

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE OVERVIEW

The news that a wealthy young gentleman named Charles Bingley has rented the manor of Netherfield Park causes a great stir in the nearby village of Longbourn, especially in the Bennet household. The Bennets have five unmarried daughters—from oldest to youngest, Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia—and Mrs. Bennet is desperate to see them all married. After Mr. Bennet pays a social visit to Mr. Bingley, the Bennets attend a ball at which Mr. Bingley is present. He is taken with Jane and spends much of the evening dancing with her. His close friend, Mr. Darcy, is less pleased with the evening and haughtily refuses to dance with Elizabeth, which makes everyone view him as arrogant and obnoxious.

At social functions over subsequent weeks, however, Mr. Darcy finds himself increasingly attracted to Elizabeth's charm and intelligence. Jane's friendship with Mr. Bingley also continues to burgeon, and Jane pays a visit to the Bingley mansion. On her journey to the house she is caught in a downpour and catches ill, forcing her to stay at Netherfield for several days. In order to tend to Jane, Elizabeth hikes through muddy fields and arrives with a spattered dress, much to the disdain of the snobbish Miss Bingley, Charles Bingley's sister. Miss Bingley's spite only increases when she notices that Darcy, whom she is pursuing, pays quite a bit of attention to Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth and Jane return home, they find Mr. Collins visiting their household. Mr. Collins is a young clergyman who stands to inherit Mr. Bennet's property, which has been "entailed," meaning that it can only be passed down to male heirs. Mr. Collins is a pompous fool, though he is quite enthralled by the Bennet girls. Shortly after his arrival, he makes a proposal of marriage to Elizabeth. She turns him down, wounding his pride. Meanwhile, the Bennet girls have become friendly with militia officers stationed in a nearby town. Among them is Wickham, a handsome young soldier who is friendly toward Elizabeth and tells her how Darcy cruelly cheated him out of an inheritance.

At the beginning of winter, the Bingleys and Darcy leave Netherfield and return to London, much to Jane's dismay. A further shock arrives with the news that Mr. Collins has become engaged to Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's best friend and the poor daughter of a local knight. Charlotte explains to Elizabeth that she is getting older and needs the match for financial reasons. Charlotte and Mr. Collins get married and Elizabeth promises to visit them at their new home. As winter progresses, Jane visits the city to see friends (hoping also that she might see Mr. Bingley). However, Miss Bingley visits her and behaves rudely, while Mr. Bingley fails to visit her at all. The marriage prospects for the Bennet girls appear bleak.

That spring, Elizabeth visits Charlotte, who now lives near the home of Mr. Collins's patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is also Darcy's aunt. Darcy calls on Lady Catherine and encounters Elizabeth, whose presence leads him to make a number of visits to the Collins's home, where she is staying. One day, he makes a shocking proposal of marriage, which Elizabeth quickly refuses. She tells Darcy that she considers him arrogant and unpleasant, then scolds him for steering Bingley away from Jane and disinheriting Wickham. Darcy leaves her but shortly thereafter delivers a letter to her. In this letter, he admits that he urged Bingley to distance himself from Jane, but claims he did so only because he thought their romance was not serious. As for Wickham, he informs Elizabeth that the young officer is a liar and that the real cause of their disagreement was Wickham's attempt to elope with his young sister, Georgiana Darcy.

This letter causes Elizabeth to reevaluate her feelings about Darcy. She returns home and acts coldly toward Wickham. The militia is leaving town, which makes the younger, rather man-crazy Bennet girls distraught. Lydia manages to obtain permission from her father to spend the summer with an old colonel in Brighton, where Wickham's regiment will be stationed. With the arrival of June, Elizabeth goes on another journey, this time with the Gardiners, who are relatives of the Bennets. The trip takes her to the North and eventually to the neighborhood of Pemberley, Darcy's estate. She visits Pemberley, after making sure that Darcy is away, and delights in the building and grounds, while hearing from Darcy's servants that he is a wonderful, generous

master. Suddenly, Darcy arrives and behaves cordially toward her. Making no mention of his proposal, he entertains the Gardiners and invites Elizabeth to meet his sister.

Shortly thereafter, however, a letter arrives from home, telling Elizabeth that Lydia has eloped with Wickham and that the couple is nowhere to be found, which suggests that they may be living together out of wedlock. Fearful of the disgrace such a situation would bring on her entire family, Elizabeth hastens home. Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bennet go off to search for Lydia, but Mr. Bennet eventually returns home empty-handed. Just when all hope seems lost, a letter comes from Mr. Gardiner saying that the couple has been found and that Wickham has agreed to marry Lydia in exchange for an annual income. The Bennets are convinced that Mr. Gardiner has paid off Wickham, but Elizabeth learns that the source of the money, and of her family's salvation, was none other than Darcy.

Now married, Wickham and Lydia return to Longbourn briefly, where Mr. Bennet treats them coldly. They then depart for Wickham's new assignment in the North of England. Shortly thereafter, Bingley returns to Netherfield and resumes his courtship of Jane. Darcy goes to stay with him and pays visits to the Bennets but makes no mention of his desire to marry Elizabeth. Bingley, on the other hand, presses his suit and proposes to Jane, to the delight of everyone but Bingley's haughty sister. While the family celebrates, Lady Catherine de Bourgh pays a visit to Longbourn. She corners Elizabeth and says that she has heard that Darcy, her nephew, is planning to marry her. Since she considers a Bennet an unsuitable match for a Darcy, Lady Catherine demands that Elizabeth promise to refuse him. Elizabeth spiritedly refuses, saying she is not engaged to Darcy, but she will not promise anything against her own happiness. A little later, Elizabeth and Darcy go out walking together and he tells her that his feelings have not altered since the spring. She tenderly accepts his proposal, and both Jane and Elizabeth are married.

Elizabeth Bennet - The novel's protagonist. The second daughter of Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth is the most intelligent and sensible of the five Bennet sisters. She is well read and quick-witted, with a tongue that occasionally proves too sharp for her own good. Her realization of Darcy's essential goodness eventually triumphs over her initial prejudice against him.

Fitzwilliam Darcy - A wealthy gentleman, the master of Pemberley, and the nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Though Darcy is intelligent and honest, his excess of pride causes him to look down on his social inferiors. Over the course of the novel, he tempers his class-consciousness and learns to admire and love Elizabeth for her strong character.

Jane Bennet - The eldest and most beautiful Bennet sister. Jane is more reserved and gentler than Elizabeth. The easy pleasantness with which she and Bingley interact contrasts starkly with the mutual distaste that marks the encounters between Elizabeth and Darcy.

Charles Bingley - Darcy's considerably wealthy best friend. Bingley's purchase of Netherfield, an estate near the Bennets, serves as the impetus for the novel. He is a genial, well-intentioned gentleman, whose easygoing nature contrasts with Darcy's initially discourteous demeanor. He is blissfully uncaring about class differences.

Mr. Bennet - The patriarch of the Bennet family, a gentleman of modest income with five unmarried daughters. Mr. Bennet has a sarcastic, cynical sense of humor that he uses to purposefully irritate his wife. Though he loves his daughters (Elizabeth in particular), he often fails as a parent, preferring to withdraw from the never-ending marriage concerns of the women around him rather than offer help.

Mrs. Bennet - Mr. Bennet's wife, a foolish, noisy woman whose only goal in life is to see her daughters married. Because of her low breeding and often unbecoming behavior, Mrs. Bennet often repels the very suitors whom she tries to attract for her daughters.

George Wickham - A handsome, fortune-hunting militia officer. Wickham's good looks and charm attract Elizabeth initially, but Darcy's revelation about Wickham's disreputable past clues her in to his true nature and simultaneously draws her closer to Darcy.

Lydia Bennet - The youngest Bennet sister, she is gossipy, immature, and self-involved. Unlike Elizabeth, Lydia flings herself headlong into romance and ends up running off with Wickham.

Mr. Collins - A pompous, generally idiotic clergyman who stands to inherit Mr. Bennet's property. Mr. Collins's own social status is nothing to brag about, but he takes great pains to let everyone and anyone know that Lady Catherine de Bourgh serves as his patroness. He is the worst combination of snobbish and obsequious.

Miss Bingley - Bingley's snobbish sister. Miss Bingley bears inordinate disdain for Elizabeth's middle-class background. Her vain attempts to garner Darcy's attention cause Darcy to admire Elizabeth's self-possessed character even more.

Lady Catherine De Bourgh - A rich, bossy noblewoman; Mr. Collins's patron and Darcy's aunt. Lady Catherine epitomizes class snobbery, especially in her attempts to order the middle-class Elizabeth away from her well-bred nephew.

Mr. And Mrs. Gardiner - Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife. The Gardiners, caring, nurturing, and full of common sense, often prove to be better parents to the Bennet daughters than Mr. Bennet and his wife.

Charlotte Lucas - Elizabeth's dear friend. Pragmatic where Elizabeth is romantic, and also six years older than Elizabeth, Charlotte does not view love as the most vital component of a marriage. She is more interested in having a comfortable home. Thus, when Mr. Collins proposes, she accepts.

Georgiana Darcy - Darcy's sister. She is immensely pretty and just as shy. She has great skill at playing the pianoforte.

Mary Bennet - The middle Bennet sister, bookish and pedantic.

Catherine Bennet - The fourth Bennet sister. Like Lydia, she is girlishly enthralled with the soldiers.

Plot Analysis

PLOT ANALYSIS

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* follows a linear, chronological structure. Elizabeth Bennet is the protagonist, and the major conflict revolves around her struggle to find a compatible husband despite the obstacles presented by both social conventions and her own lack of self-awareness. She encounters a number of antagonists who create obstacles between her and a happy marriage. These antagonists can be classified into two groups: The first are the characters who threaten Elizabeth's future happiness by trying to persuade her to marry the wrong man. They include Mrs. Bennet (who does not understand the kind of marriage her daughter wants and thinks Elizabeth should lower her standards) and Mr. Collins (who tries to convince Elizabeth to accept a marriage that would never satisfy her). The second group of antagonists are the characters who try to prevent Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy, notably Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. There are times when Elizabeth functions as her own antagonist. Her stubbornness and inability to understand that Darcy would be a good match for her move her further away from her goal of happiness, rather than toward it.

The main plot of Elizabeth's path to marriage intersects closely with subplots focused on the love lives of other female characters. The plot structure is also shaped by its division into volumes. *Pride and Prejudice* was

initially published in three volumes. In the first volume, the initial events of the plot focus on Jane's attraction to Bingley, with Elizabeth's interactions with Darcy and his gradual attraction to her functioning as secondary incidents. The major conflict in this first section of the novel centers on whether Jane and Bingley will be able to marry, since Darcy and Bingley's sisters seem determined to keep them apart. Another conflict arises when Mr. Collins begins pursuing Elizabeth, and she is forced to reject him. These two initial conflicts are given some resolution at the end of the first volume, when Mr. Collins finally accepts defeat and marries Charlotte Lucas, and the Bingley family leaves Netherfield to return to London. This moment in the plot marks a low point, as it appears as though neither Bennet sister has much chance of getting married and that most people marry for money and status.

The plot rises again with a new focus on the possibility of a match between Elizabeth and Darcy. Elizabeth's visit to Charlotte and Mr. Collins creates a new opportunity for her to interact with Mr. Darcy, leading him to propose to her. This proposal occurs approximately in the middle of the story and represents the climax of the attraction Darcy has been trying to resist ever since he first met Elizabeth. Her rejection of his proposal parallels her previous rejection of Mr. Collins. At this point, Elizabeth believes that Darcy is a bad person, and she will not accept a marriage to a man she does not love, no matter what he might offer her. However, the plotline of Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship increases in intensity after she rejects him. The rejected proposal leads him to reveal new information that makes her question her perception of him. The unfolding plot of growing affection between Darcy and Elizabeth is interrupted by a new conflict: Lydia's elopement. This conflict dominates the novel's plot until its resolution.

Once Lydia's plotline is resolved with her respectable marriage, the focus shifts to a return to Jane's storyline. Reunited with Bingley, she quickly becomes engaged, resolving the conflict that has been ongoing since the novel's start. All that remains is a final conflict to be overcome in the form of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's attempt to prevent Elizabeth from marrying Darcy. The earlier plot events where Elizabeth stood her ground have prepared her for this moment, and she refuses to back down. With the characters having finally overcome all the obstacles in their way, the novel's climax takes place when Darcy proposes a second time and Elizabeth accepts him. The climax is followed by some brief falling action, including the preparations for the marriage and the projected futures for all three couples.

Pride and Prejudice was influential in demonstrating that everyday events and domestic struggles presented in a realistic way can be as interesting as more sensational stories. Readers experience the events of the plot in the same way the characters do, without any special narrative techniques. This choice of plot structure helps to make the events of the novel relatable. The novel closes with a classic comedic ending in which three of the Bennet sisters are married and the virtuous characters (Jane, Elizabeth, Bingley, and Darcy) are rewarded with prosperity and happiness, while the foolish or wicked characters (Lydia and Wickham) face a more turbulent existence.

MAIN IDEAS THEMES

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Love

Pride and Prejudice contains one of the most cherished love stories in English literature: the courtship between Darcy and Elizabeth. As in any good love story, the lovers must elude and overcome numerous stumbling blocks, beginning with the tensions caused by the lovers' own personal qualities. Elizabeth's pride makes her misjudge Darcy on the basis of a poor first impression, while Darcy's prejudice against Elizabeth's poor social standing blinds him, for a time, to her many virtues. (Of course, one could also say that Elizabeth is guilty of

prejudice and Darcy of pride—the title cuts both ways.) Austen, meanwhile, poses countless smaller obstacles to the realization of the love between Elizabeth and Darcy, including Lady Catherine’s attempt to control her nephew, Miss Bingley’s snobbery, Mrs. Bennet’s idiocy, and Wickham’s deceit. In each case, anxieties about social connections, or the desire for better social connections, interfere with the workings of love. Darcy and Elizabeth’s realization of a mutual and tender love seems to imply that Austen views love as something independent of these social forces, as something that can be captured if only an individual is able to escape the warping effects of hierarchical society. Austen does sound some more realist (or, one could say, cynical) notes about love, using the character of Charlotte Lucas, who marries the buffoon Mr. Collins for his money, to demonstrate that the heart does not always dictate marriage. Yet with her central characters, Austen suggests that true love is a force separate from society and one that can conquer even the most difficult of circumstances.

Reputation

Pride and Prejudice depicts a society in which a woman’s reputation is of the utmost importance. A woman is expected to behave in certain ways. Stepping outside the social norms makes her vulnerable to ostracism. This theme appears in the novel, when Elizabeth walks to Netherfield and arrives with muddy skirts, to the shock of the reputation-conscious Miss Bingley and her friends. At other points, the ill-mannered, ridiculous behavior of Mrs. Bennet gives her a bad reputation with the more refined (and snobbish) Darcys and Bingleys. Austen pokes gentle fun at the snobs in these examples, but later in the novel, when Lydia elopes with Wickham and lives with him out of wedlock, the author treats reputation as a very serious matter. By becoming Wickham’s lover without benefit of marriage, Lydia clearly places herself outside the social pale, and her disgrace threatens the entire Bennet family. The fact that Lydia’s judgment, however terrible, would likely have condemned the other Bennet sisters to marriageless lives seems grossly unfair. Why should Elizabeth’s reputation suffer along with Lydia’s? Darcy’s intervention on the Bennets’ behalf thus becomes all the more generous, but some readers might resent that such an intervention was necessary at all. If Darcy’s money had failed to convince Wickham to marry Lydia, would Darcy have still married Elizabeth? Does his transcendence of prejudice extend that far? The happy ending of *Pride and Prejudice* is certainly emotionally satisfying, but in many ways it leaves the theme of reputation, and the importance placed on reputation, unexplored. One can ask of *Pride and Prejudice*, to what extent does it critique social structures, and to what extent does it simply accept their inevitability?

Class

The theme of class is related to reputation, in that both reflect the strictly regimented nature of life for the middle and upper classes in Regency England. The lines of class are strictly drawn. While the Bennets, who are middle class, may socialize with the upper-class Bingleys and Darcys, they are clearly their social inferiors and are treated as such. Austen satirizes this kind of class-consciousness, particularly in the character of Mr. Collins, who spends most of his time toadying to his upper-class patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Though Mr. Collins offers an extreme example, he is not the only one to hold such views. His conception of the importance of class is shared, among others, by Mr. Darcy, who believes in the dignity of his lineage; Miss Bingley, who dislikes anyone not as socially accepted as she is; and Wickham, who will do anything he can to get enough money to raise himself into a higher station. Mr. Collins’s views are merely the most extreme and obvious. The satire directed at Mr. Collins is therefore also more subtly directed at the entire social hierarchy and the conception of all those within it at its correctness, in complete disregard of other, more worthy virtues. Through the Darcy-Elizabeth and Bingley-Jane marriages, Austen shows the power of love and happiness to overcome class boundaries and prejudices, thereby implying that such prejudices are hollow, unfeeling, and unproductive. Of course, this whole discussion of class must be made with the understanding that Austen herself is often criticized as being a classist: she doesn’t really represent anyone from the lower classes; those servants she does portray are generally happy with their lot. Austen does criticize class structure but only a limited slice of that structure.

Family

Family is an integral theme in the novel. All of the characters operate within networks of family connections that shape their decisions and perspectives. For the female characters in particular, the influence and behavior of their family members is a significant factor in their lives. Because “the business of [Mrs. Bennet’s] life was to get her daughters married”, the Bennet sisters constantly have to navigate their mother’s plans and schemes. While male characters like Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley have much more social and financial independence, they still rely on the judgement and opinions of female family members like Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine de Burgh. Individuals are judged according to the behavior of their family members, which is why Darcy points out to Lizzy that he is doing her a favor by proposing even though she comes with embarrassing family connections. The theme of family shows that individuals never lead totally autonomous lives, and that individual actions have wider communal implications.

Integrity

Elizabeth Bennet considers herself to have very high standards of integrity, and is often frustrated and disappointed by the way she sees others behaving. She complains bitterly to her sister that “The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it, and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters.” She behaves in ways she considers consistent with her definition of integrity by refusing to marry both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy (when he proposes the first time): Elizabeth thinks it is very important to only marry a man she loves and respects, despite the pressure to achieve economic security. By the end of the novel, her commitment to integrity has been rewarded because she marries a partner who will truly make her happy. She has also come to see that she can sometimes be too rigid and judge too quickly, since she was initially mistaken about the nature and ethics of Wickham and Darcy. The novel both endorses the importance of integrity, and reminds readers not to be too quick to pass judgement on who has it, and who doesn’t.

Gender

Gender is a key theme in *Pride and Prejudice*. The story takes place at a time when gender roles were quite rigid, and men and women had a very different set of options and influences. Marriage is a pressing question for female characters like Charlotte Lucas and the Bennet sisters because marriage is the only way women can achieve economic stability and autonomy. As upper class women, they would not have been able to work to earn a living, or live independently. Marriage offered one of the only ways to move beyond their birth families. However, a woman’s marriageability relied on an impeccable reputation for chastity, and for women like Georgiana Darcy or Lydia Bennet, a reckless decision to trust the wrong man could permanently ruin their future prospects. Lydia’s elopement causes Lizzy to exclaim with horror “she is lost forever.” If Lydia is living with Wickham without being married to him, her reputation will be destroyed.

Who is prideful and who is prejudiced?

MAIN IDEAS WHO IS PRIDEFUL AND WHO IS PREJUDICED?

Jane Austen used the pairing of two key words for the titles of both *Pride and Prejudice* and another of her novels, *Sense and Sensibility*. She had originally planned to call *Pride and Prejudice* “First Impressions.” The two key words she ended up highlighting in the final title are very important to the novel’s central themes and ideas. Their meanings were slightly different at the time Austen was writing. Pride or being proud was usually not a positive trait. Whereas today people tend to speak of being proud of hard work or some sort of accomplishment, in Austen’s time, being proud usually meant someone thought he or she was better than other people or was not open to interacting with different kinds of people. Prejudice tended to mean having a set idea

about someone that was based on assumptions or preconceptions, rather than a person's actual actions and characters. Today, prejudice may mean making judgments about someone based on, for example, their race or religion. But in Austen's time, prejudice was usually more about basing judgments on reputation, gossip, or misunderstood actions.

Austen's novel shows that almost anyone is capable of being prideful and prejudiced. While these qualities are more or less universal, individuals who are able to rethink their initial judgments are the ones who are most likely to lead happy lives. For example, Mr. Darcy is the character who is most obviously proud and prejudiced. On the one hand, his pride is understandable due to his wealth and high social position. He is used to being treated as a social superior and an authority figure, and social codes of behavior ensure that he is treated with respect by characters of lower social position. However, Darcy's pride is conspicuous, and he makes it clear that he sees himself as superior to the other characters he interacts with. When he says, for example, "There is not another woman in the room, whom it would not be a punishment for me to stand up [dance] with," he indicates that he does not find the women at the ball attractive or sophisticated enough to meet his high standards. Bingley, on the other hand, while also very wealthy and in a good social position, is much more warm and open when he meets new people.

Darcy also shows prejudice and is very quick to make judgments about the people he meets. He does not keep these judgments to himself and is willing to influence those around him. For example, he admits to Elizabeth that he has tried to end the relationship between Jane and Bingley, stating, "I have done everything in my power to separate my friend from your sister." He later explains in his letter that he did not think Jane actually loved Bingley. This shows that he assumes his observation of Jane was accurate and that he did not consider whether the assumptions he was making about her feelings were accurate.

As a result of Darcy's display of pride early in the novel, the Bennet families and their neighbors become prejudiced against him. Although he behaves badly by refusing to dance with Elizabeth and not being friendlier, he does not actually harm anyone. This single interaction is not enough to truly reveal his character. Nonetheless, the bad impression he makes leads many other characters to make up their minds about who he is. For example, Mrs. Bennet calls him "a most disagreeable, horrid man." Even much more intelligent characters like Elizabeth are shown to put too much emphasis on the ideas they first formed. When Wickham later tells Elizabeth the story of how he has been mistreated by Darcy, she believes him because he describes Darcy in a way that agrees with her prejudiced opinion of him.

Elizabeth's misplaced trust in Wickham shows how prejudice influences her in two ways. By the time Wickham tells her the story of his past, she is already negatively prejudiced against Darcy. Elizabeth is also prejudiced in favor of Wickham. Wickham is handsome, charming, and easy to get along with. Even though she

is intelligent and not easily fooled, Elizabeth gets distracted by his external qualities and does not show good judgment in understanding who Wickham truly is. This kind of positive prejudice occurs throughout the novel. For example, Mr. Collins assumes that everything Lady Catherine does is intelligent and in good taste because he is prejudiced by her wealth and social position. He cannot form a clear assessment of what her behavior is actually like.

Both Elizabeth and Darcy must overcome feelings of pride and prejudice to realize their love for one another. Darcy actually does this first, and it is not an easy process for him. When he first proposes to Elizabeth, he makes it clear that his pride led him to struggle against his attraction to her. He did not want to fall in love with her because he was embarrassed by her family. However, he cannot help it. As he explains, "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed." He lets go of being prideful and prejudiced in order to propose to her.

Elizabeth is much more stubborn in overcoming her prejudice. Because she is also proud, and does not like to be treated as inferior, she is offended when Darcy says insulting things about her family when he proposes to her. She is also still prejudiced by the way she believes Darcy has treated Jane and Wickham. Elizabeth does not start to rethink her assumptions until Darcy explains what actually happened between himself and Wickham. Once her prejudice has been challenged, she becomes more open to wondering if she might have been wrong about Darcy. When she visits Pemberley, she hears different perspectives about who Darcy is and sees a new side of him. This change in her understanding is completed when Darcy helps her family after Lydia's elopement. By bribing Wickham to marry Lydia and protect her reputation, Darcy shows his integrity and generosity. Elizabeth realizes that her prideful and prejudiced attitude has led her to be totally mistaken about the characters of both men.