

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: JANE AUSTEN

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a classic comedy of manners that satirizes 18th-century society and, particularly, the expectations placed on women of the era. The novel, which follows the romantic entanglements of the Bennet sisters, includes themes of love, class, and, as one might guess, pride and prejudice. These are all covered with Austen's signature wit, including the literary device of free indirect discourse that permits a particular style of in-depth, sometimes satirical narration.

Love and Marriage

As one might expect from a romantic comedy, love (and marriage) is a central theme to *Pride and Prejudice*. In particular, the novel focuses on the different ways love may grow or disappear, and whether or not society has room for romantic love and marriage to go together. We see love at first sight (Jane and Bingley), love that grows (Elizabeth and Darcy), and infatuation that fades (Lydia and Wickham) or has faded (Mr. and Mrs. Bennet). Throughout the story, it becomes apparent that the novel is arguing that love based on genuine compatibility is the ideal. Marriages of convenience are presented in a negative light: Charlotte marries the obnoxious Mr. Collins out of economic pragmatism and admits as much, while Lady Catherine's imperious attempts at forcing her nephew Darcy to marry her daughter to consolidate estates are presented as outdated, unfair, and, ultimately, an unsuccessful power grab.

Like several of Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice* also cautions against infatuation with overly charming people. Wickham's smooth manner easily charms Elizabeth, but he turns out to be deceitful and selfish and not a good romantic prospect for her. Real love is found in compatibility of character: Jane and Bingley are well-suited because of their absolute kindness, and Elizabeth and Darcy come to realize that both are strong-willed but kind and intelligent. Ultimately, the novel is a strong recommendation of love as a basis for marriage, something that was not always the case in its era.

Pride

The title makes it pretty clear that pride is going to be an important theme, but the message is more nuanced than just the concept itself. Pride is presented as perfectly reasonable to some degree, but when it gets out of hand, it gets in the way of the characters' happiness. Thus, the novel suggests that an excess of pride is costly.

As Mary Bennet says in one of her memorable quotes, "Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us." In *Pride and Prejudice*, there are plenty of prideful characters, mostly among the wealthy. Pride in social position is the most common failing: Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine both believe themselves superior because

of their money and social privilege; they also are vain because they are obsessed with maintaining this image. Darcy, on the other hand, is intensely proud but not vain: he does initially place too high a value on social station, but he is so proud and secure in that pride that he doesn't bother with even basic social niceties. This pride costs him Elizabeth at first, and it is not until he learns to temper his pride with compassion that he becomes a worthy partner.

Prejudice

In *Pride and Prejudice*, “prejudice” is not as socially charged as it is in contemporary usage. Here, the theme is more about preconceived notions and snap judgments rather than race- or gender-based biases. Prejudice is a flaw of several characters, but first and foremost it is the main flaw of our protagonist Elizabeth. She prides herself on her ability to judge character, but her observations also lead her to form bias very quickly and deeply. The most obvious example of this is her immediate prejudice against Mr. Darcy because of his dismissal of her at the ball. Because she's already formed this opinion, she is predisposed to believe Wickham's tales of woe without stopping to think twice. This prejudice leads her to judge him unfairly and to reject him based on partially inaccurate information. Prejudice is not necessarily a bad thing, the novel seems to say, but like pride, it is only good so long as it is reasonable. For instance, Jane's total lack of bias and over-willingness to “think well of everyone,” as Elizabeth puts it, is detrimental to her happiness, as it blinds her to the Bingley sisters' true natures until it's almost too late. Even Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy is not entirely unfounded: he is, in fact, proud and thinks himself above many of the people around them, and he does act to separate Jane and Bingley. In general, prejudice of the common sense variety is a useful tool, but unchecked prejudice leads to unhappiness.

Social Status

In general, Austen's novels tend to focus on gentry—that is, non-titled people with some land holdings, although of varying financial statuses. The gradations between the rich gentry (like Darcy and Bingley) and those who aren't so well off, like the Bennets, become a way to distinguish sub-strata within the gentry. Austen's depictions of hereditary nobility are often a little satirical. Here, for instance, we have Lady Catherine, who at first seems powerful and intimidating. When it really comes down to it (that is, when she tries to stop the match between Elizabeth and Darcy), she is utterly powerless to do anything except yell and sound ridiculous.

Although Austen does indicate that love is the most important thing in a match, she also does match up her characters with socially “appropriate” matches: the successful matches are all within their same social class, even if not of equal finances. When Lady Catherine insults Elizabeth and claims that she would be an unsuitable wife for Darcy, Elizabeth calmly replies, “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter. So far, we are equal.” Austen does not upend the social order in any radical way, but rather gently mocks people who obsess too much about social and financial status.

Free Indirect Discourse

One of the most important literary devices a reader will encounter in a Jane Austen novel is *free indirect discourse*. This technique is used to slide into a character's mind and/or emotions without stepping away from third-person narration. Instead of adding a tag such as "he thought" or "she supposed," the narrator relays a character's thoughts and feelings as if they themselves were speaking, but without breaking from the third-person perspective.

For instance, when Bingley and his party first arrive at Meryton and meet the people gathered there, Austen uses free indirect discourse to put readers directly in Bingley's head: "Bingley had never met with pleasanter people or prettier girls in his life; everybody had been most kind and attentive to him, there had been no formality, no stiffness, he had soon felt acquainted with all the room; and as to Miss Bennet, he could not conceive an angel more beautiful." These are not statements of fact so much as they are a relay of Bingley's thoughts; one could easily replace "Bingley" and "he/his/him" with "I" and "me" and have a perfectly sensible first-person narration from Bingley's perspective.

This technique is a hallmark of Austen's writing and is useful in several ways. First and foremost, it's a sophisticated way of integrating a character's inner thoughts into third-person narration. It also offers an alternative to constant direct quotations and tags like "he said" and "she thought." Free indirect discourse allows the narrator to convey both the content of a character's thoughts and the tone, by using language that resembles the words the characters themselves would choose. As such, it's a crucial literary device in Austen's satirical approach to country society.

Important Characters

Elizabeth Bennet

The second eldest of the Bennet daughters and the most outspoken, Elizabeth is the novel's protagonist. Her chief fault in the novel is that she fancies herself a good judge of character, which causes her to incorrectly judge both George Wickham and Fitzwilliam Darcy. Additionally, she defies some of the societal expectations for woman in Regency England, having made up her mind to marry only for love and to disregard marrying for the sake of convenience. Her development is a hallmark of the novel. Through Darcy, she realizes the extent of her own prejudices and is ultimately able to achieve happiness by marrying him.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Often simply referred to as Mr. Darcy in the novel, this character is very much a counterpart to Elizabeth Bennet, as he is the pride to her prejudice. Because of a combination of his wealth and cold demeanor, Darcy is perceived by many people as snobbish. However, he is actually often overly proud, especially toward Elizabeth at first when he considers his proposal toward her to be beneath him. However, just as Elizabeth develops in the novel, so does Darcy. He realizes the

error of his proud ways and is able to show Elizabeth his true nature through the selfless act of saving her family from ruin.

Jane Bennet

The eldest and sweetest of the Bennet sisters, Jane finds herself romantically interested in her new neighbor, Mr. Bingley, at the beginning of the novel. However, she later finds herself heartbroken because Caroline Bingley and Mr. Darcy convince Mr. Bingley to leave Netherfield. On Darcy's part, the concern is that she has been too nonchalant about her interest in Bingley. However, those who know her-like Elizabeth-know that this is actually just because of her reserved nature. Later, Darcy helps to resolve her estrangement with Bingley, and Jane and Bingley marry.

Mrs. Bennet:

Mrs. Bennet is the overbearing mother of four daughters. As the narrator tells us in the beginning of the novel, the business of her life is getting her daughters married. This may seem petty; however, marriage was the only means of financial stability for women in Austen's age. Mrs. Bennet is concerned that, after the death of her husband, her daughters will be left in destitution. Thus, she is obsessed with finding them suitable husbands. While her intentions may make her actions seem justifiable, her daughters – especially Elizabeth-and others outside the family sometimes find her to be socially awkward and embarrassing.

Mr. Bennet

As the father of the Bennet girls, Mr. Bennet has some shortcomings. Though he clearly cares for his daughters, especially Elizabeth, he is distant. He prefers to spend most of his time hiding from his daughters in his library and seems to take no real concern in their marriage. His lax parenting may be in part to blame for Lydia's bad behavior.

Lydia Bennet

Lydia is the youngest of the Bennet daughters and the wildest. Her immaturity and irresponsibility is only encouraged by her mother. With little consideration for the well-being of her family, Lydia runs away with George Wickham, an act that could have ruined any future prospects for her sister's marriage.

Mr. Collins

Mr. Collins, a cousin of the Bennets, is set to inherit the Bennet estate when Mr. Bennet passes

away. He visits the Bennets with the intention of marrying one of the daughters to "make things right." Though he proposes to Elizabeth, she refuses. When this happens, he proposes to Charlotte Lucas in a matter of only three days. He is a man obsessed with appearance and his benefactor, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Charlotte Lucas

A close friend of Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas serves as something of a foil to her. Early in the novel, Charlotte and Elizabeth compare notes about marriage. Charlotte believes that happiness in marriage is basically a matter of luck, whereas Elizabeth believes in marriage for love. Charlotte's attitude toward love becomes a reality when she marries the ridiculous Mr. Collins.

George Wickham

Quite the charmer, Wickham finds friends wherever he goes. It is this exact attribute that fools Elizabeth Bennet initially. However, as the novel progresses, Darcy reveals that Wickham is something of a fraud; instead a charming, destitute man he is actual a liar, a gambler, and a completely dishonest man.

Mr. Bingley

Mr. Bingley, the affable new neighbor to the Bennets, almost immediately wins Jane's favor. However, Bingley is easily swayed by his sister and Darcy, and abandons Jane because he believes she is indifferent to him. He later returns, however, and proposes to Jane, thanks to encouragement from Darcy.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh

The patroness of Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine is an opinionated, proud, and snobbish noblewoman. She is also Darcy's aunt, and she assumes that her daughter will marry Darcy. Lady Catherine criticizes Elizabeth for her upbringing upon their first meeting, and later berates her for an alleged-but, at the time, untrue- proposal to Darcy.

Questions

1. Discuss briefly and illustrate the two kinds of pride which, in your view, figure most prominently in *Pride and Prejudice*.
2. Identify the chief features of Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*.

3. Does the theme of gender injustice become a part of Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage, and if so, in what way?
4. Do you think that in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen privileges 'education' or upbringing over 'nature' (or the other way round) as formative of a person's character? Discuss.
5. Find at least three instances from the text where one of the characters successfully uses wit in his or her self-defence.