

A GUIDE TO Pride and Prejudice

Jane Austen

“Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.”

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Pride and Prejudice (1813) is a comedy of manners that explores how considerations of money, family background, and personal vanity can complicate the course of true love.

Setting: Mostly in rural Hertfordshire in England in the late eighteenth century.

Protagonist: Elizabeth Bennet, the most intelligent and complex daughter in a family of five unmarried sisters who have no prospect of inheriting wealth.

Structure: The novel is divided into three “volumes,” each subdivided into many short chapters. The plot involves pairs of lovers who seem destined never to get together because of the opposition of powerful blocking figures and forces. The couples, however, after bringing the entire community together, are happily married in the end.

Conflicts: The plot is propelled by the need of the female characters to find suitable husbands. The main **conflicts** are the obstacles or blocks that get in the way of achieving these marriages. The obstacles are both **external** (the want of beauty, money, sense, or social connections) and **internal** (an inability to discern the true character or feelings of another).

Resolution: By learning from her experience and honestly evaluating herself, Elizabeth gains a husband who is not only wealthy but truly worthy. She overcomes her prejudice against Fitzwilliam Darcy, which was based on his appearance of pride, and he overcomes his prejudice against her family, which was based on pride in his own social rank and good manners.

Themes: Knowledge comes through careful reasoning and considered experience, unclouded by pride or prejudice based on rank or mere appearances.

Of Special Note: By means of comic irony and satirical exaggeration, Austen exposes the social and moral follies of her society.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The vocabulary of *Pride and Prejudice* should pose no major problems to upper-grade-level students reading at grade level, but all students, especially those reading below grade level, should be prepared to encounter a society whose social and economic conditions are markedly different from those of today. They can learn a great deal about Austen’s world from the novel itself, but some understanding of the British system of inherited wealth and the position of women within that system during the early nineteenth century will help orient them.

BACKGROUND

Entailed Property. In the traditional British class system, wealth was passed on via the inheritance of family property, an annual income for life, or both. Inherited wealth conferred far more status than money earned by work. Family estates were usually inherited by the oldest son; and other sons, and sometimes daughters, were given smaller incomes. An entail is a restriction on the inheritance of family property, and in the case of the Bennets, the entail stipulated that Longbourn, the family home, be passed on to a male cousin.

The Eighteenth-century Gentlewoman. The Bennet sisters were considered gentlewomen because their father had inherited some wealth and therefore did not have to work to earn money. Because of the entail, however, they would not inherit any wealth of their own, unlike Georgiana Darcy and Caroline Bingley, whose fathers’ estates were so large that all the children were designated to inherit. Since it was not respectable or generally even feasible for gentlewomen to work, the Bennet sisters had no option but to find husbands who could support them and maintain their position in the class to which they were born. If they did not marry, they would have to depend on the generosity of male relatives. Jane Austen’s own situation was typical of the time: she remained with her father until he died and then moved to her brother’s house. What was not typical was that she wrote books and was paid for her work.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Mrs. Bennet, a frivolous woman, bent on making advantageous matches for her five daughters but lacking the ability to judge the worth of their prospective suitors. She makes silly comments, often at inappropriate times.

Mr. Bennet, an intelligent but usually aloof man who looks on his wife and the marital dilemmas of his daughters with detached amusement. Notable for witty comments.

Jane Bennet, the eldest daughter (in her early twenties), very beautiful and sweet-tempered, always ready to think well of others and modestly of herself—the friend and **foil** of her sister Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Bennet, at first too quick and confident in her judgments, she refines her knowledge of herself and her ability to evaluate others. More outspoken and opinionated than her sister Jane.

Mary, Catherine (Kitty), and Lydia Bennet, the three younger sisters, **flat characters** who change little in response to experience. Mary is a pedant with no real knowledge. Lydia's high spirits are unrestrained by good sense.

Charles Bingley, a good-looking, wealthy, and agreeable young man, who falls in love with Jane but whose courtship of Jane is not encouraged by his friend Darcy or his fashionable sister **Caroline**, who wishes to marry Darcy. Functions as a **foil** for Darcy.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, a handsome, dignified gentleman, heir to great property and wealth. A reserved man, ill at ease with strangers and mindful of social rank. He strikes the Bennets as cold and aloof. Falls in love with Elizabeth.

Reverend William Collins, a clergyman and cousin of Mr. Bennet, who has ingratiated himself with the formidable **Lady Catherine de Bourgh** and stands to inherit Longbourn. He is accepted by Elizabeth's plain, practical friend, **Charlotte Lucas**, after Elizabeth rejects his marriage proposals.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife, a very sensible, well-mannered couple with a special affection for their two older nieces. Because Mr. Gardiner is in business, he is not considered a gentleman by the social elite, although he has every personal quality usually associated with gentility.

George Wickham, a handsome, charming officer, favorite of the Bennet sisters, whose past dealings with Mr. Darcy were very shady indeed. Not trustworthy.

PLOT

Volume I

Chapters 1–3. The main **characters** and their rural **setting** are introduced when the eligible Charles Bingley and his elegant sisters and the distinguished Fitzwilliam Darcy arrive in the district. At a local ball,

Bingley singles out the lovely Jane Bennet for a second dance. Darcy, ill at ease with strangers, declines to dance with Elizabeth Bennet. Perhaps to cover his own shyness, he dismisses her as “tolerable” looking.

Chapters 4–5. After the ball, the various confidantes—Elizabeth and Jane, Darcy and Bingley, Mrs. Bennet and her neighbor Lady Lucas, and Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas—compare impressions. The Bennets find Darcy haughty and proud, and Elizabeth confesses that her pride was “mortified” by Darcy's slight.

Chapters 6–8. Jane takes a chill while visiting the Bingleys at Netherfield Park. While recovering under the care of her hosts and the ever-attentive Elizabeth, she grows fonder of Bingley and his sister Caroline. The more critical Elizabeth believes that only Bingley sincerely cares for her sister. Meanwhile, Darcy, almost against his will, is drawn to Elizabeth. At home, the younger, flighty Bennets amuse themselves with trips to their Aunt Philips, who entertains the officers of the local militia. Trouble could be brewing there.

Chapters 9–11. In a section notable for its **dialogue**, Mrs. Bennet and Lydia make a trip to Netherfield, where Mrs. Bennet takes offense at Darcy's proud manner and sings Jane's praises. Embarrassed, Elizabeth tries to divert attention from her mother but fails to lessen the poor impression she makes on Caroline and Darcy. Alone, Darcy and Elizabeth (soon to be the **battling lovers**) spar, each probing the character of the other.

Chapters 12–14. Finally, a recovered Jane leaves Netherfield with Elizabeth. The Bennets receive a visit from their relative, Reverend William Collins, who hopes to marry one of the Bennet sisters. Mr. Bennet is amused by the spectacle of his pompous cousin, but Elizabeth is appalled.

Chapters 15–17. Reverend Collins and the Bennet sisters walk into town where they meet the charming George Wickham, an officer in the militia. They also encounter Bingley and Darcy, and Elizabeth observes a marked discomfort between Darcy and Wickham. Later at the Philips's, Wickham confides to Elizabeth that he has been unjustly treated by Darcy. Elizabeth, who is already prejudiced against Darcy, accepts Wickham's account, declaring “There was truth in his looks,” an example of Austen's **dramatic irony**.

Chapters 18–20. Wickham, oddly, absents himself from a ball given by Mr. Bingley. Disappointed by Wickham's absence, Elizabeth quizzes Darcy, Miss Bingley, and Jane about Wickham and gets unfavorable reports. The ridiculous Collins proposes to Elizabeth who rejects him.

Chapters 21–23. **Obstacles** to the progress of Jane and Bingley's romance begin when Jane receives a letter from Caroline, stating that the Bingleys are to leave Netherfield. Caroline has begun to function as a **blocking figure**, who will do all she can to prevent a match

between her brother and Jane. Though Elizabeth assures Jane of Bingley's true affection and the certainty of his return, she is worried. Meanwhile, Mr. Collins has found someone willing to marry him—Elizabeth's friend Charlotte Lucas, who declares that marriage is the only honorable provision for a well-educated woman of small fortune. This is the first of four marriages that will occur in the novel, and unlike the **parallel romances** of Jane and Bingley, Elizabeth and Darcy, and Lydia and Wickham, the Collinses are brought together by practical necessities alone without a hint of personal attraction.

Volume II

Chapters 1–3. More **complications**—Jane receives another cool letter from Caroline, which confirms that Bingley is enjoying the company of Darcy's sister, Georgiana, and has no plans to return. The ever-forgiving Jane sees Caroline as motivated by her brother's best interests, but her **foil**, Elizabeth, is critical of Bingley's lack of resolution. Aunt and Uncle Gardiner invite Jane to their London home, where she hopes to resume her ties with the Bingleys. Aunt Gardiner warns Elizabeth not to fall in love with the penniless Wickham, and when he shifts his attention to a wealthier woman, Elizabeth congratulates herself on her calm acceptance of his prudent decision. Finally Jane, receiving no word from Bingley, sadly tries to resign herself to his loss.

Chapters 4–6. Elizabeth visits her friend Charlotte and her new husband, Reverend Collins. The group is invited to Rosings, the imposing home of Lady Catherine, Mr. Collins's aristocratic patron. Elizabeth is struck more by Lady Catherine's willfulness than by her wealth or rank.

Chapters 7–9. During Elizabeth's visit, Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam come to stay with their aunt at Rosings. The young men visit the parsonage often, and although Fitzwilliam's appreciation of Elizabeth is evident, Darcy's feelings for her are harder to discern.

Chapters 10–12. In a scene of great **tension**, Darcy astounds Elizabeth by confessing that he loves her despite all his social objections to her family. (Elizabeth's mother and younger sisters have functioned as **blocks** to a marriage between her and Darcy.) Offended by his pride, she rejects his proposal, accusing him of cruelty to Jane and to Mr. Wickham. The next day Darcy sends a letter explaining that he believed Jane never seriously cared for Bingley and revealing that Wickham is a scoundrel who once tried to elope with Darcy's fifteen-year-old sister.

Chapters 13–15. Elizabeth now realizes that she has misjudged both Darcy and Wickham; she has allowed appearances and pride in her own discernment to blind her. "Till this moment I never knew myself," she exclaims in what is the **turning point** of the novel. She leaves Rosings with mixed feelings toward Darcy, her family, and herself.

Chapters 16–19. At home, Elizabeth is glad to hear that Wickham and his regiment are leaving for Brighton—until she learns that her sister Lydia has been invited there by one of the officers' wives. Unable to talk her father into denying Lydia permission for the visit, Elizabeth leaves for a tour of Derbyshire with the Gardiners. Unwittingly she finds herself at the doorstep of Pemberley, the Darcy estate, and is talked into visiting the grand house by assurances that the master is not at home.

Volume III

Chapters 1–3. While touring the grounds, after hearing a sterling account of Darcy's character from his housekeeper, Elizabeth and her relatives are surprised by the arrival of Darcy. Darcy is friendly to all and astonishes Elizabeth by inviting her to meet his sister Georgiana. Confused and flattered by his changed manner, Elizabeth visits Darcy's sister and provokes the jealousy of Caroline Bingley, who wishes to **block** any attachment between the Darcys and the Bennets.

Chapters 4–6. Darcy calls on Elizabeth just after she has heard the scandalous news that her sister Lydia has run off with Wickham. Rushing home, she finds her distressed family uncertain of Lydia's whereabouts or marital status. Elizabeth perceives the **irony** of her situation: just as she was beginning to have stirrings of love for Darcy, her sister's behavior has made marriage between them impossible.

Chapters 7–10. Lydia and Wickham are located, and an offer of money persuades Wickham to marry her. Elizabeth later finds out that it was Darcy who intervened to save her family from disgrace. The newly married couple visit the Bennets without a hint of shame or regret.

Chapters 11–13. Bingley returns to Netherfield and before long proposes to Jane. All are overjoyed and convinced of the happiness their mutual love will bring them.

Chapters 14–16. Lady Catherine, a major **blocking figure**, tries to extract a promise from Elizabeth not to marry Darcy. Failing, she tries to apply her powers of persuasion to her nephew. Her interfering angers Darcy and gives him the courage to renew his proposal to Elizabeth. This time, full of love and admiration, she gratefully accepts his offer.

Chapters 17–19. Elizabeth and Darcy announce their marriage. Those who love them are happy, and those who are disappointed eventually come around. All except the nefarious Wickham are welcomed by the couple to Pemberley. Thus the novel ends with a typical **comic resolution** in which the loving couples are united, the blocking figures reconciled, and the community restored to a state of happy equilibrium.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The striking elements of *Pride and Prejudice* are Austen's sharp delineation of **character** and her use of

comic **irony** to expose what she sees as the moral or intellectual failings of her characters. Discussion groups or students doing individual research might focus on the following activities.

1. Investigating Patterns of Characterization

One way that Austen reveals her characters is by creating **foils**, or contrasting personalities, who illuminate each other by their differences. Students may want to discuss the following pairs:

- Jane and Elizabeth Bennet
- Darcy and Bingley
- Mr. and Mrs. Bennet

2. Finding Contemporary Comic Types

The stock characters of classical comedy continue to appear in today's books, movies, plays, and television series. Students can broaden their understanding of these types by first identifying such characters and their traits in *Pride and Prejudice* and then finding similar types in contemporary works. Here are some stock types they can consider:

- the battling lovers
- the blocking parent figures
- the charming rake
- the injured innocent
- the jealous rival

3. Responding to Tone

Critics have disagreed about Austen's attitude toward the characters she satirizes. Some feel the character portraits, like that of Mrs. Bennet, are hard and angry. Others hear an amused and forgiving, though no less penetrating, tone. Students can discuss who and what they think Austen is criticizing and how severely she attacks her targets. They may also want to discuss their own feelings toward these characters.

4. Evaluating Contemporary Appeal and Relevance

After highlighting some of the differences between Austen's social world and their own, students may want to discuss, "Why would today's readers or viewers be interested in a society so different from their own?"

This question could lead to an evaluation of aspects of the novel, such as the following:

- a clear sense of moral values
- fixed social roles and rankings
- moral worth rewarded
- social restrictions on individual freedom

MEET THE WRITER

Jane Austen (1775–1817) was born and grew up in her father's rectory in Steventon, Hampshire, England. George Austen, a cultivated and well-off clergyman, took an interest in his second daughter's literary education. Jane read widely and began writing in her early teens. Although all her fictional heroines eventually find mates, Jane never married. After her father's death, she lived quietly in her brother's household, writing her minutely observed studies of "three or four families in a country village." Six of her novels were published before she died. Austen admitted that she agreed with the opinion of most of her readers: among her heroines, Elizabeth Bennet was her favorite, too.

READ ON

Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, sisters with contrasting personalities, first suffer disappointment in love and then marry happily.

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116." A view of love—" . . . an ever-fixed mark, / That looks on tempests and is never shaken."—that contrasts somewhat with Austen's.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). Personal poems of love. Number 43 begins "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."

James Joyce, "Araby." Like Austen's protagonists, Joyce's young narrator is deceived and then disillusioned by what at first attracts him.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Winter Dreams." Dreams of love and money attach young Dexter Green to the tantalizing Judy Jones, but is she worthy of his devotion?