**Pride and Prejudice**

Jane Austen

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*Pride and Prejudice*, probably the most popular of Austen's finished novels, was also, in a sense, the first to be composed. The original version, *First Impressions*, was completed by 1797, but was rejected for publication — no copy of the original has survived. The work was rewritten around 1812 and published in 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*. The final form must have been a thorough rewriting of the original effort, for it is representative of the mature Austen. Moreover, the story clearly takes place in the early nineteenth century rather than in the late eighteenth century.

Austen's works, including *Pride and Prejudice*, were barely noticed by critics during her lifetime. *Pride and Prejudice* sold fairly well — the first edition sold out at about 1,500 copies. Critics who eventually reviewed it in the early part of the nineteenth century praised Austen's characterizations and portrayal of everyday life. After Austen's death in 1817, the book continued to be published and read with little attention from critics for the next fifty years. The few critical comments made during that time continued to focus on her skill at creating characters, as well as on her technical mastery. In 1870, probably the most significant nineteenth-century critical article on Austen was published by Richard Simpson; in the article, Simpson discussed the complexity of Austen's work, including her use of irony.

Modern Austen scholarship began in 1939 with the publication of *Jane Austen and Her Art*, by Mary Lascelle. The scope and vision of that book prompted other scholars to take a closer look at Austen's works. *Pride and Prejudice*began getting serious attention in the 1940s and has continued to be studied heavily since that time. Modern critics take a variety of approaches to the novel, including historical, economical, feminist, and linguistic.

Various critics have consistently noted that the plot development of *Pride and Prejudice* is determined by character — coincidence exerts a major influence, but turns of action are precipitated by character. Although human weakness is a prominent element, ranging from Miss Bingley's jealousy to Elizabeth's blind prejudices, outright evil is little in evidence. Austen maintains an attitude of good-humored irony toward her characters.

Historical Context of *Pride and Prejudice*

During Austen's career, Romanticism reached its zenith of acceptance and influence, but she rejected the tenets of that movement. The romantics extolled the power of feeling, whereas Austen upheld the supremacy of the rational faculty. Romanticism advocated the abandonment of restraint; Austen was a staunch exponent of the neo-classical belief in order and discipline. The romantics saw in nature a transcendental power to stimulate men to better the existing order of things, which they saw as essentially tragic in its existing state. Austen supported traditional values and the established norms, and viewed the human condition in the comic spirit. The romantics exuberantly celebrated natural beauty, but Austen's dramatic technique decreed sparse description of setting. The beauties of nature are seldom detailed in her work.

Just as Austen's works display little evidence of the Romantic movement, they also reveal no awareness of the international upheavals and consequent turmoil in England that took place during her lifetime. Keep in mind, however, that such forces were remote from the restricted world that she depicts. Tumultuous affairs, such as the Napoleonic wars, in her day did not significantly affect the daily lives of middle-class provincial families. The ranks of the military were recruited from the lower orders of the populace, leaving gentlemen to purchase a commission, the way Wickham does in the novel, and thereby become officers.

Additionally, the advancement of technology had not yet disrupted the stately eighteenth-century patterns of rural life. The effects of the industrial revolution, with its economic and social repercussions, were still most sharply felt by the underprivileged laboring classes. Unrest was widespread, but the great reforms that would launch a new era of English political life did not come until later. Consequently, newer technology that existed in England at the time of *Pride and Prejudice*'s publication does not appear in the work.

General Critique of *Pride and Prejudice*

*Pride and Prejudice* continues to be popular today not only because of its memorable characters and the general appeal of the story, but also because of the skill with which it is told. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen displays a masterful use of irony, dialogue, and realism that support the character development and heighten the experience of reading the novel.

Jane Austen's irony is devastating in its exposure of foolishness and hypocrisy. Self-delusion or the attempt to fool other people is almost always the object of her wit; note how she has Elizabeth say that she hopes she will never laugh at what is wise or good.

The reader finds various forms of exquisite irony in *Pride and Prejudice*: Sometimes the characters are unconsciously ironic, as when Mrs. Bennet seriously asserts that *she* would never accept any entailed property, though Mr. Collins is willing to; other times, Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth serve to directly express the author's ironic opinion. When Mary Bennet is the only daughter at home and doesn't have to be compared to her prettier sisters, the author observes that "it was suspected by her father that she submitted to the change without much reluctance." Mr. Bennet turns his wit on himself during the crisis with Wickham and Lydia — "let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough."

Elizabeth's irony is lighthearted when Jane asks when she began to love Mr. Darcy. "It has been coming on so gradually that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley." She can be bitterly cutting, however, in her remark on Darcy's role in separating Bingley and Jane. "Mr. Darcy is uncommonly kind to Mr. Bingley, and takes a prodigious deal of care of him."

The author, independent of any character, uses irony in the narrative parts for some of her sharpest — but often unnoticed — judgments. The Meryton community is glad that Lydia is marrying such a worthless man as Wickham: "and the good-natured wishes for her well-doing, which had proceeded before from all the spiteful old ladies in Meryton, lost but little of their spirit in this change of circumstances, because with such a husband, her misery was certain."

Austen uses irony to both provoke whimsical laughter and to make veiled, bitter observations. In her hands — and few others are more capable and discriminating — irony is an extremely effective device for moral evaluation.

Dialogue also plays an important role in *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel opens with a talk between Mrs. Bennet and her husband: "'My dear Mr. Bennet,' said his lady to him one day, 'have you heard that Netherfield is let at last?'" In the conversation that follows, we learn a great deal — about Mrs. Bennet's preoccupation with marrying off her daughters, Mr. Bennet's ironic and sarcastic attitude toward his wife, and her self-pitying nature. The stage is effortlessly set for the family's introduction to the Bingley group, and the dialogue has given us information on both incidents of plot and the attitudes which drive the characters.

The pieces of dialogue are consistently the most vivid and important parts of the novel. This is natural because novels were mostly read aloud in Austen's time, so good dialogue was extremely important. We learn of the major turning points through the dialogue, and even intense inner change like Elizabeth's famous self-recognition scene ("How despicably have I acted!") is related as a person talking to herself.

Each character's speeches are individually appropriate and the most telling way of revealing what each is like. Elizabeth's talk is forthright and sparkling, her father's is sarcastic, Mr. Collin's speeches are tedious and silly, and Lydia's fountain of words is all frivolity and no substance.

The things that happen in *Pride and Prejudice*happen to nearly all readers — embarrassment at the foolishness of relatives, the unsteady feelings of falling in love, and the chagrin of suddenly realizing a big mistake. The psychological realism of the novel is revealed in the quick recognition we have of how the key characters feel.

It is very natural for Elizabeth and Darcy to be angry at each other after she first turns him down, and it is very natural for them to feel twinges of regret, and then have a complete change of mind with the passage of time. Every step in their progress toward each other is described with a sensitivity to how people feel and act. In the subtle and beautiful description of Elizabeth's self-realization is a convincing view of how an intelligent, feeling person changes.

When considering Austen's realism, however, readers should recognize that her major weakness as a writer is related to her greatest strength. She writes about what she knows — and this means that great areas of human experience are never touched on. We never see that much of the male characters, and they are rough sketches compared with her heroines. Extreme passions are usually avoided in her writing, and this becomes noticeable when, for example, she moves to a very impersonal, abstract voice when Elizabeth accepts Darcy: Elizabeth "immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change . . . as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure his present assurances." People who dislike Austen's works often cite this lack of extreme emotions as their main reason. Even so, no one can deny her ability to create unforgettable characters, build well-structured plots, or deliver assessments of society with a razor-sharp wit. Austen's works possess a timeless quality, which makes her stories and themes as relevant today as they were two hundred years ago.

## Character List

**Elizabeth Bennet** An intelligent and spirited young woman who possesses a keen wit and enjoys studying people's characters. Although she initially dislikes Darcy, circumstances cause her to reassess her negative impression of him, and she eventually falls in love with him.

**Fitzwilliam Darcy** A wealthy, proud man who falls in love with Elizabeth and reveals a generous, thoughtful nature beneath his somewhat stiff demeanor.

**Mr. Bennet** Elizabeth's ironic and often apathetic father. Unhappily married, he has failed to provide a secure financial future for his wife and daughters.

**Mrs. Bennet** Elizabeth's foolish and unrestrained mother who is obsessed with finding husbands for her daughters.

**Jane Bennet** A gentle and kind-hearted young woman who is Elizabeth's confidant and the oldest of the Bennet daughters. She falls in love with Bingley but is cautious about revealing the depth of her feelings for him.

**Mary Bennet**The pretentious third Bennet daughter, who prefers reading over socializing.

**Catherine (Kitty) Bennet**The Bennet's peevish fourth daughter, who joins her sister Lydia in flirting with soldiers.

**Lydia Bennet**The Bennet's immature and irresponsible youngest daughter. Mrs. Bennet's favorite, she shocks the family by running away with Wickham.

**Charles Bingley**A good-natured and wealthy man who falls in love with Jane. He is easily influenced by others, especially by his close friend Darcy.

**Caroline Bingley**Bingley's shallow and haughty sister, who befriends Jane and later snubs her. She attempts to attract Darcy's attentions and is jealous when Darcy is instead drawn to Elizabeth.

**Mr. and Mrs. Hurst**Bingley's snobbish sister and brother-in-law. Mrs. Hurst spends most of her time gossiping with Caroline, while Mr. Hurst does little more than play cards and sleep.

**George Wickham**A handsome and personable fortune hunter to whom Elizabeth is initially attracted. He eventually runs off with and is forced to marry Lydia.

**Lady Catherine De Bourgh**Darcy's arrogant aunt, who dominates Mr. Collins and entertains hopes that her daughter will marry Darcy.

**Miss De Bourgh**Lady Catherine's sickly, bland daughter.

**Colonel Fitzwilliam**Darcy's well-mannered and pleasant cousin, who is interested in Elizabeth, but who needs to marry someone with money.

**Georgiana Darcy**Darcy's shy but warmhearted sister.

**Mr. Collins**Mr. Bennet's ridiculous cousin, who will inherit Longbourn after Mr. Bennet's death. Upon Lady Catherine De Bourgh's recommendation, he seeks a bride, first proposing to Elizabeth and then to Charlotte Lucas.

**Charlotte Lucas**Elizabeth's sensible and intelligent friend, who disappoints Elizabeth by marrying Mr. Collins for money and security.

**Sir William and Lady Lucas**Charlotte's parents and the Bennets' neighbors.

**Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner**Mrs. Bennet's intelligent and cultivated brother and sister-in-law.

**Mr. and Mrs. Phillips**A country attorney and his vulgar wife, who is Mrs. Bennet's sister.

# Pride and Prejudice Summary

[*Pride and Prejudice*](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice) is set primarily in the county of Hertfordshire, about 50 miles outside of London. The story centers on the the Bennet family, particularly [Elizabeth](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#elizabeth). The novel opens at Longbourn, the Bennet family's estate. Mr. and [Mrs. Bennet](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-bennet) have five children: [Jane](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#jane), Elizabeth, [Mary](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mary), [Kitty](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#kitty), and [Lydia](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#lydia). The family engages in a conversation about [Mr. Bingley](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mr-bingley), "a single man of large fortune" who will be renting the nearby estate of Netherfield Park. Mrs. Bennet sees Mr. Bingley as a potential suitor for one of her daughters.

The Bennets first meet Mr. Bingley and his companions at the Meryton Ball. The townspeople conclude that Mr. Bingley is perfectly amiable and agreeable. Meanwhile, Mr. Bingley takes an immediate liking to Jane Bennet. Mr. Bingley's friend [Mr. Darcy](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mr-darcy), however, snubs Elizabeth. The community decides that Darcy is proud and disagreeable because of his reserve and his refusal to dance. Jane finds Bingley's sisters - Caroline and [Mrs. Hurst](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-hurst) - to be amiable, but Elizabeth sees them as arrogant.

After further interactions, it becomes evident that Jane and Bingley are interested in one another. However, while Bingley makes his partiality quite obvious, Jane is universally cheerful and somewhat shy. [Charlotte](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#charlotte) Lucas, Elizabeth's best friend, has a very pragmatic view of marriage. She recommends that Jane make her regard for Bingley more obvious. At the same time, Mr. Darcy begins to admire Elizabeth, captivated by her fine eyes and lively wit. She, however, remains contemptuous towards him.

When Jane is invited for dinner at Netherfield, Mrs. Bennet refuses to provide her with a carriage, hoping that the impending rainstorm will force her to spend the night there. After getting caught in the rain, Jane actually falls ill and has to remain at Netherfield for many days. Upon hearing that Jane is ill, Elizabeth walks to Bingley's estate through the muddy fields. [Caroline Bingley](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#caroline-bingley) and Mrs. Hurst are scandalized by Elizabeth's rumpled appearance, but join Bingley in welcoming her nonetheless.

Elizabeth continues to impress Darcy during her time nursing Jane at Netherfield. However, she remains blind to his affections and continues to see him as a proud and haughty man. Caroline, who hopes to attract Mr. Darcy herself, grows extremely jealous of Elizabeth and mocks her lowly status.

Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters come to Netherfield to check on Jane, and Elizabeth is mortified by their foolish behavior and complete lack of manners. Bingley's admiration for Jane continues unabated, though, and his affection is evident in his genuine solicitude for her recovery. After Jane recovers, she returns home with Elizabeth.

Meanwhile, a militia regiment is stationed at the nearby town of Meryton, where Mrs. Bennet's sister [Mrs. Phillips](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-phillips) lives. Mrs. Phillips is just as foolish as Mrs. Bennet. Lydia and Kitty love to stay with their aunt in Meryton so they can socialize (and flirt) with the military officers.

[Mr. Collins](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mr-collins), [Mr. Bennet](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mr-bennet)'s distant cousin, writes a letter stating his intention to visit. Collins is in line to inherit Longbourn because the estate has been entailed away from any female children. Mr. Collins is a clergyman, and his patroness, [Lady Catherine](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#lady-catherine) de Bourgh (who is also Darcy's aunt), has suggested that he find a wife. Therefore, Collins hopes to make amends for the entailment by marrying one of Mr. Bennet's daughters. Mr. Collins proves himself to be a silly man, speaking in long, pompous speeches with an air of solemn formality. The Miss Bennets and Mr. Collins go for a walk to Meryton. On the way, they meet an officer in the regiment named [Mr. Wickham](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mr-wickham). They also run into Mr. Darcy. When Darcy and Wickham see one another, both men become visibly uncomfortable.

Wickham shows an immediate partiality for Elizabeth, and they speak at length over the following days. In one of these conversations, Wickham explains his past with Darcy. Darcy's father had promised that Wickham, his godson, would inherit a good living after the elder man's death. However, Darcy failed to fulfill his father's dying wishes and left Wickham to support himself. Elizabeth, already predisposed to think badly of Darcy, does not question Wickham's account. When Elizabeth tells Wickham's story to Jane, however, Jane refuses think badly of either Wickham or Darcy, insisting that there must be some misunderstanding.

Bingley hosts a ball at Netherfield. He and Jane spend the whole evening together and their mutual attachment becomes increasingly obvious. However, Mrs. Bennet speaks loudly about their imminent engagement, and Elizabeth notes that Darcy overhears her. Later that evening, Darcy asks Elizabeth to dance and she reluctantly accepts. She does not enjoy it and cannot understand why he asked her. Mr. Collins pays particularly close attention to Elizabeth at the ball, and even reserves the first two dances with her.

The next day, Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth. She refuses, but it takes him a while to accept her rejection; he assumes she is simply playing coy (as he believes females do). Mrs. Bennet is extremely angry at Elizabeth for refusing Collins, but Mr. Bennet is glad. Mr. Collins quickly shifts his attentions to Charlotte Lucas. He proposes to Charlotte, and she accepts. Elizabeth is disappointed in her friend for agreeing to marry such a silly man simply for the sake of financial security.

Bingley travels to London for business but plans to return to Netherfield. His sisters and Darcy soon follow him. Soon thereafter, Caroline writes to Jane to say that Bingley has changed his plans and will not return to Netherfield for at least six months. Caroline also informs Jane that she hopes Bingley will marry Darcy's younger sister in order to unite the two families' fortunes. Jane is heartbroken. Elizabeth thinks that Darcy and Bingley's sisters have somehow managed to dissuade Bingley from proposing to Jane.

Mr. and [Mrs. Gardiner](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-gardiner), Elizabeth's aunt and uncle, come to Longbourn to visit. Noting Jane's sadness, they invite her to stay with them in London for a while. Elizabeth hopes that Jane will run into Bingley while in London. Mrs. Gardiner warns Elizabeth against marrying Wickham because of his poor financial situation. While Jane is in London, Caroline Bingley is extremely rude to her. Jane assumes that Mr. Bingley knows she is in London, and since he does not call, she decides he no longer cares for her. In Meryton, Wickham suddenly transfers his attentions from Elizabeth to [Miss King](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#miss-king), a woman who has recently acquired 10,000 pounds from an inheritance.

Elizabeth travels to visit Charlotte (now Mrs. Collins) at her new home in Kent, along with [Sir William Lucas](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#sir-william-lucas) and [Maria Lucas](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#maria-lucas). On their way, the travelers stop to visit Jane and the Gardiners. Mrs. Gardiner criticizes Wickham's change of affections, but Elizabeth defends him. During her stay in Hunsford, Elizabeth and the others are often invited to dine at Rosings, Lady Catherine's large estate. Lady Catherine is completely arrogant and domineering. After Elizabeth has been at the parsonage for two weeks, Mr. Darcy and his cousin [Colonel Fitzwilliam](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#colonel-fitzwilliam) visit Rosings. Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam get along very well. Darcy also pays a lot of attention to Elizabeth and often visits the parsonage. He also purposely meets her during her daily walks through the nearby gardens. One day, Colonel Fitzwilliam mentions to Elizabeth that Darcy recently saved a close friend from an imprudent marriage. Elizabeth realizes that Fitzwilliam is referring to Bingley and Jane. She is so angry at Darcy that she gives herself a headache, which keeps her from visiting Rosings that night.

Darcy visits Elizabeth while she is alone at the parsonage and confesses that he wants to marry her despite her low family connections. Elizabeth is shocked at his arrogant address and rudely refuses him. She also rebukes him for acting in such an ungentlemanly manner and accuses him of ruining Jane's future happiness and betraying Wickham. Darcy is shocked that Elizabeth has declined his proposal and leaves.

The next day, Darcy finds Elizabeth and hands her a letter. She reads it after he is gone. First, Darcy defends himself for dissuading Bingley from proposing to Jane. Not only were Jane's family connections low, but she did not seem to show any particular preference for Bingley. Darcy then details his side of the Wickham story. Before his death, Darcy's father asked Darcy to provide Wickham with a living, provided Wickham enter the clergy. Wickham, however, did not want to enter the clergy, and asked Darcy for 3,000 pounds to study law. Wickham soon squandered all his money on a dissolute lifestyle and then asked Darcy for another stipend, promising to enter the clergy this time. When Darcy refused, Wickham seduced Darcy's teenage sister, Georgiana. Before they could elope, Darcy intervened and saved Georgiana's honor.

Elizabeth initially refuses to believe Darcy's claims, but comes to consider the possibility as she reflects on Wickham's behavior. She realizes she was inclined to believe Wickham because she was prejudiced against Darcy and because she was flattered by his attention. Soon afterwards, Elizabeth returns home, stopping to collect Jane on the way. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, and Kitty are upset because the regiment is leaving Meryton and moving on to Brighton. Lydia is then invited to join [Colonel Forster](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#colonel-forster) and [Mrs. Forster](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-forster) in Brighton. Elizabeth advises her father to refuse Lydia's request, believing that her sister's frivolous nature will get her in trouble there. However, Mr. Bennet does not heed Elizabeth's advice.

Soon afterwards, Elizabeth goes on vacation with the Gardiners. Their first stop is close to Pemberley, Mr. Darcy's estate. The Gardiners want to take a tour, and Elizabeth only agrees once she learns that Darcy is currently away. During their tour of the estate, [Mrs. Reynolds](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-reynolds), the Pemberley housekeeper, praises Darcy unequivocally. Elizabeth also expresses some regret that she will never be mistress of this estate. The travelers suddenly run into Darcy, who has arrived early. Surprisingly, Darcy is extremely cordial to both Elizabeth and the Gardiners. He tells Elizabeth that he wants her to meet Georgiana as soon as she arrives the next day. The next morning, Darcy and Georgiana visit Elizabeth and the Gardiners at their inn. Bingley soon joins them, and Elizabeth can see that he still thinks fondly of Jane. Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner return the courtesy by visiting Pemberley, where Bingley's sisters treat them quite rudely.

One morning, Elizabeth receives a letter from Jane, announcing that Lydia has eloped with Wickham. Worse yet, the family fears that Wickham does not actually intend to marry her. Jane asks Elizabeth to return home immediately. As soon as Elizabeth reads the letter, Darcy arrives at the inn. In her frantic state, Elizabeth tells him what has happened. Darcy feels partially to blame, since he never publicly exposed Wickham's wickedness.

Elizabeth and the Gardiners depart for Longbourn almost immediately. There, a hysterical Mrs. Bennet has locked herself in her room. They learn from Colonel Forster that Wickham has amassed over 1,000 pounds of gambling debts. The next day, [Mr. Gardiner](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mr-gardiner) leaves for London to join Mr. Bennet, who is already there looking for Lydia. After many days of fruitless searching, Mr. Bennet returns home, leaving the search in Mr. Gardiner's hands.

Soon, a letter arrives from Mr. Gardiner announcing that Lydia and Wickham have been found. Wickham has agreed to marry Lydia if Mr. Bennet provides her with her equal share of his wealth. Considering the size of his debts, Mr. Bennet knows that Wickham would never have agreed to marry Lydia for so little money. He concludes that Mr. Gardiner must have paid off Wickham's debts to solidify the deal. After their marriage, Lydia and Wickham visit Longbourn. Lydia is not the least bit remorseful for her conduct. Nevertheless, Mrs. Bennet is very happy to have one of her daughters married. At dinner, Lydia lets it slip to Elizabeth that Darcy was present at her wedding. Curious, Elizabeth writes to Mrs. Gardiner for details. Her aunt explains that it was Darcy who found Lydia and Wickham and paid off Wickham's debts. Mrs. Gardiner believes that Darcy did this out of love for Elizabeth.

Bingley and Mr. Darcy soon return to Netherfield Park, and they call at Longbourn frequently. After several days, Bingley proposes to Jane. She accepts, and the family is very happy. In the meantime, Darcy leaves on a short business trip to London. While he is gone, Lady Catherine comes to Longbourn, furious after hearing a rumor that Elizabeth and Darcy are engaged. She forbids Elizabeth from ever accepting a proposal from Mr. Darcy, but Elizabeth is completely offended and refuses to promise anything. Lady Catherine leaves in a huff.

After returning from his trip, Darcy tells Elizabeth that his affection has not changed. She then reveals that her feelings have changed and that she would be happy to marry him. They discuss how and why their sentiments have changed since Darcy's first proposal. Darcy has since realized he was wrong to act so proudly and place so much emphasis on class differences. Elizabeth, meanwhile, accepts that she was wrong to judge Darcy prematurely and admits that she allowed her vanity to affect her judgment.

Both couples marry. Elizabeth and Darcy live at Pemberley. After living in Netherfield for a year, Jane and Bingley move to an estate near Pemberley. Lydia and Wickham tire of each other eventually, and Lydia keeps asking her sisters for money. Kitty spends most of her time with her two elder sisters, and her education and character begin to improve. Mary remains at home to keep her mother company. Mr. Bennet is very happy that his two oldest daughters have married so happily, and Mrs. Bennet is glad that her daughters have married so prosperously.

# Pride and Prejudice Themes

## Pride

As [Mary](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mary) says in Chapter 5, "human nature is particularly prone to [pride]." Throughout [*Pride and Prejudice*](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice), pride prevents the characters from seeing the truth of a situation. Most notably, it is one of the two primary barriers in the way of a union between [Elizabeth](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#elizabeth) and Darcy. Darcy's pride in his social position leads him to scorn anyone outside of his own social circle. Meanwhile, Elizabeth's pride in her powers of discernment cloud her judgment. These two find happiness by helping each other overcome his/her pride. Outside of Elizabeth and Darcy, however, Austen seems pessimistic about the human ability to conquer this character flaw. A slew of secondary characters, like [Mrs. Bennet](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-bennet), [Lady Catherine](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#lady-catherine), [Mr. Collins](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mr-collins), and [Caroline Bingley](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#caroline-bingley), remain deluded by personal pride throughout the novel.

## Prejudice

Critic A. Walton Litz comments, "in Pride and Prejudice one cannot equate Darcy with Pride, or Elizabeth with Prejudice; Darcy's pride of place is founded on social prejudice, while Elizabeth's initial prejudice against him is rooted in pride of her own quick perceptions." Ultimately, both characters' egos drive them towards personal prejudice. Darcy has been taught to scorn anyone outside his own social circle and must overcome his prejudice in order to endear himself to Elizabeth. Similarly, Elizabeth's excessive pride in her discernment leads her write Darcy off too quickly. Ultimately, they find happiness by recognizing the barriers that prejudice creates.

## Family

Austen portrays the family unit as primarily responsible for the intellectual and moral education of children. Throughout the novel, the younger characters either benefit from or suffer from their family values. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's failure to provide their daughters with a proper education leads to [Lydia](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#lydia)'s utter foolishness and immorality. Elizabeth and [Jane](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#jane) manage to develop virtue and discernment in spite of their parents' negligence, though it is notable that they have other role models (like the Gardiners). Darcy shares his father's aristocratic nature and tendency towards generosity, while Lady Catherine's formidable parenting style has rendered her daughter too frightened to speak.

## Women

Austen is certainly critical of the gender injustices present in 19th century English society, particularly as perpetrated by the institution of marriage. In Pride and Prejudice, many women (such as [Charlotte](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#charlotte)) must marry solely for the sake of financial security. However, in her portrayal of Elizabeth, Austen shows that women are just as intelligent and capable as their male counterparts. [Jane Austen](https://www.gradesaver.com/author/jane-austen) herself went against convention by remaining single and earning a living through her novels. In her personal letters, Austen advised friends only to marry for love. In the novel, Elizabeth's happy ending reveals Austen's beliefs that woman has the right to remain independent until she meets the right man (if she meets him).

On the other hand, most contemporary readers will find the Longbourn entailment to be unjust. And yet the heroines - Jane and Elizabeth - refrain from speaking out against it. Instead, the only two characters who openly criticize the entailment - Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine - are ridiculous caricatures. Furthermore, the fact that Elizabeth seems to share her father's distrust frivolous women suggests Austen's uneasy relationship with her own gender.

## Class

Class issues are everywhere in Pride and Prejudice. While the novel never posits an egalitarian ideology nor supports the leveling of all social classes, it does criticize an over-emphasis on class, especially in terms of judging a person's character. Ultimately, the novel accepts Elizabeth's view that the trappings of wealth are not a virtue in and of themselves. Darcy's initial pride is based on his extreme class-consciousness, but he eventually comes to accept Elizabeth's perspective, most notably evidenced through his admiration of the Gardiners. Likewise, he joins Elizabeth in rejecting the upper-class characters who are idle, mean-spirited, closed-minded, like Lady Catherine and Bingley's sisters.

Austen clearly finds rigid class boundaries to be occasionally absurd. Mr. Collins's comic formality and obsequious relationship with Lady Catherine form a satire of class consciousness and social formalities. In the end, the novel's verdict on class differences is moderate. Austen seems to accept the existence of class hierarchy, but she also criticizes the way it can poison society. Critic Samuel Kliger notes, "If the conclusion of the novel makes it clear that Elizabeth accepts class relationships as valid, it becomes equally clear that Darcy, through Elizabeth's genius for treating all people with respect for their natural dignity, is reminded that institutions are not an end in themselves but are intended to serve the end of human happiness."

## Individual vs. Society

In Pride and Prejudice, Austen portrays a world in which society is actively involved in the private lives of individuals. Characters often face questions about their responsibility to the world around them. A prime example is Darcy's guilt for not having publicly shamed Wickham before he was able to elope with Lydia. After all, Lydia's sin threatens to besmirch not only her family, but the community at large. And yet Austen seems quite well aware of how easily public opinion can change, as evidenced by the town's easily shifting opinions on Wickham.

Elizabeth, meanwhile, is proudly independent and individualistic. She possesses the ability to transcend her limitations - the negligence of her parents, the frivolity of Meryton, the pragmatic nature of Charlotte - because she is confident enough to go after what she wants. However, her individualistic nature misleads her as she works through her feelings for Darcy - but thankfully, [Mrs. Gardiner](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice/study-guide/character-list#mrs-gardiner) is there to guide her towards him. Ultimately, Austen is critical of the power public opinion has on individual action, but she also believes that society has a crucial role in promoting virtue and therefore, engendering individual happiness. According to critic Richard Simpson, Austen portrays a "thorough consciousness that man is a social being, and that apart from society there is not even the individual."

## Virtue

Austen's novels unite Aristotelian and Christian conceptions of virtue. She sees human life as purposeful and believes that human beings must guide their appetites and desires through their use of reason. For instance, Elizabeth almost loses her chance at happiness because her vanity overcomes her pragmatism. Lydia's lack of virtue is linked with her inability to control her passion and desire.

Most of these examples emphasize the importance of self-awareness. Without knowing oneself, it is difficult to develop virtue. Darcy and Elizabeth, two of the only characters who actually change in the novel, can only see past their pride and prejudice with each other's help. In the end, Austen links happiness to virtue and virtue to self-awareness.