

## Pride and Prejudice

**“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”**

**What is the significance of the novel's opening line?**

The novel's opening line summarizes the story that follows by focusing the reader's attention on the subject of marriage and the two main characters to come: “the single man in possession of a good fortune”—Mr. Darcy—and his wife-to-be—Elizabeth Bennet. The sentence also suggests the novel's import and timelessness by suggesting that its plot and themes are “truths universally acknowledged.” Sparks fly when spirited Elizabeth Bennet meets single, rich, and proud Mr. Darcy. But Mr. Darcy reluctantly finds himself falling in love with a woman beneath his class. Can each overcome their own pride and prejudice?

### Plot

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.

**Although the setting and characters of the novel are out of date, *Pride and Prejudice* has remained a popular novel since its publication in 1813. Why do you think it has retained its popularity?**

The novel seems old-fashioned but it deals with a major issue in literature, pure and unconditional love which overcomes social barriers and all kinds of prejudice. It is still relevant today because despite social and technological advances, human nature seems not to change that easily. It also criticizes the hypocrisy of the British society of the time and it shows the idleness of well-off people, who do nothing else but attending balls, rendering long visits, travelling, playing music and hunting. Therefore, its social message still holds true today although in a lesser extent. Besides, the novel evokes our curiosity (or even nostalgia) about a world which is now outdated (at least in developed countries and in big cities), where social boundaries are very strict, where everyone is meticulously “monitored”, criticized, frowned upon, even condemned sometimes, but where, on the other hand, everybody seems to have their own specific “place” in society. Furthermore, it provides readers with an interesting insight on the status of women in Europe in the 19th century. Women were considered to be “inferior” and every woman who exhibited some kind of independent behavior would be severely criticized. Last but not least, it is fun to read, not to mention that it offers readers a happy ending!

**What are the elements or values in the novel that you believe are universal. Do they transcend time?**

Love, friendship, independence, sincerity, discretion, compassion, understanding, equality, boldness, integrity, self-confidence, wittiness, self-determination etc.

According to Mr. Darcy, what qualities make a woman “accomplished”?

Mr. Darcy agrees with Charles Bingley that an accomplished woman must have a knowledge of music, art, and languages and that she should also possess a “certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice.” However, Darcy adds one more quality to the list: “the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.”

Do you think that Elizabeth Bennet would still be considered a remarkable woman in modern-day society? What qualities does she have which may be significant for a young lady nowadays?

Elizabeth seems to be independent, intelligent and bold/daring, not being afraid to express her opinion openly. She does show prejudice, but only after being insulted by Darcy. She is proud of herself and of her family and she is not dazzled by fortune or social status, unlike her mother and many other women of her time. She also seems to be a good judge of other people’s character despite the fact that she can be very strict at times. She is probably aware of the fact that she is charming but she is far from conceited. All these traits are positive, so Elizabeth would certainly be considered a remarkable woman even today.

The gossipy small-town environment is a microcosm of society at large. What do you think about Jane Austen’s perspective on society as a whole? What conclusion can you draw about Jane Austen’s perspective on the society of that era?

Jane Austen is critical and occasionally ironical towards the society of her time, which was established or structured on the basis of class, money and gender. Social behavior was regarded as a very important aspect and it was thus closely observed, imposing strong limits on individuals, particularly women. The author shows people who are constantly being watched and criticized by others, both in public and family occasions, which could mean that she wanted to portray the lack of independence that people, and especially women, at her time used to have. Moreover, Austen’s choice to present characters from different social and/or economic backgrounds who fall in love with each other, perhaps shows her intention to criticize or even reject the values of her society.

How is the novel a critique of the social norms of its time?

Austen shows that people who have more money or a higher social status are not necessarily better people. In fact, often they have less integrity, less intelligence, and less ability to make the world a better place. For example, Caroline Bingley finds the Bennet sisters boring and their mother intolerable, but she is only trying to woo Mr. Darcy for herself. Mr. Collins is a buffoon who defines himself by his patron and prattles on about topics that do not interest his audience. Lady Catherine, a character of high social standing, is conceited and rude to Elizabeth in their final conversation. Austen uses her characters to reveal a universal truth: Wealth and status do not make people good people.

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. 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 warmer and more 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. 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.**

## Quiz

1. Complete the quotation: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a \_\_\_\_."
  - A. house
  - B. title
  - C. wife
  - D. dog
2. The Bennet family lives in the village of
  - A. Pemberley
  - B. Longbourn
  - C. Rosings
  - D. London
3. Mr. Bingley, when he attends the ball in Meryton, seems to be quite taken with
  - A. Elizabeth
  - B. Jane
  - C. Lydia
  - D. Charlotte Lucas
4. How does Mr. Darcy offend Elizabeth at the first ball?
  - A. He insults her father.
  - B. He dances with Jane too often.
  - C. He slaps her.
  - D. He refuses to dance with her.

5. Why does Jane's visit to the Bingleys end up lasting for days?

- A. She gets soaked in a rainstorm and becomes ill.
- B. Mr. Bingley proposes to her.
- C. Mrs. Bennet forgets to send a carriage to bring her home.
- D. Jane is hoping to make Mr. Darcy fall in love with her.

7. To which Bennet daughter does Mr. Collins propose marriage?

- A. Elizabeth
- B. Jane
- C. Mary
- D. Lydia

9. Whom does Mr. Collins marry?

- A. Jane
- B. Lydia
- C. Miss Bingley
- D. Charlotte Lucas

10. Why does Miss Bingley dislike Elizabeth?

- A. She is jealous of Darcy's growing attraction to Elizabeth.
- B. Elizabeth insulted Miss Bingley at the ball.
- C. Wickham has told Miss Bingley lies about Elizabeth's character.
- D. Darcy is constantly speaking ill of Elizabeth.

11. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is Darcy's

- A. Aunt
- B. Sister
- C. Mother
- D. First wife

12. When Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth, he spends most of the proposal dwelling on

- A. Her beauty
- B. How socially unsuitable a match she is for him
- C. How much he adores her family
- D. How much money he will lavish on her

13. When Darcy proposes for the first time, Elizabeth

- A. Tells him that she is engaged to Wickham
- B. Asks him for more time
- C. Turns him down
- D. Faints

14. When he returns to Netherfield, Mr. Bingley

- A. Has just married Miss Darcy

- B. Pursues the priesthood
- C. Begins courting Elizabeth
- D. Resumes courting Jane

15. What does Lady Catherine forbid Elizabeth to do?

- A. Marry Bingley
- B. Visit Rosings
- C. Marry Darcy
- D. See Wickham

16. The novel ends with

- A. Darcy marrying Elizabeth, and Bingley marrying Miss Darcy
- B. Darcy marrying Elizabeth, and Wickham marrying Jane
- C. Bingley marrying Jane, and Elizabeth marrying Wickham
- D. Bingley marrying Jane, and Darcy marrying Elizabeth

17. What are Elizabeth's most notable virtues

- A. Her generosity and sympathetic heart
- B. Her intelligence and quick wit
- C. Her curiosity and sense of style
- D. Her maturity and deferential disposition

18. Which characteristic does Elizabeth have to overcome in the novel

- A. Her belief in the virtue of behaving conventionally
- B. Her pattern of choosing men who are bad for her
- C. Her tendency to make judgments too quickly
- D. Her cynicism about the reality of romantic love