

1813

JANE AUSTEN'S

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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Literary Cavalcade Scholastic Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the many painstaking hours of work. Holly Hughes and Thomas F. Hirsch have devoted to making the Book

Austen, Jane (1775-1817) —English novelist often referred to as the greatest woman writer. She is known for her brilliant satire and her common-sense approach toward melodramatic situations and ordinary human behavior.

Pride and Prejudice (1813) —Austen’s most popular work — the story of the Bennet family. Mrs. Bennet occupies her time searching for husbands for her five daughters including the book’s intelligent heroine, Elizabeth, who represents “prejudice.” Her suitor, Fitzwilliam Darcy, represents “pride.”

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THE AUTHOR AND HER TIMES

Jane Austen was a country parson's daughter who lived most of her life in a tiny English village. She began writing her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, when she was still in her late teens. When she wrote the original version of her second and most famous novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (originally entitled *First Impressions*), she was not yet twenty-one. At that time she had never been away from home, except for a few years at a girls' boarding school before the age of ten. And yet, although she had seen almost nothing of the world beyond Steventon, the town where she grew up, she was able to write a witty, worldly novel of love, money, and marriage.

Jane Austen's world seems very narrow to us today. The year she was born, 1775, was an important one in English as well as American history, but to the people of the little village of Steventon, the American Revolution was something very far away that hardly touched their lives at all. Years later while Austen was writing her novels, England was involved in the Napoleonic Wars, but you won't find much mention of them in her work. One reason these wars did not affect the English at home very much was that they were fought entirely on foreign soil or at sea, and they did not involve very large numbers of Englishmen. (Two of Jane Austen's brothers did see combat as naval officers and both reached the rank of admiral, and a naval officer who did well in the wars is one of her most attractive

heroes in her last novel, *Persuasion*.) Another reason is that—without television, radio, telephones, automobiles, or even railroads—news traveled slowly.

People traveled very little, and when they did it was on foot, by public coach, or—if they could afford it—by private carriage. In the evenings they sat together around the fire, mother and girls mending or embroidering by candlelight and often someone reading aloud. For entertainment, they might visit a neighbor or go to a dance in the village public hall. At these so-called assemblies, young people were chaperoned by mothers and aunts, and only the most correct behavior was tolerated. If there was a large estate in the neighborhood, the squire or lord of the manor would give evening parties and occasionally a ball, to which his lady would invite the leading families of the countryside.

Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* in the family sitting room while her six brothers and a sister, her father's pupils, and visiting neighbors swirled around her. She would cover her manuscript with a blotter during interruptions and take up her pen again when the room was quiet. All the while, she was watching, listening, and thinking about the world around her. The novel reflects her understanding of and active involvement with “ordinary” people.

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is based on the concerns of people in early nineteenth-century country society. One of these concerns is money. Austen could observe the money problems of a middle-class family right in her own home. As a clergyman of the Church of England, her father was an educated man and a gentleman. But his parish consisted of only about three hundred people, and his

income didn't provide well for his family, so he had to take in students in addition to his church duties. Even so, he could send only one son, the oldest, to Oxford, and he couldn't give his daughters attractive dowries or an income if they remained unmarried.

Like other young women of their social class, Jane and her sister Cassandra were educated, mostly at home, in the “ladylike” subjects of music, drawing and painting, needlework, and social behavior. Thanks to her father and her own literary tastes, Jane was also very well read. Tall and graceful, with dark hair and beautiful hazel eyes, she enjoyed parties, liked to dance, and had numerous suitors. As it turned out, however, neither Jane nor her sister Cassandra ever married. After their father died in 1805, they and their mother were cared for by a brother who had been adopted by a wealthy childless couple and had inherited a sizable estate. (Such adoptions were a fairly common custom of the time.)

Such realities of middle-class life are central to *Pride and Prejudice*. Critics of a hundred or so years ago called Jane Austen “vulgar” and “mercenary,” because she writes so frankly about money. One of the first things we learn about her characters, for example, is how much income they have. Her critics considered it bad taste to talk about money, either one's own or someone else's.

But in the middle class of Jane Austen's time, the amount of your income could be a matter of life and death. What is more, it was not money you worked for and earned that mattered, but money you were born to or inherited. People who worked—businessmen, manufacturers, and even some professional people,

such as lawyers—were not accepted as members of the “gentry.” They were “in trade,” and the gentry looked down on them.

While Austen was writing, a great change was coming over England. The industrial revolution was reaching its height, and a new middle class of prosperous factory owners was developing. Yet in the midst of this change, one ancient English tradition still survived, and that was that the true gentry were not the newly rich in the cities but those who lived on their inherited estates. The new middle class, who had become rich “in trade,” were therefore buying manor houses and estates in the country, and setting up their heirs as members of the landed aristocracy.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the two leading male characters represent this social change. Mr. Darcy’s aristocratic family goes back for generations, and he draws his income from his vast estate of tenant farms. His friend Mr. Bingley, however, is heir to a fortune made “in trade” and is looking for a suitable country estate to establish himself in the upper class.

Notice how different characters in the novel react to these social distinctions. Jane Austen herself, through her heroine Elizabeth, expresses her contempt for snobbery. You’ll find that she pokes fun at the snobs and makes them her most comical characters.

Still, there was a very serious side to all this, and that was the situation of young women. In our time, women have many other choices in addition to marriage. In Jane Austen’s time it wasn’t so. A young woman of her class

depended for her happiness, her health, in fact the whole shape of her life, on her making a good marriage. If her husband was poor or a gambler or a drunkard, she and her children could suffer genuine privation. A girl with no fortune of her own often could not attract a husband. Then she might have to become a governess, living in other people's houses, looking after their children and subject to their whims.

The necessity of making a good marriage is one of the major themes of *Pride and Prejudice*, but that doesn't mean the novel is old fashioned. In fact, you may find that you can make a good argument for calling Jane Austen a feminist and her novel a feminist novel. It's a serious novel in many ways, but also a very funny one.

Jane Austen began writing novels simply to entertain herself and her family, with no idea of having her stories published. In her time, novels weren't considered a respectable form of literature, rather the way murder mysteries and Gothic romances are looked down on in our own time. Ministers preached and social critics thundered against the habit of reading novels. Meanwhile, hundreds of novels were being published—most of them trashy romances or wildly exaggerated adventure yarns—and people went right on reading them.

Most of these novels, including some of the better ones, were written by women. Writing was one of the few possible occupations for an intelligent, educated woman. Women could write at home while fulfilling their traditional role of running a household and bringing up children. They could stay out of the

public eye, hiding behind an assumed name. George Eliot's real name was Mary Ann Travers, the Bronte sisters wrote under the name of Bell, and George Sand in real life was Madame Dudevant. When Jane Austen's books were finally published, thanks to her brother Henry who acted as her agent, the title page just said "By a Lady." Her novels were read by a small, exclusive audience during her lifetime. She lived a quiet life and never yearned for celebrity.

Austen was working on her sixth and last novel, *Persuasion*, when Henry fell ill and she moved to London to nurse him. Soon afterward her own health began to fail. With Cassandra as her nurse and companion, she moved to Winchester to be treated by a famous surgeon there. He apparently could not help her, and on July 18, 1817, she died, just five months short of her forty-second birthday.

Judging from her letters, which radiate good humor and laugh off minor misfortunes, Jane Austen's life, although short, was a busy and contented one. If the lively, witty Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* was modeled on any living person, the model must have been Jane Austen herself.

THE NOVEL

PLOT

In the neighborhood of the Bennet family's estate of Longbourn, Mr. Bingley, an attractive young bachelor with a good income, has moved into the nearby manor. He falls in love with the oldest of the five Bennet daughters, Jane. But his friend, wealthy and aristocratic Mr. Darcy, disapproves of Bingley's choice. Darcy considers the Bennet family to be socially inferior, and he plots with Bingley's sisters to separate the lovers. Meanwhile, though, Darcy is finding it hard to resist his own increasing attraction to Jane's next younger sister, the vivacious Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is prejudiced against Darcy because he seems so proud and conceited. She also suspects that he has interfered between Jane and Bingley. She is even more put off when she hears that Darcy has treated a young man, George Wickham, cruelly and unjustly. Wickham tells her that Darcy has denied him the inheritance that his godfather, Darcy's father, left him. Wickham courts Elizabeth, and his good looks, charming manners, and story of injustice at Darcy's hands win her sympathy and deepen her prejudice against Darcy.

Because Mr. Bennet has no son, his estate will be inherited by his nearest male relative, Mr. Collins. This pompous clergyman comes to Longbourn seeking a wife. He proposes to Elizabeth, who rejects him—even though marrying him

would be the one way to keep Longbourn in the family. But he wins her best friend, Charlotte Lucas, a plain young woman who marries Collins to escape from spinsterhood into a safe, if loveless, marriage.

The story continues with an interweaving of plot and subplots. Elizabeth visits Charlotte, now Mrs. Collins. Darcy visits his aunt, Lady Catherine, who is Mr. Collins's patron. Darcy and Elizabeth meet constantly, and at last he proposes to her, saying with more honesty than tact that he does this against his better judgment. She angrily rejects him, accusing him of destroying Jane's happiness and Wickham's legitimate prospects. Later, in an earnest letter, he tells her the truth on both counts: he did interfere between Jane and Bingley, but he did not treat Wickham unjustly. In fact, he says, Wickham is a thoroughly bad character. Elizabeth believes Darcy for once, and her prejudice against him begins to weaken.

Elizabeth goes on a trip with her aunt and uncle, the Gardiners. They come to Darcy's magnificent estate in his absence and are shown through the house. His housekeeper praises him for his goodness and generosity, painting a very different picture of him from the one Elizabeth has had. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Darcy himself arrives. Elizabeth is mortified to be found there, but he is full of courtesy to the Gardiners and very attentive to Elizabeth.

Bad news comes from Longbourn: The youngest Bennet girl, giddy sixteen-year-old Lydia, has run away with Wickham. Such a scandal must disgrace the whole family, and Elizabeth decides that now, just as her feelings

toward Darcy have begun to change, any hope of his renewing his proposal is lost forever.

But not so. Darcy feels partially responsible for Lydia's elopement; he feels he should have warned the Bennets that Wickham once tried the same thing with Darcy's own sister. Besides, he is very much in love with Elizabeth. For her sake he searches out the fugitive couple, makes sure that they are legally married, pays Wickham's debts, and buys him a commission in the army. All this he does secretly. But, though sworn to secrecy, Lydia reveals Darcy's part in her rescue—and Elizabeth realizes at last how wrong she's been about him all along.

Bingley, with Darcy's encouragement, proposes to Jane and is accepted. Soon Darcy makes his proposal again to Elizabeth. By now she has abandoned her prejudice and he has subdued his pride, and so they are married and all ends happily.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

ELIZABETH BENNET

The leading female character in the novel is just under twenty-one. She is not as beautiful as her older sister but pretty enough, with fine eyes and a light, graceful figure. Mr. Darcy is attracted by her looks, but he especially likes what he calls her "lively mind"—she herself calls it her "impertinence." She is quick to make fun of people's absurdities and hypocrisies, but she's also deeply serious about some things—particularly about people's power to make each other happy

or unhappy. This seriousness is the main source of her prejudice against Darcy, and also—when she learns more about him—the source of her love for him. Unlike Jane, she is quick to express her feelings; she is fiery in expressing her anger at Darcy for what she believes he has done to make Jane unhappy and to ruin Wickham’s prospects. She also tries to persuade her father that he must be firm with Lydia, but she fails to budge him. She is too loyal to criticize her father openly, but she admits to herself that he is wrong in his treatment both of Lydia and of his wife.

FITZWILLIAM DARCY

Darcy is the leading male character in the novel, a tall, handsome man of twenty-eight, who first scorns and then falls in love with Elizabeth, much against his will. Unlike his friend Bingley, who is delighted with the friendly country society, Darcy’s first impression is that there is no one attractive enough to dance with or even talk to. Even Elizabeth seems to him merely “tolerable” when he first sees her. His ancient family name, magnificent estate, and sizable fortune all contribute to his pride. But there’s another side to his character, as Elizabeth and we, the readers, learn. He is a generous master to his servants and tenants and a loving brother to his young sister Georgiana. He is so steadfast in his love for Elizabeth—even though she has rejected him,—that he finds and rescues her sister from disgrace. He does this in secret, not expecting even to be thanked for it. He is too honorable to win Elizabeth’s hand by this unselfish action alone. He does not want her gratitude; he wants her love. Darcy’s character gradually

unfolds in the course of the story, and we, along with Elizabeth, like him better the more sides of him we see. We also see that he takes Elizabeth's criticism of him to heart—makes an effort to curb his pride and judge people according to what they really are, not merely by their rank in society. He demonstrates this change by his politeness and then his growing friendship with Elizabeth's aunt and uncle, the Gardiners, even though Mr. Gardiner is “in trade.” The gradual revelation and development of Darcy's character—from pride to generosity and gentleness—is one of the strengths of the novel.

JANE BENNET

Elizabeth's older sister is in her early twenties. She is the family beauty, and she is also the sweetest-natured of the family. She can't see anybody's faults and is never cross or angry. Her calmness and even temper turn out to be a disadvantage to her, however, when she doesn't seem to return Bingley's affection and he is easily discouraged from proposing to her. Although Jane hides her feelings from most people, Elizabeth knows that she really loves Bingley and suffers at losing him.

CHARLES BINGLEY

Darcy's friend provides a contrast to Darcy the way Jane provides contrast to Elizabeth. Where Darcy is proud and hard to please, Bingley is easygoing and ready to like everybody. He is also good-looking and a highly eligible bachelor. As the heir to a fortune, he is looking for a country estate, but he is taking his

time and enjoying his freedom. Although he is attractive, he is unsure of himself and quick to believe Darcy when Darcy says that Jane Bennet doesn't love him. When Darcy changes his opinion of the situation, Bingley just as readily renews his attentions to Jane and wins her hand. As Elizabeth says, from Darcy's point of view Bingley is a most convenient friend, so willing to be led in the way that Darcy wants him to go.

CAROLINE BINGLEY

Charles's sister is a fashionable young woman and what we today would call a social climber. She would like to forget that her own and her brother's fortunes were made "in trade" and is ambitious to step up higher in society by way of marriage. When Charles seems interested in Jane Bennet, Caroline pretends to be friendly to her, but she lets Jane know that she hopes her brother will marry Darcy's sister. She also conspires with Darcy to separate her brother from Jane. As for Elizabeth, Caroline is barely polite to her face and critical, even spiteful, behind her back. She is obviously jealous of Darcy's growing interest in Elizabeth. She herself had hoped to marry him.

MR. BENNET

Elizabeth's father is a witty, scholarly country gentleman whose comments and opinions contribute much to the comedy of the novel. But he is also a disappointed man, who long ago gave up all hope of finding happiness in his marriage—and who treats his foolish wife and younger daughters as objects of

amusement. He loves his two older girls, Jane and Elizabeth (Elizabeth is his favorite). But his unwillingness to control his wife's silly talk and his youngest daughter Lydia's flirtatious behavior comes close to wrecking both Jane's and Elizabeth's hopes of making happy marriages. Another of his disappointments is that his estate is entailed—meaning that it can go only to a male heir—and he has no son. Like most human beings, he would like to avoid unpleasantness, particularly the unpleasantness of having to save money and provide for the future. In his early years, always expecting the birth of a boy, he saw no need to save any of his income in order to provide for his daughters' future. By the time the fifth Bennet baby turned out to be still another girl, it seemed to him too late to do anything about the situation. Elizabeth loves her father dearly, but even she can't pretend that he doesn't have these serious faults as a husband and father.

MRS. BENNET

Elizabeth's mother is a figure of fun from the very opening scene of the novel; the fact is that she is really not very bright. Her whole purpose in life is to get her daughters married, but her lack of sense and judgment goes far to damage their prospects. She babbles constantly, complains of her nerves, and takes to her bed when things go wrong. She is even more embarrassing to her two older daughters when she is in good spirits, making silly comments and boasting loudly of their expectations. Her indulgence of Lydia's wildness carries the family to the brink of disaster.