

Pride and Prejudice: summary and analysis

The news that a wealthy young gentleman named Charles Bingley has rented the manor known as Netherfield Park causes a great stir in the neighboring village of Longbourn, especially in the Bennet household. The Bennets have five unmarried daughters, and Mrs. Bennet, a foolish and fussy gossip, is the sort who agrees with the novel's opening words: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." She sees Bingley's arrival as an opportunity for one of the girls to obtain a wealthy spouse, and she, therefore, insists that her husband call on the new arrival immediately. Mr. Bennet torments his family by pretending to have no interest in doing so, but he eventually meets with Mr. Bingley without their knowing. When he reveals to Mrs. Bennet and his daughters that he has made their new neighbor's acquaintance, they are overjoyed and excited.

Eager to learn more, Mrs. Bennet and the girls question Mr. Bennet incessantly. A few days later, Mr. Bingley returns the visit, though he does not meet Mr. Bennet's daughters. The Bennets invite him to dinner shortly afterward, but he is called away to London. Soon, however, he returns to Netherfield Park with his two sisters, his brother-in-law, and a friend named Darcy.

Mr. Bingley and his guests go to a ball in the nearby town of Meryton. The Bennet sisters attend the ball with their mother. The eldest daughter, Jane, dances twice with Bingley. Within her sister Elizabeth's hearing, Bingley exclaims to Darcy that Jane is "the most beautiful creature" he has ever beheld. Bingley suggests that Darcy dance with Elizabeth, but Darcy refuses, saying, "she is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me." He proceeds to declare that he has no interest in women who are "slighted by other men." Elizabeth takes an immediate and understandable disliking to Darcy. Because of Darcy's comments and refusal to dance with anyone not rich and well-bred, the neighborhood takes a similar dislike; it declares Bingley, on the other hand, to be quite "amiable."

At the end of the evening, the Bennet women return to their house, where Mrs. Bennet regales her husband with stories from the evening until he insists that she be silent. Upstairs, Jane relates to Elizabeth her surprise that Bingley danced with her twice, and Elizabeth replies that Jane is unaware of her own beauty. Both girls agree that Bingley's sisters are not well-mannered, but whereas Jane insists that they are charming in close conversation, Elizabeth continues to harbor a dislike for them.

The narrator then provides the reader with Bingley's background: he inherited a hundred thousand pounds from his father, but for now, in spite of his sisters' complaints, he lives as a tenant. His friendship with Darcy is "steady," despite the contrast in their characters, illustrated in their respective reactions to the Meryton ball. Bingley, cheerful and sociable, has an excellent time and is taken with Jane; Darcy, more clever but less tactful, finds the people dull and even criticizes Jane for smiling too often (Bingley's sisters, on the other hand, find Jane to be "a sweet girl," and Bingley therefore feels secure in his good opinion of her).

The opening sentence of *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"—establishes the centrality of an advantageous marriage, a fundamental social value of Regency England. The arrival of Mr. Bingley (and news of his fortune) is the event that sets the novel in motion. He delivers the prospect of a marriage of wealth and good connections for the eager Bennet girls. The opening sentence has a subtle, unstated significance. In its declarative and hopeful claim that a wealthy man must be looking for a wife, it hides beneath its surface the truth of such matters: a single woman must be in want of a husband, especially a wealthy one.

The first chapter consists almost entirely of dialogue, a typical instance of Austen's technique of using the manner in which characters express themselves to reveal

their traits and attitudes. Its last paragraph, in which the narrator describes Mr. Bennet as a “mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice,” and his wife as “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper,” simply confirms the character assessments that the reader has already made based on their conversation: Mrs. Bennett embodies ill-breeding and is prone to monotone hysteria; Mr. Bennet is a wit who retreats from his wife’s overly serious demeanor. There is little physical description of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, so the reader’s perception of them is shaped largely by their words. Darcy makes the importance of the verbal explicit at the end of the novel when he tells Elizabeth that he was first attracted to her by “the liveliness of [her] mind.”