

Major themes

Many critics take the title as the start when analysing the themes of *Pride and Prejudice* but Robert Fox cautions against reading too much into the title (which was initially *First Impressions*), because commercial factors may have played a role in its selection. "After the success of [Sense and Sensibility](#), nothing would have seemed more natural than to bring out another novel of the same author using again the formula of antithesis and alliteration for the title. The qualities of the title are not exclusively assigned to one or the other of the protagonists; both Elizabeth and Darcy display pride and prejudice."^[9] The phrase "pride and prejudice" had been used over the preceding two centuries by [Joseph Hall](#), [Jeremy Taylor](#), [Joseph Addison](#) and [Samuel Johnson](#).^{[10][11]} Austen probably took her title from a passage in [Fanny Burney's Cecilia](#) (1782), a popular novel she is known to have admired:

'The whole of this unfortunate business, said Dr Lyster, has been the result of PRIDE and PREJUDICE. [...] if to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination.'^{[11][12]} (capitalisation as in the original)

A theme in much of Austen's work is the importance of environment and upbringing in developing young people's character and morality.^[13] Social standing and wealth are not necessarily advantages in her world and a further theme common to Austen's work is ineffectual parents. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the failure of Mr and Mrs Bennet as parents is blamed for Lydia's lack of moral judgment. Darcy has been taught to be principled and scrupulously honourable but he is also proud and overbearing.^[13] Kitty, rescued from Lydia's bad influence and spending more time with her older sisters after they marry, is

said to improve greatly in their superior society.^[14] The American novelist Anna Quindlen observed in an introduction to an edition of Austen's novel in 1995:

Pride and Prejudice is also about that thing that all great novels consider, the search for self. And it is the first great novel that teaches us this search is as surely undertaken in the [drawing room](#) making [small talk](#) as in the pursuit of a [great white whale](#) or the [public punishment of adultery](#).^[15]

Marriage

The opening line of the novel famously announces: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."^[16] This sets marriage as a [motif](#) and a problem in the novel. Readers are poised to question whether or not these single men need a wife, or if the need is dictated by the "neighbourhood" families and their daughters who require a "good fortune".

Marriage is a complex social activity that takes political and financial economy into account. In the case of Charlotte Lucas, the seeming success of her marriage lies in the comfortable financial circumstances of their household, while the relationship between Mr and Mrs Bennet serves to illustrate bad marriages based on an initial attraction and surface over substance (economic and psychological). The Bennets' marriage is an example that the youngest Bennet, Lydia, re-enacts with Wickham and the results are far from felicitous. Although the central characters, Elizabeth and Darcy, begin the novel as hostile acquaintances and unlikely friends, they eventually work toward a better understanding of themselves and each other, which frees them to truly fall in love. This does not eliminate the challenges of the real differences in their technically-equivalent social status as gentry and their female relations. It does however provide them with a better understanding of each other's point of view

from the different ends of the rather wide scale of differences within that category.

When Elizabeth rejects Darcy's first proposal, the argument of marrying for love is introduced. Elizabeth only accepts Darcy's proposal when she is certain she loves him and her feelings are reciprocated.^[17] Austen's complex sketching of different marriages ultimately allows readers to question what forms of alliance are desirable especially when it comes to privileging economic, sexual, companionate attraction.^[18]

Wealth

Money plays a fundamental role in the marriage market, for the young ladies seeking a well-off husband and for men who wish to marry a woman of means. George Wickham tries to elope with Georgiana Darcy, and Colonel Fitzwilliam states that he will marry someone with wealth. Marrying a woman of a rich family also ensured a linkage to a higher-class family, as is visible in the desires of Bingley's sisters to have their brother married to Georgiana Darcy. Mrs Bennet is frequently seen encouraging her daughters to marry a wealthy man of high social class. In chapter 1, when Mr Bingley arrives, she declares "I am thinking of his marrying one of them".^[19]

Inheritance was by descent but could be further restricted by [entailment](#), which in the case of the Longbourn estate restricted inheritance to male heirs only. In the case of the Bennet family, Mr Collins was to inherit the family estate upon Mr Bennet's death in the absence of any closer male heirs, and his proposal to Elizabeth would have ensured her security; but she refuses his offer. Inheritance laws benefited males because married women did not have independent legal rights until the second half of the 19th century. For the upper-middle and aristocratic classes, marriage to a man with a reliable income was almost the only route to security for the woman and the children she was

to have.^[20] The irony of the opening line is that generally within this society it would be a woman who would be looking for a wealthy husband to have a prosperous life.^[21]

Class^[edit]

Lady Catherine and Elizabeth by [C. E. Brock](#), 1895

Lady Catherine confronts Elizabeth about [Darcy](#), on the title page of the first illustrated edition. This is the other of the first two illustrations of the novel.

Austen might be known now for her "romances" but the marriages in her novels engage with economics and class distinction. *Pride and Prejudice* is hardly the exception. When Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, he cites their economic and social differences as an obstacle his excessive love has had to overcome, though he still anxiously harps on the problems it poses for him within his social circle. His aunt, Lady Catherine, later characterises these differences in particularly harsh terms when she conveys what Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy will become, "Will the shades of Pemberley be thus polluted?" Although Elizabeth responds to Lady Catherine's accusations that hers is a potentially contaminating economic and social position (Elizabeth even insists she and Darcy, as gentleman's daughter and gentleman, are "equals"), Lady Catherine refuses to accept the possibility of Darcy's marriage to Elizabeth. However, as the novel closes, "...through curiosity to see how his wife conducted herself", Lady Catherine condescends to visit them at Pemberley.^[22]

The Bingleys present a particular problem for navigating class. Though Caroline Bingley and Mrs Hurst behave and speak of others as if they have always belonged in the upper echelons of society, Austen makes it clear that the Bingley fortunes stem from trade. The fact that Bingley rents Netherfield Hall – it is, after all, "to let" – distinguishes him significantly from Darcy, whose estate belonged to his father's family and through his mother, is the grandson

and nephew of an [earl](#). Bingley, unlike Darcy, does not own his property but has portable and growing wealth that makes him a good catch on the marriage market for poorer daughters of the gentry, like Jane Bennet, or of ambitious merchants. Class plays a central role in the evolution of the characters and Jane Austen's radical approach to class is seen as the plot unfolds.^[23]

An undercurrent of the old [Anglo-Norman](#) upper class is hinted at in the story, as suggested by the names of Fitzwilliam Darcy and his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh; [Fitzwilliam](#), [D'Arcy](#), [de Bourgh](#) ([Burke](#)), and even [Bennet](#), are traditional Norman surnames.^[24]

Self-knowledge

Through their interactions and their critiques of each other, Darcy and Elizabeth come to recognise their faults and work to correct them. Elizabeth meditates on her own mistakes thoroughly in chapter 36:

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried; "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself."^[25]

Other characters rarely exhibit this depth of understanding or at least are not given the space within the novel for this sort of development. Tanner writes that Mrs Bennet in particular, "has a very limited view of the requirements of that performance; lacking any introspective tendencies she is incapable of appreciating the feelings of others and is only aware of material objects".^[26] Mrs

Bennet's behaviour reflects the society in which she lives, as she knows that her daughters will not succeed if they do not get married. "The business of her life was to get her daughters married: its solace was visiting and news."^[27] This shows that Mrs Bennet is only aware of "material objects" and not of her feelings and emotions.^[28] A notable exception is Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth Bennet's close friend and confidant. She accepts Mr Collins's proposal of marriage once Lizzie rejects him, not out of sentiment but acute awareness of her circumstances as "one of a large family". Charlotte's decision is reflective of her prudent nature and awareness.