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An Introduction to Pride and Prejudice

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 title page of the text did not reveal Austen’s authorship; rather, it read, “**Pride and Prejudice**: A novel. In three volumes. By the Author of **Sense and Sensibility**.” The title **Pride and Prejudice** came from a phrase in Francis Burney’s 1782 novel **Cecilia**. In the final chapter of that novel, a character intones, “Yet this, however, remember; 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”. It is her most-translated novel, and has never gone out of print. **Pride and Prejudice** (and Jane Austen’s work more generally) experienced a late twentieth-century revival in popularity in part due to film and television productions.

From all accounts, **Pride and Prejudice** was one of Austen’s favorite pieces; in a letter to Cassandra written after she received the published copy of the novel, she wrote “I have got my own darling Child from London,” referring to the novel. Austen was particularly attached to the character of Elizabeth Bennet, of whom she wrote: “I must confess that I think her as delightful a character as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least, I do not know.” Despite her fondness for the novel, Austen was initially critical of it: “Upon the whole however I am quite vain enough & well satisfied enough.—The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling;— it wants shade;—it wants to be stretched out here & there”.

List of Characters:

Elizabeth Bennet: She is the novel’s twenty-year-old protagonist. She is the second of the five Bennet daughters, and the favorite of her father, since she is the most intelligent and sensible of the girls. Elizabeth (also called “Lizzy”) is courted first by Mr. Collins,



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then Mr. Wickham, then Mr. Darcy. She acquires an immediate dislike for Darcy, but eventually the two begin to understand one another, and they end happily married.

Mrs. Bennet: She has one goal in life: to get her daughters married well. Ironically, her obsessive pursuit of proper (wealthy) matches for her daughters nearly backfires, as potential suitors are repulsed by her behavior. The opening chapter establishes her as “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper”.

Mr. Bennet: He is “an odd mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humor, and caprice” (3), the patriarch of the Bennet family. He loves his daughters, particularly Elizabeth, but generally fails as a parent by refusing to educate or control their young instincts. Due to an entail, his estate will pass to the nearest male relative, Mr. Collins.

Jane Bennett: She is 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 Bennett: She is the pretentious third Bennet daughter, who prefers reading over socializing. Catherine (Kitty) Bennett The Bennet’s peevish fourth daughter, who joins her sister Lydia in flirting with soldiers.

Lydia Bennett: She is the Bennet’s immature and irresponsible youngest daughter. She is Mrs. Bennet’s favorite of the girls. Mrs. Bennet’s favorite, she shocks the family by running away with Wickham.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy: He is Mr. Bingley’s best friend and the nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. His aristocratic connections and considerable wealth make him a sought-after bachelor, but his excessive pride causes much consternation among the ladies of the area. A man of great pride, he is also honest and cautious. Despite initially insisting that there is not a pretty girl in all of Meryton, he eventually becomes attached to Elizabeth Bennet, to whom he makes a prideful, unromantic, (and rejected) proposal of marriage. Believing he merely speaks plainly, Darcy fails to see that his speeches often shock and anger his audiences. After realizing his haughty manner has been his downfall, Darcy learns humility, and eventually wins the hand of Elizabeth.

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Mr. Bingley: He is the source of much neighborhood gossip when he moves to Netherfield, an estate neighboring Longbourne. Kind, generous, and easy-going, he immediately finds a likeminded soul in Jane, despite her family's class and social inferiority. He is best friends with Darcy, who steers him away from Jane, in part due to her poor connections. But Bingley cares little for money or status. With honest modesty, he believes that he has not won Jane's affection. Learning he has been deceived by his friend and sisters, he immediately returns to Jane to set things right, and also hastily forgives Darcy for his interference.

Mr. Collins: He is 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. His obsequious manner and absurd formality are repeatedly a source of humor in the novel.

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

Caroline Bingley: She is Bingley's snobbish sister. Although she is fond of Jane, she merely tolerates Elizabeth, and scorns the rest of the Bennet family entirely. She attempts to win the affection of Darcy, but only succeeds in making Elizabeth that much more agreeable to him. Louisa Bingley Hurst is Bingley's sister who is married to Mr. Hurst, "a man of more fashion than fortune". She tends to share in Caroline's sentiments, but as a married sister, is somewhat removed from some of the politics of the situation.

Georgiana Darcy: She is Darcy's sister. The Bingley sisters claim to be quite fond of her, but it is possible that they are merely after the Darcy family connections, including both the money and the proximity to Georgiana's eligible brother Darcy.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh: She is a wealthy upper-class woman with a large estate. She is the widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, and now lives at Rosings. She is used to getting her own way in everything, and is a most unpleasant woman. She is Mr. Collins'



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patron, and he idolizes her, though it is clear that she merely keeps him around to flatter her. She is also Darcy 's aunt, but he is less tolerant of her high airs.

Mr. Gardiner: He is Mrs. Bennet's brother. He is married and has four children with his wife. He and his wife are quite fond of the Bennet girls, particularly Elizabeth, and prove much better parents than the Bennets. It is Mr. Gardiner who works to recover Lydia in London, and the family believes that they are indebted to him for payments to Wickham to ensure their marriage.

Mrs. Gardiner: She is Mr. Gardiner's wife, and sister-in-law to Mrs. Bennet. A mother of four children (two girls and two boys), she is a sensible and observant woman, but knows how to keep her surmises to herself. Elizabeth is quite attached to her.

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

Colonel Forster He is the commander of the militia regiment of which Wickham is a member. He is attentive and kind to the Bennet family after Lydia runs off with Wickham, and makes every attempt to find the two.

Story in Brief

When Charles Bingley, a rich single man, moves to the Netherfield estate, the neighborhood residents are thrilled, especially Mrs. Bennet, who hopes to marry one of her five daughters to him. When the Bennet daughters meet him at a local ball, they are impressed by his outgoing personality and friendly disposition. They are less impressed, however, by Bingley's friend Fitzwilliam Darcy, a landowning aristocrat who is too proud to speak to any of the locals and whom Elizabeth Bennet overhears refusing to dance with her. Bingley and the oldest Bennet daughter, Jane, soon form an attachment. Any serious relationship between the two, however, is opposed by Bingley's sisters (who do not approve of Jane as a wife for Bingley because of her mother's lower status) and by Darcy (who believes that Jane is indifferent to Bingley).



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Meanwhile, Darcy finds himself attracted to Elizabeth despite his objections to her family. He is drawn to her spirited wit and expressive eyes, and Caroline Bingley's jealous criticisms of Elizabeth can do nothing to lessen Darcy's admiration. As Darcy grows more interested in Elizabeth, Elizabeth continues to despise him and is instead attracted to George Wickham, a handsome and personable militia officer. Wickham tells Elizabeth that his father worked for Darcy's father and that he and Darcy grew up together. Stating that he was favored by Darcy's father, Wickham claims that Darcy disobeyed his father's bequest of a clergyman's revenue to Wickham out of selfish resentment. Wickham's tale makes Darcy appear not only proud but cruel, and Elizabeth accepts Wickham's account without question, disliking Darcy even more because of it. In the midst of Jane and Elizabeth's developing relationships, the Bennet family is visited by Mr. Bennet's cousin, William Collins, a clergyman who will inherit Mr. Bennet's estate when he dies because of a legal stricture known as an entail. Full of apologies for the entail and praises for his patroness, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, Mr. Collins informs the Mrs. Bennet that Lady Catherine has instructed him to marry and that he plans to choose a wife from the Bennet daughters. He settles on Elizabeth, but is stunned and offended when she refuses him. He quickly turns his attention to Elizabeth's friend, Charlotte Lucas, who wants to marry for security rather than love, and the two are soon engaged and married. At the same time, Jane is dismayed to find out that Bingley and the entire Netherfield party have unexpectedly left for London. Caroline Bingley writes to Jane that they do not intend to return, and she predicts a match between Bingley and Darcy's sister, Georgiana, who is also in London. Although Jane quietly resigns herself to a life without Bingley, Elizabeth is angry for her sister and suspects that Bingley's sisters and Darcy are trying to keep him from Jane. Elizabeth visits Charlotte at her new home in Hunsford, Kent, and meets Mr. Collins' patroness and Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, an overbearing woman who thrives on meddling in other people's lives. Soon after Elizabeth's arrival in Kent, Darcy visits his aunt with his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Darcy puzzles Elizabeth with his behavior; he seems to seek out her company, but he never says much. One day, he surprises Elizabeth by proposing to her. Still repelled by his pride and believing Darcy is responsible for Bingley's separation from Jane and for Wickham's misfortune, Elizabeth



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refuses him. The next day, Darcy gives her a letter explaining his role in influencing Bingley away from Jane and details the facts of Wickham's situation. A careful examination of the facts reveals that Darcy, while proud, is innocent of wrongdoing, leaving Elizabeth mortified at her discovery of how her own pride prejudiced her against Darcy. After returning home for a month, Elizabeth goes on a trip with her aunt and uncle Gardiner to Derbyshire county, where they visit Darcy's estate of Pemberley. There they meet Darcy unexpectedly and are all surprised at how graciously he treats them. He calls on Elizabeth at her inn, introduces her to his sister, and invites her to Pemberley for dinner. Darcy is still in love with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth begins to have similar feelings for him. In the midst of this promising situation, Elizabeth receives two letters from Jane telling her that Lydia has eloped with Wickham, causing Elizabeth and the Gardiners to leave for home immediately. Elizabeth fears that Lydia and the Bennet family are permanently disgraced and that her newly-discovered love for Darcy is hopeless. When Lydia is found, however, she and Wickham marry. After the wedding, Elizabeth discovers that Darcy was instrumental in orchestrating the marriage, thereby saving the reputation and marriageability of the other Bennet daughters. Bingley returns to Netherfield and soon asks Jane to marry him. Jane, of course, accepts, and Mrs. Bennet's exultation is only lessened by her irritation at Darcy's occasional presence. Meanwhile, Elizabeth's happiness for her sister is interrupted by a visit from Lady Catherine De Bourgh, who has heard a rumor that Darcy and Elizabeth are engaged, which they are not. She lectures Elizabeth on the imprudence of such a match, and then demands that Elizabeth promise not to accept any proposal from Darcy. Elizabeth refuses, causing Lady Catherine to tell Darcy about Elizabeth's impertinence and to scold him about the folly of an engagement between them. Lady Catherine's description of Elizabeth's response to her demands gives Darcy hope that Elizabeth has had a change of heart. He proposes again and Elizabeth happily accepts.