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Understanding Pride and Prejudice

A Stuent Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

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[美] 德布拉·蒂奇曼 著
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Introduction

At the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, England was confronting many ideas and situations that were new and threatening to the status quo. Revolution was in the air. In 1775 the American colonies had revolted against English control and subsequently, by means of war, broke entirely from England, disposing even of the idea of monarchy by establishing a republican form of government. In the 1780s the French overthrew their monarchy, executing many members of the royal family and the aristocracy in their revolt against the tyranny of class designated by birth. Both revolutions were driven by powerful forces—the pursuit of equality for all men (though limited by race and/or property ownership) and the idea that individuality and merit count for more than birthright and inheritance.

In addition to the revolutions of France and the United States, there were other, not so well received, responses to the ideas of equality and individuality among men. Women of the better educated classes began to imagine a world in which they could have the same rights and privileges as men. Mary Wollstonecraft's landmark work of early feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was written after she had published a much less famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), in which she defended individuality and equality among men against attacks

by conservatives like the English philosopher Edmund Burke. Theories of equality and individuality were not only stretched to include women, however; they were also expanded as arguments against slavery based on race, leading to a strong movement for the abolition of slavery in England in the early nineteenth century.

Into this whirl of revolutionary zeal and the English government's repressive reactions came the novels of Jane Austen. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, during which all of Austen's novels were published, the British government passed repressive measures that severely limited what could be published without danger of the author and the publisher or printer being accused and convicted of sedition. As a result of those measures, the publishing industry increasingly turned to "safe" topics—like that of "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village," as Jane Austen once called the subject of her novels. Her books do not make explicit statements about the political issues confronting England, but they do illustrate much of English life in those difficult times. Austen, by focusing on the activities of only a few country families, deflects attention from the overtly political, while in fact showing how social class, patronage, and privilege affected the average English person, male and female. Her novels, therefore, are enacted against the background of both physical revolution and a major revolution of thought, but they do not directly express any particular argument.

One result of Austen's refusal (or perhaps inability, given the prevailing political climate in the publishing world) to engage directly in the argument over revolutionary ideas has been that readers have often been able to find support for diverse views in Austen's works. Some literary and social critics have labeled her conservative, antifeminist, and supportive of the status quo; others have described her novels as subversive, and claimed that they support individualism, set out for ridicule the traditionally accepted views of the aristocratic, patriarchal structure of British society, and encourage change to a more egalitarian society with equity of treatment under the law for all people, including women, servants, and children. Both sides of this argument can find support in the novels, as can many less extreme positions.

The fact that Austen's novels can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways does not, however, make them wishy-washy or politically passionless. Instead, it demonstrates their complexity, the com-

plexity of human nature. Just as we find ourselves interpreting the events of our own lives and those of the people we know from our own political, social, and personal perspectives, so too do we interpret the lives of Austen's characters from our individual perspectives. Unlike many others of her period, Austen has not written didactic tracts that inform us of the "proper" way to think about issues of class, gender, marriage, and social structure; instead she shows us the reality of life, from her own perspective, for men and women in the small towns and country villages of England. She shows us human nature in many forms and many situations, enabling us to make judgments about the society in which her characters live.

Because Austen focuses on human nature instead of on politics, her works transcend time and place. As readers of the late twentieth century, we are able to relate to the experiences of her characters, to put ourselves in their places, and to try to determine what we or those we know would do in similar situations. Thus, her novels remain fresh, providing not only an enjoyable read but an opportunity to examine human nature in a different historical setting.

Pride and Prejudice, perhaps more than any other novel of its time, places us clearly within the context of English society at the time of such revolutionary struggles. It shows us the effects of those struggles on members of the English gentry and lower aristocracy who have no direct connection to the revolutions under way. On the surface, it is a love story, but under the surface, it is informed by many facets of society of which late twentieth-century readers tend to have little understanding. Knowing this, I have provided information about Austen's time and place from a variety of sources, including literary, historical, legal, sociological, and religious works. Throughout the following chapters, documents from these diverse perspectives illuminate different aspects of Austen's fiction.

The first chapter is a literary analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*. It focuses on the central issue of the novel, marriage, and how various characters relate to the societal situation that makes marriage such a dominant focus of the lives of women in Austen's time. Issues of class, property, and gender pervade the novel, as does the conflict between the way things "are done" (the status quo) and individualism. Austen takes great care with even the most mi-

nor of her characters, drawing portraits that encourage her readers to examine the relationships of each character to the others in careful detail.

Chapter 2 discusses in some depth the law and custom of Austen's time as they applied to marriage and inheritance. With so much of the plot hinging on inheritance laws that are, by our standards, antiquated and illogical, some grasp of these laws is essential to a thorough understanding of the novel. It is equally necessary to understand the laws involving marriage. Whereas marriage as an institution was much the same in Austen's time as in our own, the legal consequences for both parties (and for the families involved) were far-reaching, because divorce was almost unknown, and because women relinquished many rights when they married.

Chapter 3 discusses marriage from the viewpoint of other eighteenth-century English writers. The obligations and expectations of each spouse differed widely from those of the present day, and it is instructive to examine the attitudes of Austen's contemporaries on the institution of marriage.

Chapter 4 examines in some detail the role of the unmarried woman. *Pride and Prejudice* is, in one sense, a novel about how important it was for women of Austen's time to marry—and to marry well. To comprehend the importance of marriage, one must understand what the alternative meant for women of the late eighteenth century. The excerpts from William Hayley's essay on old maids vividly illustrate the prejudices to which unmarried women were subject. Jane West and Mary Wollstonecraft describe some of the difficulties unmarried women faced because few economic and social opportunities were available to them in English society. Other sources describe the situation of unmarried women who did not lead a life of chastity, and that of widows, who in English society generally had greater power and social standing than their never-married counterparts.

Chapter 5 looks at educational opportunities and expectations for the young woman of the gentry or aristocracy, including what could be expected when one was sent away to a girls' boarding school and what one might expect to learn if kept at home and tutored by a mother or a governess. There were no legal requirements in Austen's time that girls receive any formal education whatsoever, and modern readers are often puzzled to find that

embroidery, drawing, singing, and dancing were highly regarded as educational pursuits.

Chapter 6 examines twentieth-century parallels to issues in *Pride and Prejudice*. The details have changed, but in many cases the issues themselves remain the same. This chapter focuses on how courtship and marriage customs both resemble and differ from those of Austen's time. It shows that finding and maintaining personal partnerships (whether in marriage or in less legally formalized situations) remains one of the dominant issues of our society today, and how educational opportunities and the ability to lead a fulfilling life as a single woman have increased dramatically since Austen's time.

Excerpts from and references to a wide variety of documents are included in these chapters, all of them chosen to expand one's understanding of the novel. They include the following:

- a literary study
- commentaries on eighteenth-century English law
- eighteenth-century literary essays
- eighteenth-century advice manuals
- eighteenth-century educational treatises
- historical reports
- a newspaper article
- magazine articles

Each issue explored as well as the supporting documents is introduced by an essay explaining its significance in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*. Also included are Topics for Written or Oral Exploration and Suggested Readings.

Page numbers in parentheses following quoted material refer to the texts listed in the Suggested Readings at the end of each chapter. Original spellings have been used in most cases; some have been modified, however, in the interests of clarity. Quotations from *Pride and Prejudice* are from the J. M. Dent and Sons edition published in London in 1906.

Figure 1.1. Illustration of Darcy requesting Elizabeth's hand, from a nineteenth-century edition of *Pride and Prejudice*. *Source: The Novels of Jane Austen: Pride and Prejudice*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1892, frontispiece.

Contents

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Literary Analysis: *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." With that line, claimed by some scholars to be the most famous opening line of all fiction, Jane Austen begins *Pride and Prejudice*. That one line introduces several of the major issues and themes that have been explored in the novel throughout the past two centuries: marriage, wealth, class, property, propriety, and a debate over the existence of universal truth. Moreover, these are not merely issues of historical significance; they retain their relevance as we move into the twenty-first century, still trying to determine how best to deal with issues of love, money (or the lack of it), and proper behavior in a world that resists simple solutions to complicated issues.

Pride and Prejudice has often been depicted as a simple story of love between a wealthy, proud aristocrat and an intelligent, beautiful young woman born into a family of five sisters with little financial security. Elizabeth, the second of five daughters in the Bennet family, is bright, attractive, witty, and of good moral character. Her father is a gentleman, a term used in Austen's time to denote a man who has sufficient income from property he owns not to have to work in a profession or trade to support his family. He has inherited a small estate that supplies enough money to

provide for his family during his lifetime; however, since he has no son, the estate will pass, after his death, to his cousin, Mr. Collins. As a result, his wife and daughters will not have sufficient income to support themselves comfortably after Mr. Bennet dies. This fact leads Mrs. Bennet to focus all of her attention on getting husbands for her daughters so that they will be provided for later in life. The interrelated issues of financial security and marriage are, therefore, at the heart of the novel.

Elizabeth meets Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy at a party in the neighborhood. They begin their acquaintance by insulting one another, develop strong feelings for each other, and eventually recognize those feelings as love. Obstacles to their marrying include differences in wealth and social position, the behavior of members of their respective families, and their own proud and prejudiced views of themselves and each other, which temporarily prevent them from communicating openly and honestly with each other about their feelings, hopes, dreams, and fears. Ultimately, as in all of Jane Austen's novels, the right people marry one another, having learned lessons about themselves and the world around them as they endure and overcome the difficulties set in their paths by themselves and others.

This summary of the plot is accurate, as far as it goes, but it does the novel great disservice to oversimplify the plot and the issues dealt with in such a way. In fact, *Pride and Prejudice* explores the moral and social conditions of life in the early nineteenth century in ways that enable us both to understand that earlier time better and to examine with greater insight our own attitudes and actions within the moral and social conditions of life in our own time, enabling us to determine ways in which our decisions about love, marriage, and proper behavior reflect our own truths about what is ultimately right and wrong. Yet, for all of its emphasis on morality, the novel is not preachy. Through her ironic style, Austen causes us to laugh at and with her characters as we explore our own pridefulness and prejudices along with theirs.

EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Jane Austen set *Pride and Prejudice* in the time in which she lived, the first decades of the nineteenth century, generally known as the Regency period in England. In order to understand the world of the novel, one must understand something of the society it represents. This society was highly stratified: aristocrats tended to socialize with other aristocrats; the gentry (generally considered to be upper middle class by today's standards) socialized with other gentry; tradespeople socialized with tradespeople, the working poor with the working poor, and the poverty-stricken with other nonworking poor. Yet, while this stratification was firmly in place, it was not absolute. Tradespeople who earned sufficient money might buy their way into the gentry or, within a few generations, even into the aristocracy (examples in *Pride and Prejudice* include Sir William Lucas, a tradesman who bought a country estate and retired to become a gentleman, and Mr. Bingley, whose father earned his fortune in trade). Those born into the gentry might either rise in stature through economic and social good fortune or fall into straitened circumstances by loss of money, property, or good name. Thus, the class system in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century, though rigid in theory, in fact had considerable room for mobility.

Social position, however, tended to be established in terms of families, not individuals. A woman, for example, generally held the social position of her father, to be replaced by that of her husband if she married. Her children were considered to have the social rank of their father, unless they attached themselves to other family members who ranked higher socially. Thus, the Bingley family, whose wealth came from successful trade in earlier generations, were, by virtue of that wealth, raised to the level of gentry—upper gentry, in fact, as is evident by their ability to rent Netherfield Park. Although the bulk of the money belongs to Mr. Bingley, the social status of his unmarried sister is high because she has attached herself to his household. Likewise, any scandal committed by one member of a family implicated all—and could literally destroy the chances of the unmarried women in the family to find respectable mates. Thus, Lydia Bennet's running off with Mr. Wickham pre-