

Guides to English Literature



JANE AUSTEN

**PRIDE
AND PREJUDICE**



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GUIDES TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

General Editor: S. H. Atkins, M.A., Ph.D. (Lond.)

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How to Use This Book

The purpose of this book is not to enable students (or candidates preparing for a specific examination) to answer a number of stock questions on the novel by the unintelligent and uncomprehending memorisation of given material. The intention is rather to provide a *guide* which will enable the reader to study the novel methodically and purposefully for himself, and consequently this book should be read in close conjunction with the text which is the object of study. Hence the student will find no conventional “character-studies” or model answers; for the former he should evolve a picture of the main people in the novel by reading the commentary side by side with the text, and noting how their characters are built up in their reactions to other people and in different situations; and for the latter he should work out his own material for the topics indicated in the fourth section of the book and his own answers to the specimen questions provided in the fifth part. Such material when assembled and put into due form will constitute a character-study or an answer which is the student’s own work, and which will be of much greater real value to him than the mere memorisation of material provided by somebody else. It should be pointed out that it is essential that such sketches and answers should be supported by direct illustrative quotations from, or very close reference to, the text of the novel, especially if the student is reading it as a set book in an examination. The major part of this book is therefore devoted to an interpretative study of the novel; this is followed in section three by an alphabetical reference list of the characters, which should be consulted as the reading of the novel progresses.

In the fourth section the reader will find suggestions about important characters, themes and episodes in the novel, with some indication of where material on them may be found. These topics

should be carefully followed up in the text in accordance with these indications.

The fifth section contains specimen examination questions, which are good illustrations of the sort of thing which may be expected in examinations on this novel. Candidates should give themselves practice by writing out the answers to some of these, possibly allowing themselves the usual time for such answers (about 30–35 minutes for O Level examinations) and without referring to the text; they should also carefully think out (and perhaps make notes for) answers to the questions which they do not write out in full.

A few suggestions for further reading are added. These are intended mainly for students who wish to undertake work at a rather higher (e.g. “Advanced”) level.

1. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JANE AUSTEN

Jane Austen was born at Steventon in northern Hampshire in 1775. She led an almost entirely uneventful life, spending her time first at her father's rectory at Steventon and then, except for a brief period in Bath, sharing it between Southampton, the little village of Chawton in Hampshire, where her home is still preserved as a museum, and Winchester, where she died in 1817 at the age of only 42. She never married.

Set out thus briefly, Jane Austen's life seems almost empty but, as a modern critic says "within her small world—and it was not so small as is often made out—she had known affection, boredom, anxiety, love and loss, hatred and impatience. That is quite enough experience on which to set out as a novelist if one has the mind." (Robert Liddell, *A Treatise on the Novel*. London 1947.) Of course, the important words in this quotation are the concluding ones—"if one has the mind". Quite simply Jane Austen was a genius, in the fullest sense of this word, and nothing could stop her writing. Her first work (the title of which she mis-spelled *Love and Freindship*) was completed when she was fifteen though it was not published till 1922. Almost all her six novels were written in their original form before 1800, when she was still only twenty-five, but they were not published till the last six years of her life. They are:

Sense and Sensibility: 1811.

Pride and Prejudice: 1813.

Mansfield Park: 1814.

Emma: 1816.

Northanger Abbey: 1818.

Persuasion: 1818.

No writer writes successfully about aspects of experience which he has not himself shared and it must be admitted that Jane Austen wrote within very precise limits.

First, these limits are geographical. Certain events take place in areas as remote as Devonshire, Derbyshire and Kent, but Jane Austen's world is really limited to a quadrilateral of which the corners are marked by Bath, Lyme Regis, Southampton and the Home Counties just north of London.

Secondly, her work is limited socially. She writes only of the class to which she belonged and which she really knew: the minor landed gentry and the clergy, who were usually their younger sons, enjoying the comfort of a family living. With the exception of the Prices in *Mansfield Park*, no important character in Jane Austen is really poor; on the other hand no one belongs to the real aristocracy.

The third limitation is perhaps more significant: Jane Austen is not much concerned with the darker side of life. This is quite deliberate for, as we shall read later, she says, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery". It is probably for this reason that we have no hint in the novels of the tragedy involved in the fact that a great war—the greatest which had so far taken place in the history of the world—was going on at the time she wrote. The young officers at Meryton provide agreeable partners for Kitty and Lydia Bennet; in other novels naval officers are enabled to marry on the proceeds of prize-money awarded them for victories at sea; of the war, as a war, however, we hear nothing. Indeed, Jane Austen tells us surprisingly little of contemporary social history in general. She takes the exact division into classes for granted but she never seems to question its justice. Even for such obvious matters as the fashions of the day she has hardly a word, so we may add on this point that it may help the reader to imagine Darcy in a white top-hat, a blue coat, rather like the modern dress coat, light waistcoat and breeches, and high top-boots. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is to be seen in a long muslin dress with a waist almost up to the armpits, topped by a poke-bonnet and a shawl for outdoors, but cut very low for the ball at Meryton—when Darcy,

of course, would replace his top-boots with silk stockings and pumps.

It may seem that Jane Austen's limits are rather narrow; within them, however, her skill is almost unequalled. She is one of England's greatest novelists and one of the most complete masters of social satire who ever lived.

2. A COMMENTARY UPON “PRIDE AND PREJUDICE”

1. *The Ball at Meryton (Chapters I to V)*

After an opening sentence which is both typical of her own dry wit and certain to catch the eye of a prospective reader, Jane Austen proceeds to introduce us to the minor aristocracy of a restricted country district, the town of Meryton in Hertfordshire and its immediate surroundings. In the novel itself, details of both place and people are scattered over many pages but the situation will be made clearer to the reader if those details are collected here in one place. Three groups of people are especially concerned:

(i) *the Bennet family*, which consists of Mr. Bennet of Longbourn, Mrs. Bennet, and their five young and unmarried daughters. Mr. Bennet has an income of £2,000 a year which might appear reasonably adequate, especially when we consider that the sum represents at least £10,000 to-day and that “Mr. Pitt’s iniquitous income-tax” was, by our standards, extremely small; but this income is wholly derived from Mr. Bennet’s landed estate and that estate is entailed upon the next *male* heir. This puts a very different complexion on the affair, for an entail is a legal system by which an estate cannot be left exactly as its present owner pleases but must be passed on according to an unalterable agreement—usually, as at Longbourn, to the nearest male relative. When Mr. Bennet dies, therefore, his wife and daughters will have to leave Longbourn and live on the very small fortune which is Mrs. Bennet’s own property. We must remember this if ever we feel inclined to lose patience with Mrs. Bennet in her task of husband-hunting: she wants to save her daughters from something pain-

fully like real poverty. Today, of course, the five girls could be given some form of professional training which would make them quite independent of either father or mother. In Jane Austen's time, this was not merely beneath the dignity of the Longbourn ladies; it was physically impossible.

(ii) *the Lucas family*, which consists of Sir William Lucas of Lucas Lodge whose title is due to the fact that he was fortunate enough to be mayor of Meryton at the moment when a loyal address to the king was called for; his wife, Lady Lucas; and their two daughters: Charlotte, who at twenty-seven is dangerously near becoming an old maid, but who is also the especially close friend of Elizabeth Bennet; and her younger sister, Maria.

(iii) *the Bingley family*, which consists of young Mr. Bingley, who has just inherited a fortune of £100,000; his married sister, Mrs. (Louisa) Hurst and her nonentity of a husband, who has "more fashion than fortune" and is perfectly ready to live indefinitely at Mr. Bingley's expense; and his unmarried sister, Miss Caroline Bingley, who sits at the head of his table and acts as hostess when he entertains his friends. Mr. Bingley has just rented Netherfield Park, the most considerable estate in the district, which lies two miles beyond Meryton on the side farthest away from Longbourn. Besides his own family, Mr. Bingley also has staying with him a close friend, the very rich Mr. Darcy, of Pemberley in Derbyshire.

We are to watch these groups inter-acting and it is characteristic of Jane Austen's unobtrusive art that she brings them all together at the one place where they would be sure to meet in real life—a ball at Meryton; and it is not even a special occasion but merely one of the usual "assemblies" which are held at regular intervals throughout the season to provide husband-hunting mammas and marriageable young ladies with an opportunity of displaying both their skill and their attractions. For such a family as the Bennets, however, who are recognised as "the most considerable" in their immediate neighbourhood, the supply of really

suitable, eligible young men is very strictly limited so that the arrival of the two rich new-comers, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, causes a great deal of excitement. Mrs. Bennet, the business of whose life is to get her daughters married, goes to the dance with very high hopes and when Mr. Bingley dances two sets (four dances in all) with her eldest and prettiest daughter, Jane, it already begins to look as though these hopes are not without some solid foundation.

Mr. Darcy, however, is not so obliging. His is the "Pride" of the title and he is not only too proud to dance with any other partners than Bingley's sisters, he is also so rude that he actually allows himself to be heard saying of Elizabeth Bennet, "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*!" This sentence strikes modern ears so harshly that we must remember the time of which Jane Austen was writing, a time when distinctions of social class were so precise that members of different classes hardly believed themselves to be of the same kind of human flesh and blood. The very rich Mr. Darcy might, upon the whole, almost be expected to be scornful of the daughter of the only moderately well-to-do Mr. Bennet. Taking all this into consideration, however, we are still glad to see how Elizabeth takes the matter: no wonder she is "Prejudiced" against him from this time forward.

2. *Illness at Netherfield (Chapters VI to XII)*

Jane Austen composed *Pride and Prejudice* many years before it was published and the title she originally gave to it was *First Impressions*. It will be wise for us to remember this fact as we study this second section of the novel, for we shall watch how certain first impressions—especially Darcy's of Elizabeth—begin to change.

The section begins with an interesting conversation between Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas, in which we are shown the well-bred young lady's attitude to the process of husband-hunting. The standard of the normal is shown in Charlotte who clearly feels that the final capture is all that matters: "if a woman conceals her affections", she says, "from the object of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him". Elizabeth agrees that, for a girl who

is "determined to get a rich husband, or any husband", these tactics may well be justified but she makes it clear that respect and affection will be essential prerequisites of any marriage which she makes (Chapter VI).

It is a notable point of skill in Jane Austen's writing that she follows this conversation immediately by a paragraph in which she tells how Darcy's "first impressions" of Elizabeth start to change as he begins to find that her face is "rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes". He himself does not yet see which way he is going, but the observant reader already begins to make interested comments.

Two minor events now take place: first, Sir William Lucas gives a party, at which Elizabeth is able to shine as a player and singer; and then we are given the news that a militia regiment is to be quartered at Meryton for the whole winter (Chapter VII). This last news is of enormous importance, not because it reminds either the characters or the readers of the novel that the greatest war in history up to then is going on, but because the young officers of the militia will provide romantic partners for the young ladies at the Meryton assemblies. This fact is particularly true of Catherine and Lydia Bennet, whom their father succinctly describes as "two of the silliest girls in the country"; but we must be fair enough to admit that the effect on them differs only in degree from the effect it has on all their friends, and that there is no maiden heart in the district which does not beat a little faster at the news. We must now turn, however, to a more serious romance.

A letter from Netherfield would in any case have caused a great stir on its arrival at Longbourn, but the letter which now comes is unusually important. Miss Bingley is inviting Jane Bennet to dinner! It is true that her brother and Mr. Darcy are to be away but Mrs. Bennet knows how to deal with even such a difficulty: it looks like rain; Jane shall ride horseback and will therefore be asked to stay the night to prevent her getting soaked on her ride home. This is indeed a master-stroke but, as occasionally happens when plans are too clever, it recoils on the heads of the planners. The rain comes, indeed, but it comes when Jane is on her way to Netherfield and she becomes so thoroughly chilled that she is

taken seriously ill, and has to stay there for much longer than any of them had wished.

Jane's letter home, giving the news of her illness, produces in the whole family reactions which are so characteristic and so revealing that we must spend a moment or two in their consideration. Elizabeth's affection and practical common-sense show themselves in her determination to go at once to Netherfield, even though she must go on foot and through the rain, in order to look after the invalid. Her mother is concerned only with appearances: "You will not be fit to be seen when you get there!" But what is probably the cleverest touch is the way in which Mr. Bennet displays the unconscious selfishness of the man whose personal comfort has long been the first consideration of his whole household: he cannot be expected even to order the horses. Mary, the blue-stocking, responds with characteristic orotundities: "I admire the activity of your benevolence, but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason"—we have to remind ourselves that Mary is talking about her own sister's illness—"and in my opinion exertion should always be in proportion to what is required". Finally, we notice that the apparent kindness of the addle-pated Kitty and Lydia in offering to accompany Elizabeth on her walk as far as Meryton is really actuated only by the hope that they may once more meet the handsome young officers. We now see all these characters much more clearly than we did before (Chapter VII).

It is seldom that even Jane Austen is quite so revealing in so brief a space, but, in the scene of Elizabeth's arrival at Netherfield (Chapter VIII), there is an almost exact parallel and one which would repay careful analysis. We notice the veiled contempt of the two fashionable ladies: the widely different reasons for the silence of Mr. Darcy and that of Mr. Hurst: the genuine warmth of Mr. Bingley; and in every instance we say, "Yes, that is exactly how he (or she) would behave in real life". The same comment has often been made before, most notably perhaps when that other great novelist of Jane Austen's time, Sir Walter Scott, wrote in his Journal on March 14th 1826: "That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements, and feelings, and

characters, of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like anyone now going; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment, is denied to me." A noble tribute from one great writer to another, and one which we have just seen to be wholly justified.

While Elizabeth is upstairs with Jane, the Netherfield party discuss her "incredible" behaviour in walking three miles through the rain. The comments from each are much what we might have expected but we must not fail to notice the especial care with which Miss Caroline Bingley snatches every opportunity of seeking to make Elizabeth look small in the eyes of Mr. Darcy. There was already a hint of this, it will be remembered, as long ago as Sir William Lucas's party, in the conversation about Elizabeth's fine eyes, but it is now clear that there is much more to the matter than the light social banter of the previous occasion. Miss Bingley in fact, is herself in love with Darcy and she is therefore jealous of the impression which she fears that Elizabeth is already making upon him. She belongs to the school of Charlotte Lucas and will miss no opportunity of "fixing" her prey.

One of Jane Austen's most typical methods of character-drawing is the use of comparison and contrast and both of these are very skilfully employed at this point in the development of the plot. In the first place, we have the contrast between Elizabeth's unselfish care for her sister and Caroline's completely self-centred attitude to the whole of life; between the intelligent, witty conversation of the visitor and the bored and boring prattle of the hostess; between the real beauty of Elizabeth's character as reflected in her face and the vapid, "chocolate-box" prettiness of the fashionable Miss Bingley. All this is, it may be thought, obvious enough, but another, subtler parallel is now to be drawn.

Jane becomes so much better that Elizabeth sends for their mother to pronounce on the invalid's fitness to face the rigours of the journey home and Mrs. Bennet, delighted at having achieved an entrée into Netherfield, behaves with the silly vulgarity that is her distinguishing characteristic. (Hers is probably the cruellest

portrait in the whole book.) Miss Bingley, of course, does not fail to mark—and to remark upon—both the silliness and the vulgarity; but she then goes on to behave in ways that are at least equally silly and possibly even more vulgar. She sits at Darcy's side as he writes to his sister, interrupting him at every moment and commenting upon the speed and evenness of his writing (Chapter X), and then, on the evening of the same day, we watch her in hypocritical raptures over a book which she is actually too stupid to understand and which she has only chosen because it is the second volume of a work of which Darcy is reading the first (Chapter XI).

By the time Jane is, in fact, well enough to leave Netherfield, we have been able to note real progress in the development of the personal relationships which are to be the main theme of the book. First, Miss Bingley—as her own generation would have said—is plainly setting her cap at Darcy; at the moment her success is small but there are points on her side which we must not overlook: the greatest of these is probably the fact that he cannot marry Elizabeth without accepting Mrs. Bennet as his mother-in-law. Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, is beginning to be genuinely in love with Jane, both because he recognises the natural sweetness of her disposition and because of the romantic attraction of her illness. The greatest danger to this romance, however, is something quite external: Bingley is, as he readily admits, easily influenced, and he is not yet sufficiently deeply in love to withstand what has always been the strongest influence upon him—that of his closest friend. If, therefore, Darcy decides not to approve of the match, Jane's future may still not be as rosy as her mother is now convinced that it is. And, finally, what of Elizabeth?

On her side the "Prejudice" awakened by Darcy's behaviour at the Meryton Ball has not yet been forgotten; she cannot be unconscious that he appears to be regarding her at moments with unusual interest, but both her native modesty and her present conception of his character prevent her reading any deep meaning into this. Darcy's "Pride" is as strong as ever and it is with some alarm that he begins to analyse his own motives and to discover "the danger of paying Elizabeth too much attention". For the

moment, therefore, we leave all the possible romances in the balance and turn to meet a new character.

3. *The Heir of Entail* (Chapters XIII to XV)

Jane Austen never throws away an opportunity and, though the Revd. Mr. Collins is first introduced to us by letter, that letter itself is as characteristic and revealing as any conversation which he holds with another character throughout the whole book. Indeed it would be a valuable exercise to consider all Mr. Collins's letters and the light they must throw upon his other behaviour; in doing so, by the way, we must not overlook letters written to Mr. Collins, especially that wonderful letter in which Mr. Bennet informs him (in Chapter LX) of the engagement of Elizabeth. But in reading a novel by Jane Austen, the fact is that we cannot afford to overlook anything: consider, at this very point of the arrival of the letter, Mr. Bennet's deliberate perverseness; Mrs. Bennet's almost wilful refusal to understand the terms of an entail; and even the "learned" Mary is not forgotten: "In point of composition his letter does not seem defective. The idea of the olive branch perhaps is not wholly new . . ."

Let us see for a moment what we can learn of Mr. Collins from his letter alone: first, as to mere facts, we discover that the heir of entail is a young clergyman, who has just been appointed Rector of the parish of Hunsford in Kent; but we are more concerned with the kind of man he is than with his office and here too the letter is very revealing. That he is both smugly self-satisfied and intolerably pompous is suggested by the tone of the whole; we want to do him justice, however, and we feel that he is sincerely conscious of his Christian duties both as a clergyman and as a man who is anxious to make up the quarrel that had existed with Mr. Bennet in Mr. Collins's father's time. But at a second reading, even this must be qualified: his duties to his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, are clearly far more important to him than those of his priestly office, and he is far more conscious that his offer of friendship is "highly commendable" than he is desirous of really making peace.

It is the result of this letter that, when Mr. Collins appears for