

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO JANE AUSTEN'S



PRIDE  
*and*  
PREJUDICE

'I think this a wonderful and useful series  
and I highly recommend it.'

CLAIRE TOMALIN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Janet Todd*

*The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Jane Austen's*

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Pride  
and  
Prejudice

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*by  
Janet Todd*



# Introduction

Jane Austen started writing at the age of eleven, first anarchic parodies of contemporary fiction, then longer stories that foreshadowed the novels. From about 1795 she was sketching out three full-length works; one of these, begun a year later when she was 20, about the age of her heroine, was *First Impressions*, an early version of *Pride and Prejudice*. This was offered by her father to the publisher Thomas Cadell, who declined even to see the manuscript. It was one of the worst publishing decisions in history.

Eventually printed 17 years later, when Austen was 38, *Pride and Prejudice* is the most satisfying and enjoyable of her six books – and has become probably the most successful novel in the English language.

Despite the astringency of her writing, Austen is often thought of as the mother of romance. She has made the Regency period (1811-1820), when all six novels were published, almost synonymous with modern popular notions of the romantic. Directly or indirectly, she has influenced romantic novels by authors such as Georgette Heyer and Daphne du Maurier and supermarket fodder of the sort published by Harlequin Romance and Mills and Boon.

Of all her books, though, it is *Pride and Prejudice* which comes closest to delivering the

fairytale story of the ordinary girl who catches and marries a prince. The most inventive and ebullient of her works, it is also the one which closes with the heroine most in the ascendancy and least controlled by either parent or husband. Here, for the only time in Austen's novels, the romantic dream of bourgeois individualism taming aristocratic authority actually does come true.

But if, on one level, *Pride and Prejudice* is a reworking of the Cinderella story, it is a fiction of much greater depth than Austen's ironic, self-deprecating description of it as “rather too light & bright & sparkling” would suggest. “Beneath the light, bright and sparkling surface,” says Edward Neill in *The Politics of Jane Austen*, “it investigates the social heart of darkness.” W.H. Auden famously wrote in 1937:

You could not shock her more than she shocks me;  
Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.  
It makes me most uncomfortable to see  
An English spinster of the middle-class  
Describe the amorous effects of “brass”,  
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety  
The economic basis of society.

A.A. Gill made much the same point when he described *Pride and Prejudice* in *The Sunday Times* as depicting a marketplace for “selling teenage virginity for cash and crenellations”.

Other critics have gone even further. The psychologist D.W. Harding, for example, argued in a much-quoted essay, “Regulated Hatred”, that what we see in *Pride and Prejudice* is a chilling playing out of the author’s troubled psyche – the “caustic and subversive ironies” of the novel, said Harding, allowed Austen to survive in a world she actually detested and feared, an exercise not so much in fond satire as in “regulated hatred”. Whatever Austen felt, it is certainly true that she was conscious of the tensions simmering below the surface of the world she wrote about.

The world is a limited one. By her own admission, she created a “little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush”, advising her niece that “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on”. And work on it she did, with an artistry which few novelists have matched. Within her deliberately selected confines, she explores, in *Pride and Prejudice*, not just what it is like to be a young girl in search of a suitable husband, but what it is to be human, brilliantly illuminating the difficulties of the individual living within society and the necessity constantly to reconcile personal needs with those of the wider world around one.



## A summary of the plot

Five daughters are born to Mr and Mrs Bennet, a gentleman whose estate is entailed and must fall after his death to the nearest male relative; his wife, rather beneath him in birth and education, greatly laments the entail. Given the very few options for genteel girls, the daughters must marry well if they are to retain a decent position in society; nonetheless the two eldest and most sensible, Elizabeth and Jane, cannot imagine actually husband-hunting. Mr Bennet, a sardonic man who enjoys mocking his vulgar wife and silly younger daughters, favours Elizabeth because of her intelligence; as a result she has been given much freedom at home for her quickness in response.

The entry of four gentlemen into the Bennet society sets the plot in motion. The first is an apparently proud and disagreeable but rich and handsome man called Darcy; he accompanies his friend Bingley, who has taken a lease on a neighbouring house. At a local dance he makes a disparaging remark about Elizabeth’s inadequate beauty, which she overhears, resents and mocks. Meanwhile her sister Jane and Bingley are falling in love – to Mrs Bennet’s loud delight. The third male arrival is the Bennet heir, Mr Collins, an absurd clergyman impressed by the grandeur of his patroness, Lady Catherine de Burgh, who is Mr Darcy’s aunt; Mr Collins intends to marry one of

the Bennet daughters to compensate for the fact that he will succeed to their property. Mrs Bennet declares Jane spoken for, so his choice falls on Elizabeth, who struggles to refuse his preposterous proposal. (Shortly afterwards, her older and plain friend Charlotte, with less refined views on marriage, learns of Elizabeth's refusal and takes the rejected suitor for herself.) The fourth man is a soldier, Wickham, charming son of the estate manager of Mr Darcy's father – he movingly describes Darcy's persecution and envy of himself. He flirts with silly Lydia Bennet and more seriously engages Elizabeth's attention; she finds him attractive and plausible.

Meanwhile, despite his unfortunate first impression on her, Darcy is finding Elizabeth's wit, sparkle and bright eyes increasingly alluring. To her great surprise, when she visits Charlotte, now married to Mr Collins, he proposes marriage, at the same time declaring the struggle he has had with himself over approaching a lady with such deplorable relations. Astounded by this frankness and having learnt that Darcy had parted her sister from his friend Bingley, Elizabeth rejects him roundly. He leaves but writes a letter of explanation, especially concerning Wickham, who is in fact a wastrel and ingrate and has topped his villainies by trying to seduce Darcy's young, vulnerable and rich sister. Slowly Elizabeth comes to see that she has put too much faith in her first impressions of both men.

To cheer herself she takes a trip with her sensible aunt and uncle, the Gardiners, people in trade in London and therefore quite below Darcy in status. Assuming his absence they visit his estate in Derbyshire – Elizabeth is impressed by what she sees and understands the full consequence of Mr Darcy and his proposal. At this point he appears. Both are awkward but both have already been changed by the other. Darcy asks the Gardiners to fish on the estate, thus treating them as equals, while Elizabeth reins in her pertness. Their burgeoning love is interrupted by the news that Wickham has run away with Lydia with little intention of marrying her. Darcy leaves Elizabeth, who assumes he has rejected her now that her family is thoroughly disgraced. In fact he has gone to London to pay Wickham to marry Lydia. When Elizabeth returns home, she learns of this and understands she is still loved by Darcy. Despite strong opposition from Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine de Burgh, the two come together, as do Jane and Bingley; from time to time Mr Bennet escapes his wife to visit both couples.

The above plot can be seen as the blueprint for the romantic novel. Lovers meet early on and then are separated by circumstances, the hostility of others or their own psychological problems. But the reader believes throughout that it is important they be united. Throughout the novel they are not physically together much and other plots set off the

main love story. In their quest for a fulfilling relationship, the lovers must come to understand more about themselves. The work will mix realism and romance and educate the reader, who will be pleased to have understood the hints about a satisfying conclusion and feel brighter and more alive at the close.

## What is *Pride and Prejudice* about?

*Pride and Prejudice* has been called the story of a manhunt. In a way, that's exactly what it is. From the perspective of Mrs Bennet, the business of life is to get her daughters married. The same can be said of Lady Lucas, mother of plain, sensible Charlotte. For the girls themselves, the choice of a husband will be the most important decision they ever make.

*Pride and Prejudice*, then, is about marriage – about the tensions between the ideal of romantic love and social and economic pressures; about the dangers of being imprudently swept away by passion; about the difficulty, especially acute in a civilised society with limited opportunities for intimacy, of understanding potential partners well enough to make reliable judgements about them. (An underlying theme of the novel is how little we can really know of other people.)

*Opposite: Mr and Mrs Bennet, one of Hugh Thomson's famous illustrations for the 1894 edition. Others appear throughout this book.*

