

## Study Questions & Essay Topics

### Study Questions

1.

Jane Austen's original title for the novel was *First Impressions*. What role do first impressions play in *Pride and Prejudice*?

*Pride and Prejudice* is, first and foremost, a novel about surmounting obstacles and achieving romantic happiness. For [Elizabeth](#), the heroine, and Darcy, her eventual husband, the chief obstacle resides in the book's original title: *First Impressions*. Darcy, the proud, prickly noblewoman's nephew, must break free from his original dismissal of Elizabeth as "not handsome enough to tempt me," and from his class-based prejudice against her lack of wealth and family connections. Elizabeth's first impressions, meanwhile, catalogue Darcy as arrogant and self-satisfied; as a result, she later accepts slanderous accusations against him as true.

Both Elizabeth and Darcy are forced to come to grips with their own initial mistakes. Structurally, the first half of the novel traces Darcy's progression to the point at which he is able to admit his love in spite of his prejudice. In the second half, Elizabeth's mistaken impressions are supplanted by informed realizations about Darcy's true character. Darcy's two proposals to Elizabeth chart the mature development of their relationship. He delivers the first at the mid-point of the novel, when he has realized his love for Elizabeth but has not yet escaped his prejudices against her family, and when she is still in the grip of her first, negative impression of him. The second proposal—in which Darcy humbly restates his love for her and Elizabeth, now with full knowledge of Mr. Darcy's good character, happily accepts—marks the arrival of the two characters, each finally achieving the ability to view the other through unprejudiced eyes.

2.

Analyze how Austen depicts [Mr. Bennet](#). Is he a positive or negative figure?

Mr. Bennet's chief characteristics are an ironic detachment and a sharp, cutting wit. The distance that he creates between himself and the absurdity around him often endears him to the reader and parallels the amused detachment with which Austen treats ridiculous characters such as Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine. To associate the author's point of view with that of Mr. Bennet, however, is to ignore his ultimate failure as a father and husband. He is endlessly witty, but his distance from the events around him makes him an ineffective parent. Detached humor may prove useful for handling the Mr. Collinses of the world, but it is helpless against the depredations of the villainous (but likable) Wickham. When the crisis of Lydia's elopement strikes, Mr. Bennet proves unable to handle the situation. Darcy, decent and energetic, and the Gardiners, whose intelligence, perceptiveness, and resourcefulness make them the strongest adult force in the novel, must step in. He is a likable, entertaining character, but he never manages to earn the respect of the reader.

3.

Discuss the importance of dialogue to character development in the novel.

All of Austen's many characters come alive through dialogue, as the narrative voice in Austen's work is secondary to the voices of the characters. Long, unwieldy speeches are rare, as are detailed physical descriptions. In their place, the reader hears the crackle of quick, witty conversation. True nature reveals itself in the way the characters speak: Mr. Bennet's emotional detachment comes across in his dry wit, while [Mrs. Bennet](#)'s hysterical excess drips from every sentence she utters. Austen's dialogue often serves to reveal the worst aspects of her characters—Miss Bingley's spiteful, snobbish attitudes are readily apparent in her words, and Mr. Collins's long-winded speeches (and occasional letters, which are a kind of secondary dialogue) carry with them a tone-deaf pomposity that defines his character perfectly. Dialogue can also conceal bad character traits: Wickham, for instance, hides his rogue's heart beneath the patter of pleasant, witty banter, and he manages to take Elizabeth in with his smooth tongue (although his good looks help as well). Ultimately, though, good conversational ability and general goodness of personality seem to go hand in hand. It is no accident that Darcy and Elizabeth are the best conversationalists in the book: *Pride and Prejudice* is the story of their love, and for the reader, that love unfolds through the words they share.

### **Suggested Essay Topics**

1. Discuss the importance of social class in the novel, especially as it impacts the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy.
2. Though Jane Austen satirizes snobs in her novels, some critics have accused her of being a snob herself. Giving special consideration to Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins, argue and defend one side of this issue.
3. *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel about women who feel they have to marry to be happy. Taking Charlotte Lucas as an example, do you think the author is making a social criticism of her era's view of marriage?
4. Giving special attention to Wickham, Charlotte Lucas, and Elizabeth, compare and contrast male and female attitudes toward marriage in the novel.
5. Discuss the relationship between Mrs. Bennet and her children, especially Elizabeth and Lydia.
6. Compare and contrast the Bingley-Darcy relationship with the Jane-Elizabeth relationship.
7. Compare and contrast the roles of Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mrs. Bennet.