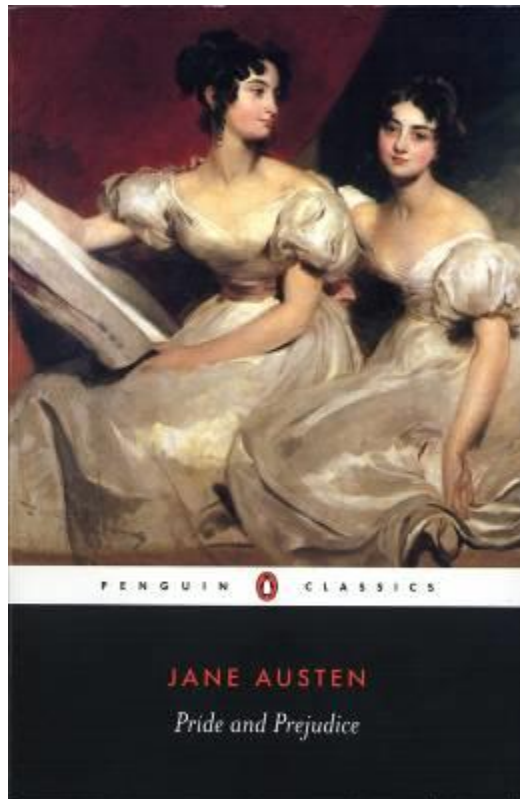


Vignettes of Jane Austen's England in the Novel
Pride and Prejudice

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Abstract

Jane Austen's novels offer vivid glimpses of an era which describe a way of life. Austen's deep insight into the human nature is quite incredible. She was so discreet in her choice of milieu that she confined herself to a familiar zone. Jane Austen's concept of family was idyllic. Kinship bonds were strong during her times. Jane Austen's outlook on character development and the influence of parents on their children also reflects the rise of science and Newton's discovery of universal laws of cause and effect.

Key words: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, idyllic concept of family, parental influence.



“Portrait of Austen (c. 1810) by her sister, [Cassandra](#)”
Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Austen

Vivid Glimpses of an Era

Jane Austen’s novels offer vivid glimpses of an era which describe a way of life. Austen’s deep insight into the human nature is quite incredible. She was so discreet in her choice of milieu that she confined herself to a familiar zone.

Revolves around Elizabeth Bennet

The novel, *Pride and Prejudice* revolves around Elizabeth Bennet, the second of the five daughters of a landed country gentleman. Elizabeth's father, Mr. Bennet, is a voracious reader and quite oblivious of his responsibilities. On the other hand, Elizabeth's mother, Mrs. Bennet, is a woman mostly concerned with finding suitable suitors for her five daughters, who will inherit nothing from their father due to primogeniture laws. Jane Bennet, the eldest daughter has an amiable disposition, while Elizabeth Bennet shares her father's wit and sarcasm; Mary is not pretty but is reserved, and religious; Catherine, sometimes called Kitty, the fourth sister, follows where her younger sister leads while Lydia, the youngest of them all is quite boisterous and outgoing.

Bingley, Affluent and Handsome Young Bachelor

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The narrative opens with the news in the Bennet family that Mr. Bingley, an affluent and handsome young bachelor, is moving into Netherfield Park in the neighbourhood. In a ball at Longbourn, Mr. Bingley is soon warmly received while his friend Mr. Darcy is detested initially for his arrogance. Mr. Bingley singles out Jane as his dance partner, and it soon becomes clear that they have formed an attachment to each other. Darcy slights Elizabeth, in the beginning. One day during a visit to Bingley's sister, Caroline, Jane is caught in a heavy downpour and is stranded at Netherfield for several days. Elizabeth reaches Netherfield in order to nurse her sister back to health. During her stay there, she meets Darcy who visits the Bingley household often. Darcy's attitude towards Elizabeth slowly changes, though Elizabeth still holds on to her first impression of Darcy as an arrogant man.

Elizabeth Turning Down Offer of Marriage

In the meantime, Collins offer of marriage to Elizabeth is being turned down by Elizabeth herself much to her mother's consternation. The mother is worried because as per the law of the land, the property of the Bennets should be inherited by the nearest male relative who is Collins himself. Out of spite for Elizabeth, Collins marries Elizabeth's close friend, Charlotte Lucas, much to Elizabeth's surprise.

Instances of Alienation

There are many other unpleasant instances which alienate Jane from the Bingleys and Elizabeth from Darcy. Elizabeth believes that Bingley was greatly influenced by Darcy and Bingley's sister in this regard. Another young man called Wickham, a militia officer appears on the scene. In Wickham's own words, he has been mistreated by Darcy despite having been a godson and a favourite of Darcy's father. Wickham confides in Elizabeth during a ball and the bitter accusation enrages her further. At one point in time, Elizabeth even hopes to marry Wickham. Her dreams are shattered when she learns that her youngest sister Lydia had eloped with Wickham.

The incident devastates the Bennet family and interestingly, Darcy intervenes to sort out things before Lydia and Wickham could be married legally in the church. Elizabeth's opinion of who Darcy is, changes and Darcy's offer of marriage is now gracefully accepted by Elizabeth.

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On Jane's side, Bingley returns from London, dispelling all misgivings of the Bennet family and is reunited with Jane. The novel ends with the marriages of three of the Bennet sisters well settled and with the mother heaving a sigh of relief.

Idyllic Family Concept

Jane Austen's concept of family was idyllic. Kinship bonds were strong during her times. The quality of life had in its fold, the happiness of the members and a good upbringing of children, and eventually to the successful functioning of society as a whole. The socio-political theories of John Locke led to widespread changes in the existing attitudes toward children and the role of parents in raising children, while Daniel Defoe, among others, espoused fundamental changes in the nature of the marriage relationship. These new beliefs were instrumental in the decline of the patriarchal family structure and gave rise to "affective individualism" and the "companionate marriage."

Generally people inherit most of their beliefs and thoughts from their families. Society is deeply rooted cultural beliefs and practices. Strong beliefs are ingrained in the minds of people which is manifested in different ways. Each member of a family has a role to play in society. The role expectations determine how the members help fulfill the functions of the family to provide economic support, emotional security and childcare.

Leo Tolstoy's Focus on Family

Leo Tolstoy upholds family as a very important institution. It has its own significance as a basic social institution because it is found in all societies. Each individual is part of a family and an extended kin network where strong feelings are expressed. It is a place of security where joy and companionship is sought. It is also a place where sadness and grief are expressed. Family as an institution shapes individuals and eventually helps people learn a good deal about the social world. This in turn impacts the evolution of their self-identity through the process of socialization. A person's bond with his parents influences his personality to a very great extent. So family background is an important ingredient of social status and social class is often seen as representative of their families and not just of people. In fact, each person's individual efforts and decisions and their inherent talents will help decide the course their lives will take. Still,

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undoubtedly, the family's structure resources and interactions immensely impact a person's life courses. In Tolstoy's family, dinner was the glory and climax of the day. It was the time when all the family members got together and exchanged views on different subjects. Dinner time gave each of them a platform to voice their personal opinions on different matters. Similar interactions are seen in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as well.

Family Structure

Family structure also affects the ways in which families can offer emotional support and care for their children. Quite often the family structure is disrupted due to some reason. Either, the couples separate or the children move away. Families that have experienced separation due to some reason have much more complicated structures. The pain and difficulties that families face because of their size and composition are referred to as structural in origin by sociologists. Bigger families face lot of difficulties than smaller families. Similarly, separated couples have a difficult time meeting all their needs.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet just exists. He absolves himself of all family responsibilities much to the dismay and consternation of his wife. His second daughter Elizabeth shoulders all responsibilities and the entire family including even the father look up to her for comfort and solace. Mr. Bennet is not even concerned about the outgoing Lydia who is found to have liaisons with the military men in the neighbourhood. However, Elizabeth has a watchful eye on Lydia, especially during balls. She confides her fears about Lydia to her father who dismisses it as baseless. Mr. Bennet does not take her seriously until Lydia elopes with Wickham. There is a character similar to Mr. Bennet in Tennessee Williams play, *The Glass Menagerie*. In this play, the father-figure is absent. The last conversation that the family had with him was just "Hello- goodbye" over the phone after which the family was left to fend for itself. The mother was in difficult straits, trying unsuccessfully to find a suitor for her ailing daughter.

Myth in Jane Austen

Geoffrey Gorer in his article, "*The Myth in Jane Austen*" says the really warm relationship in the novel is that between Elizabeth and her father, Mr. Bennet; Elizabeth is his favourite daughter and they are able to share in private jokes from which even

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the rest of the family are excluded; they are so attached that when Elizabeth plans to go away for a short visit, the only pain was in leaving her father who would certainly miss her.”(94)

Mature Character

There is no other character in the novel, *Pride and Prejudice* as mature and sensible as Elizabeth Bennet. Even her mother is considered as an eccentric woman who is disliked by many in the neighbourhood. Her relationship with her husband is dysfunctional. There are no moments of mutual trust or camaraderie between the couple.

The way in which her heroines and their future husbands choose one another, the kind of marriages they will have, and the way they will operate as parents follow the patterns set forth in the writings of Defoe and Locke.

The Influence of Parents

Jane Austen’s outlook on character development and the influence of parents on their children also reflects the rise of science and Newton's discovery of universal laws of cause and effect. The parent-child relationships is given a lot of importance in the novels. In the novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet do not spend quality time with their children. Mr. Bennet does not make his presence felt in the family. His seemingly negligent attitude to settle his daughters is quite unacceptable and uncanny. His light banter with his wife which only aggravates her ill temper serves to only alienate him further from his wife. Mostly, the siblings are found together and in particular Elizabeth and Jane, sharing their joys and sorrows.

Much of the story in Jane Austen's novels revolves around the eighteenth century debate over parental desires versus personal preferences and over money and social status versus love as the basis for marriage. She shares Defoe's belief in the importance of love and respect as the basic requirement for marriage, and she shows the negative influence of poor marriage choices on the habits and dispositions of husband and wife. The most devastating consequence of an unhappy marriage is the inability of husband and wife to carry out their roles as father and mother, satisfactorily.

As can be seen in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Collins and Lucas were not happily married. Lucas married Collins for fortune and convenience whereas Collins married Lucas out of spite for Elizabeth who rejected Collin's proposal.

It is the story of a closely knit family whose members come together to dine and exchange views on issues concerning marriage. With an anxious mother who has to settle five daughters in marriage and a seemingly disinterested father who is more of a reader than an observer, things are very difficult for the family.

The protagonist who is Elizabeth is very prominent in the novel. She completely overshadows all other characters in the novel. She seems to mother all her family members, giving each of them timely advice as the situation warrants. Even her father looks up to her for advice and he seeks her company. Her mother lacks social grace and is despised by most people at the balls. In her efforts to secure eligible suitors for her daughters, Mrs. Bennet alienates many people with her poor manners. Elizabeth is the pivot around which the entire novel revolves. Whether it is moderating a casual conversation at the dining table, advising an over indulgent sister, entertaining guests, Elizabeth is at her best.

Beautiful Panoramic Scenes

The novel gives the reader some beautiful panoramic scenes which can only belong to a family. For example, the banter of sisters, making preparations for a ball, choosing dresses, accessories etc. which would befit a ball. There are some beautiful moments which Jane and Elizabeth share at different points in life. They are often found together at the end of the day, reviewing the sequence of events. For instance, they discuss the first ball, that they had in the neighbourhood. Jane tells Elizabeth, that "Bingley is just what a young man ought to be, sensible, good humoured, lively and I never saw such happy manners! (19). Elizabeth added that he was also handsome. As Anna Quindlen remarked, Jane is "sugar to Elizabeth's lemonade". Jane is closest to Elizabeth, and her character is often contrasted with that of Elizabeth. She is favoured by her mother mainly because of her beauty.

They also discuss the arrogance of Darcy who did not choose to dance that day. As for the rest of the sisters, they have fun filled moments in the countryside, in their own garden, chasing butterflies and dreaming of a bright future. While Kitty and Lydia have their own share of arguments, Mary keeps to herself and she plays the piano beautifully. Occasionally, the appearance of military men at the balls are a cause of much mirth and excitement among the Bennet sisters with also their eccentric mother, hoping that someday all her five daughters would be comfortably settled.

Surprisingly, the mother, Mrs. Bennet lacks the social grace that a woman of her social standing needs. She is in a world of her own, trying to figure out ways in which she could settle her daughters. She could in no way offer the comfort and the solace that a daughter needed in times of despair. When Bingley went to London and there was no news of his return, there was only Elizabeth by the side of Jane, trying to cheer her up with the prospect of going to town. Besides, the parents could not exercise control over their daughters. Lydia, who was the youngest of them all needed much attention but both the parents did not realise the repercussions of leniency on their part.

When Lydia got an opportunity to accompany an official's wife for a holiday, it was only Elizabeth who had a strange premonition that things could go wrong. Elizabeth's repeated protestations were of no avail. Even the father did not take Elizabeth seriously. As things turned out, Lydia eloped with Wickham, the most unlikely person anyone could think of. Unfortunately, when the incident took place, Elizabeth was away at Pemberly with her relatives. Elizabeth is apprised of the happenings through Jane's letter.

Letters in Family

Letter is an important component in a family. Letters were the only means of contact through which relatives could be reached. Each letter in the Bennet household brings forth anticipation, excitement and also anxiety. Jane Austen's letters run from January 9, 1796, until late May 1817. It is believed that some of her best letters were written to her nieces. Most of the letters were written to her dear sister, Cassandra with whom she shared a special bond. These letters which have been archived unfold to the readers a panoramic view of the times in which

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she lived. The essence of these letters find a portrayal in the letters penned by the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*.

In the novel, letters are mostly written between Jane and Elizabeth in which important news is exchanged. The news of Lydia's elopement with Wickham is passed on to Elizabeth through a letter from Jane. When Elizabeth reads about it, she is too shocked to react. Incidentally, Darcy enters the room and finds her shaken and quite distraught. Upon much coaxing and cajoling, Elizabeth confides in Darcy and vents all her feelings. Darcy comforts her and leaves in haste.

Back home, Jane is anxiously awaiting the arrival of her dear sister Elizabeth. When Elizabeth arrives at Longbourn, she is warmly greeted by Jane and then by the rest of the family. Mr Bennet expresses his regret over sending Lydia on a holiday with the official's wife. For the first time in his life, Mr. Bennet realizes his negligence in raising his daughters and he expresses his deep sense of remorse to Elizabeth. For all intents and purposes, Elizabeth was a very important member of the family, dispensing soothing advice and forewarning her loved ones of possibilities of impending troubles. In Lydia's case, Elizabeth was shrewd enough to predict the outcome of her holidaying. Unfortunately, her father ignored her well-meant advice, as a result of which the entire family had to face ignominy and defamation.

Family Bonds Grow Stronger With Each Adversity

The family bonds grow stronger with each adversity. In the episode involving Lydia, there are a host of relatives visiting the Bennets to offer solace and comfort. Within the family, as usual Elizabeth and Jane take charge of the situation and they try their best to soothe everyone. The mother is in a state of shock and she is comforted by her daughters while also being taken care of the maids. The father who has absolved himself of all responsibilities finds solace in his favourite daughter, Elizabeth. As for the outside members, Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife visit them and offer their comfort. However, Collins whose proposal was rejected by Elizabeth, visits them and expresses his regret rather unkindly. He said that he was extremely sorry that the family reputation was tarnished by the incident. Elizabeth who could not bear to

hear him anymore retaliated saying that it was not appropriate for him to stay any longer, if his reputation was at stake.

Members of the family find great relief when they vent their feelings to one another. In the Bennet family, the wisest and the most sensible conversations take place between Elizabeth and Jane. The aftermath of the whole episode involving Lydia is discussed in whispers within the confines of their room at night. These moments also help them reflect on their own lives and their prospects of getting a suitor. The recent episode of Lydia had shattered the dreams of Elizabeth and Jane. Elizabeth felt that more things had been ruined than just Lydia's reputation. However, the next day, Elizabeth was able to compose herself and tell Jane that in any case their chances of making good marriages were not good. But nevertheless, Jane felt that their family reputation was tainted by association, though she and Elizabeth were innocent. Both Elizabeth and Jane find the much needed solace and comfort in each other's company. They share a special bond. In George Bernard Shaw's play, *The Heartbeak House*, the bond between sisters is quite different. Unlike the Bennet sisters, the two sisters here do not even recognize each other after a long gap of years and while they greet each other, there is no warmth and no sign of the pangs of separation which is customary among sisters.

Social Classes

One conspicuous fact, which can be traced to many centuries, was the division of social classes. Jane Austen describes her chosen world just as it was in her times. Like other satirists, she is too shrewd and rational to be content with the existing world. She holds up a mirror to the prevailing stratified society in humorous ridicule and condemnation. Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen satirizes snobbery in the arrogant Lady Catherine de Bourgh and the crafty Mr. Collins. On the other hand, Elizabeth Bennet's mortification over her ill-bred mother's indifferent behaviour hardly comes under the head of snobbery.

Genuine and Spurious Gentility

Jane Austen always makes a distinction between genuine and spurious gentility, between self-worth status or possessions. By tradition, gentility is founded on land and money. The arrogant Darcy, with a sophisticated upbringing, falls short of expectations as far as etiquette is

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concerned until he learns his lesson from Elizabeth Bennet. Likewise, many people far below in the financial and social scale are misguided by false values and self-interest rather than by a sound judgement and good reason. In a positive way, characters are portrayed in a good light, considering the British custom of courtesying and in general good manners. The novel, *Pride and Prejudice* has very few characters who have the author's or the reader's entire approval, and her comedies of manners have far reaching effect with the satire and humour.

Class Divisions

Class divisions are strengthened by the fact that most genteel families have a fixed place of habitation and they live in the ancestral house which is handed down for generations. They embody a culture and a way of living which is only known to their families. Jane Austen with her fondness for rural Hampshire makes her strong desire of place a living presence in the novels.

Darcy's ancestral estate, are ideal settings for entire novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Bingley is the first "gentleman" in his line because his father left him a fortune, Darcy has at Pemberley a splendid library which "has been the work of many generations" Thus the nobility of the newly rich is sharply contrasted with traditional stability. The village of Longbourn where the Bennets live is in sharp contrast with the ancestral estate of the affluent Darcy. However, Darcy's former opinion of the middle class mentality changes, especially when he observes Elizabeth's refined manners and her social etiquette and grace./Shortly before he proposes to her, he remarks saying, "You cannot have been always at Longbourn"

Elizabeth's two significant meetings with Darcy take place in Mrs. Collins' house and at Pemberley. In the social structure of the era in the novels, places of residence are conspicuous points of cultural reference.

The desire to augment family wealth, power, and prestige gets primacy among the affluent. "They're all on the make, in a quiet way, in Jane," says a character in Kipling's *The Janeities*—and, in novels about young women, the prime field of activity is marriage. While the

novels do depict happy marriages, among most of the characters verge on the commercial view of marriage.

Parents' Role in the Marriage Market

In Jane Austen's England, although on the higher social levels, parents did play a role in the marriage market, daughters had gained far more autonomy as far as their preferences were concerned. In Jane Austen's novels, though there is mostly a commercial side to the marriages, the heroines and heroes marry for love and parents, with some exceptions, are acquiescent. But the Austen heroines, who have higher intentions are also on their own, they may like Elizabeth Bennet, make their loving suitors make amends or like even the gentle Jane Bennet, go in search of them.

The decision of Charlotte Lucas to marry Collins after his offer is being turned down by Elizabeth, is a reminder that for many young genteel women there were only three prospects: marriage, aging spinsterhood at home, or accepting the offer of a governess or teacher in a school. Charlotte, is not as shrewd as her friend Elizabeth Bennet, but she is twenty-seven, she has never been romantic, and she desires only a comfortable home which she finds in Collins house. Interestingly, she finds more happiness and solace in the poultry and the parish rather than in the company of her husband.

Poverty Around

Jane Austen did not have the opportunity to acquire first-hand knowledge about the various degrees of poverty around her. However, as the daughter of a village clergy man, she seems to have given alms to the poor. She did not have much money to give the poor but "her needlework was nearly always a garment for the poor" (Life, 242). Again, Darcy was known for his magnanimity towards the poor, and this was in sharp contrast to his aunt, Lady Catherine.

As far as the demarcation in the class was concerned, Jane Austen has satirical overtones about pretensions of the rich and the affluent. A point in case is Lady Catherine. Elizabeth soon discerned that though this great lady was actually advocating peace for the country, she was a very active magistrate in her own parish. As far as Collins was concerned, he appraised Lady

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Catherine of even the minute details of the parishioners. Lady Catherine was always there to settle differences between people and assuage fears among the discontented and the poor though there were no tangible solutions that she could offer.

It is a known fact that class divisions prevailed but even poor families, had some domestic help. Jane Austen describes the maids and men servants attending to them on various occasions. As far as *Pride and Prejudice* is concerned the maids are mostly attending to either Mrs Bennet when she is ill or they are delivering letters to them. The author clearly describes the ways in which the different characters spent their leisure hours. With many servants to attend to their various needs, they had a lot of time on their hands. As far as Mrs. Bennet was concerned, she spent her entire lifetime in just gossiping about other families and trying to fix her daughter's marriage. As far as the Bennet girls were concerned they were found to be enjoying themselves at balls and wondering who could be their ideal life partners. Lady Catherine de Bourgh who was known for her ostentatious outlook was seen to be inviting people like the Bennets whom she treats contemptuously.

Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* did belong to the upper class. Unlike his aunt, he was always kind to the poorer sort and the middle class and in particular to the Bennet family. Initially, he may have been regarded as an arrogant person but his kind gestures belied the earlier expectations of the people. On the other hand, the pretentious Collins only served to alienate himself from the Bennet family. When Lydia eloped, it was only Darcy who extended help. Darcy ensured that Lydia and Wickham were lawfully wedded. But Collins only expressed regret over the incident and nothing more than that.

Music Performance and Enjoyment Across Social and Economic Classes

Though class divisions prevailed in Jane Austen's time, music was something common to all of them. Even amateur musicians had their heyday atleast within the confines of their own families like Mary in *Pride and Prejudice*. Music was important in balls and people loved it. In fact music brought people together and touch a chord among people and truly bonded people. Coming to the third parameter, Jane Austen's had power in her language which was perhaps unrivalled in her times. Every thought of hers was packed neatly into a series of phrases and

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sentences which gave a poise and elegance that few writers could match. The novel *Pride and prejudice* opens with the sentence which has become an adage among the youth. “ It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (7).

This above sentence has become proverbial in English speaking circles. The opening sentence itself captures the attention of the readers and prepares them for what is to follow. Again the curiosity of the Bennet girls in getting a glimpse of the young and handsome Bingley who had called on them is described very elegantly in the following words.

‘The ladies were somewhat more fortunate, for they had the advantage of ascertaining from an upper window that he wore a blue coat and wore a black horse” (13).

The sentence does aptly describe the secrecy which most ladies tried to maintain. They would rather observe someone unnoticed than observe them openly.

Portrayal of the Family

Coming to the details, the Bennet family is a fictitious family portrayed beautifully by the English novelist Jane Austen. The family hails from Hertfordshire landed gentry. The family plays a pivotal role in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel actually revolves around the fortunes of the protagonist, Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s bond with the different characters greatly influences the plot of the entire novel.

The society at that particular time viewed marriage as the only possible avenue for a young girl hailing from a good family. The presence of five young daughters with only good looks to warrant any attention was a matter of grave concern and anxiety for the mother. Yet Mrs. Bennet falls short of social etiquette as far as her manners are concerned. In her frantic attempts to find suitable partners for her five young daughters, she incurs the wrath of many, including an eligible young bachelor who is attracted towards Elizabeth. Mrs. Bennet’s efforts are ridiculed by her indifferent husband, time and again.

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Each of the daughters is unique. They show different behaviour depending on the schooling they received.: the two eldest daughters, Jane and Elizabeth, endear themselves to their father by their excellent behaviour while Mary, who is unassuming exhibits intellectual and musical talents and the two youngest are quite incorrigible and they enjoy the freedom of choosing to go wherever they wished.

The other members of the Bennet family comprise Mrs. Bennet's brother and sister, Mr. Gardiner and Mrs. Philips, the haughty and foolish Mr. William Collins, the designated heir of Mr. Bennet's estate. All these characters too contribute significantly to the progress of the story. However, they operate from different levels in accordance to their social status. Collins bridges the gap between the gentry of Hertfordshire to which the Bennets belong and the aristocratic Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Darcy.

The multiple problems revolving around the legal, financial or emotional interests that unite or divide the Bennet family allow Jane Austen scope to raise a number of societal issues of her times, particularly involving girl's education and the authenticity of certain customs. Mr. Bennet gets an annual income of £2,000, which is a fairly good income for a gentleman but definitely not comparable to Mr Darcy's annual income of £10,000. Because Mr Bennet has no sons and therefore no immediate male heir, the estate would be inherited by his next closest male relative, Mr. Collins. According to the law of the land, the Bennet family could still retain their ancestral property if one of the Bennet daughters married Collins. Again as per the entailment, the marriage to one of the daughters should bring forth a male heir who in turn would salvage the Bennet property.

The said-grandson would then become the new heir presumptive of the entailment, by virtue of his birth. This grandson could make claims over the property before Mr. Bennet's demise. This was why Mr. Collins' late father, Mr. Collins Sr., before his death, coaxed his son to mend the differences with the Bennets by offering his hand to one of the Bennet daughters. The alliance would not only mend the relationships between the two families but it would strengthen Collin's claims to Longbourn.

Emily Auerbach criticises Mr Bennet for being unscrupulous and ignorant of his daughters's future. and suggests that he possesses "too little sense of duty or responsibility" Critics have discerned a dysfunctional marriage between Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet which in turn has a negative impact on the family. They obviously made an incongruous pair.

Mr. Bennet is described by the narrator in his first appearance in the book as "so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character", and it this ironic, cynical sense of humour that grieves his wife.

Mr. Bennet is portrayed as a sarcastic man who was quite irresponsible regarding his duties as a husband and as a father. He may raise laughter through his subtle irony and remarks but he has many grievous faults. He is found to be indifferent and irresponsible, selfish, indolent, hating company; he suffers, according to Phyllis Ferguson Bottomer, from a form of autism. He and his wife definitely do not share common ground but he has for his part entirely given up his role as a responsible patriarch.

He is negligent of the needs of his family. His disenchantment over the world is evident as he withdraws into his library and camouflages his feelings hides behind his cynical mockery. Unlike his wife and daughters he would be happier inside the comfort of his home rather than outside.

Detached from the world, he did not evince interest even in his neighbours. When he is part of a social event, such as the ball at Netherfield, it is as a silent spectator to the many flaws of his own family. Even the sudden discovery of Darcy's role in Lydia's marriage only elicits from him an exclamation of relief: "So much the better. It will save me a world of trouble and economy. Though he loves his daughters immensely, in particular, Elizabeth, he often fails as a father, preferring to retreat into his own world of books. The ceaseless efforts of his wife to settle the daughters do not seem to awaken him from his world. In fact he does not have the skills to handle those areas. He would rather enjoy the mistakes of the family than show deep concern for

them. As a father he does not take efforts to exercise control over the two youngest daughters who appear to be wayward.

Mr. Bennet had only married his wife on an impulse according to the author.

[Mr. Bennet] captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in the marriage put an end to any real affection further. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all of his views of domestic happiness were overthrown.

But Mr. Bennet tried to seek comfort in the company of books and to forget the woes his marriage had brought in. Having realized what kind of woman he had married he did not take efforts to correct her. Neither did he take any efforts to correct his daughters as well. As per his standards only Jane and Elizabeth were sensible. Mr. Bennet would have tried to refine his wife probably but later realized the futility of this exercise. This perhaps led to his indifference, lethargy and negligence as far as family issues were concerned. He openly shows favouritism to Jane and Elizabeth and distances himself from his wife and his younger daughters, especially at social gatherings.

At the very outset, it is clear that Elizabeth is her father's favourite daughter. The two share an uncanny bond, which is obvious to everyone in the family. In one of her angry outbursts, Mrs. Bennet turns on her husband and exclaims: "I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving her the preference". To which he replies "They have none of them much to recommend them...they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters".

Marriage was an important aspect of people's lives especially in Jane Austen's times. Despite the customs of society of responsible fathers getting their daughters settled early in life, Mr. Bennet was negligent of his duties. After Elizabeth turns down Mr. Collins' marriage proposal, Mrs. Bennet is not in her elements and resolves that she shall "never see [Elizabeth]

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again" .Yet her father, without even caring to ask Elizabeth her reasons for refusing to marry Mr. Collins, who would have been a good match for her, sarcastically says "An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. -- Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do."

Mr. Bennet

Mr. Bennet seems to have a gentle disposition, for he does not involve himself with Mrs. Bennet's plans. He does have drawbacks which in all likelihood could really affect the future of his family, especially the daughters. In the early days of his marriage, his view was that "economy was... perfectly useless". He did not exercise caution in matters of money. He spent lavishly and his wife supported him in this regard.

This lack of wisdom and foresight on money matters did not bother Mr. Bennet because he believed that one day his wife would bear him a son. The birth of a son in the family would eliminate the entail and ensure the financial future of his family. Since a son was not born, his wife faced a great risk of impoverishment in the event of Mr. Bennet's demise. Added to this, Mr. Bennet had no resources to win suitors for his daughters by means of huge dowries.

The narrator is silent about Mr. Bennet's lineage. However, the author does divulge information about Mrs. Bennet. Mrs. Bennet originally belonged to the Gardiner family and she was married for twenty three years when the story opens. She is the daughter of an attorney of Meryton in Herfordshire. She has two siblings--a brother and a sister, both married. The marriages of the two women have taken them to different circles in society. The brother's pursuit of higher studies has catapulted him to a good social status in society.

In the opening chapter, the author cautions the reader that Mrs. Bennet has little understanding about the world and that she has an unpredictable temper. Her only outstanding feature which impressed people of her times was her beauty for which Mr. Bennet was attracted only to discover later that she was too foolish and shallow in her attitudes. It is believed that though her first name is not mentioned, she could have been christened Jane, since most eldest

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girls were named after their mothers. Mrs. Bennet being the elder of the two sisters, this name is more likely. Mrs. Bennet inherited a wealth of £4,000, from her father. This money was a huge fortune as per the standards of her family.

For twenty long years, Mr. Bennet had sought refuge in the company of books, only to be distracted now and then by the family conflicts. As for Mrs. Bennet, she was despondent about the future of not only of her daughters but also of herself. With no male heir to claim the property, the thought of becoming a widow and leaving house to the closest male heir was heavily weighing on her mind. This is the main reason for her anxiety over the future of her daughters. The eldest, who was Jane, as per the custom of the land had to be settled first. Even as Jane stepped into her sixteenth year, Mrs. Bennet grew anxious about her. As the years rolled by the arrival of a young gentleman by name Bingley in the neighbourhood further reinforces this idea. After a few preliminaries during balls and other occasions during which Mr. Bingley and Jane meet, Mrs. Bennet orchestrates other occasions to fix the proposals not only for Jane but also for Elizabeth and Lydia. Mrs. Bennet sends Jane out in the rain to Netherfield to make sure the people there retain her, she coaxes Collins to ask for Elizabeth's hand in marriage. Both the occasions have negative outcomes, though later Bingley does marry Jane. Mrs. Bennet also unabashedly rejoices over Lydia's marriage to Wickham later though Lydia's elopement with Wickham had ruined the family's reputation, initially.

Mrs. Bennet's Lack of Social Grace

Mrs. Bennet's lack of social grace was a matter of concern not only to Mr. Bennet but also to Jane and Elizabeth who unlike their mother were refined and well mannered. The years had not mellowed down Mrs. Bennet and she was the same impulsive woman that Mr. Bennet knew her to be in the early days of her marriage. Unfortunately, Mrs. Bennet is unable to evolve as a better person and more like Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine and her own daughter Lydia who had no intention of changing their ways.

Mrs. Bennet is so sensitive that she gets upset soon. She has no sense of discernment nor does she have an aptitude for analyzing things and facing reality. She is also prone to anxiety attacks which has a debilitating effect on her. For instance, when she learns that Lydia had

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eloped with Wickham, she gets anxiety attacks and she is confined to her room with mostly the servants to attend to her. Her poor understanding of life and lack of intelligence only served to alienate herself from her husband. Her husband only had contempt for her which was subtly brought out in his remarks to her queries.

Quite ignorant of the ways of the upper class, she did desire to be considered one among them. For instance, she desired to be considered on par with Mr. Darcy, an eligible bachelor from the upper class. Her lack of tact, her foolish talk and jesting were enough to embarrass Jane and Elizabeth in the company of Darcy and Bingley. She did not empathize with anyone. If she did have empathy, it was for herself and Lydia.

As far as Mrs. Bennet's idea of social grace was concerned, she gave more importance to outward appearances. For example, she felt, Jane's beauty would suffice to attract an eligible suitor. She was impressed with the uniforms of the militia. For her it was not behaviour which mattered. It was wealth and pomp, which according to her was a sign of true class. According to her, the validity of a marriage is gauged by the amount "of calico, muslin and cambric" to buy for the bride's attire. Thus, Mr. Bennet's refusal to get new dresses for her dear Lydia on her wedding day offended her more than the Lydia's elopement with Wickham. Mrs Bennet is so preoccupied with settling her daughters that even when her husband announces an unknown guest for dinner, she imagines him to be Mr. Bingley, while nurturing the belief that Jane had hidden it from her.

Caricatures Out of the Characters

Jane Austen has particularly created caricatures out of her characters. As Virginia Woolf remarked, "no excuse is found for [her fools] and no mercy shown them [...] Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give [her] the supreme delight of slicing their heads off." According to the tradition of the comedy of manners and didactic novel, she uses caricatures and parody to ridicule some of her contemporaries.

Mrs. Bennet is affected by logorrhea, a defect that Thomas Gisborne considers specifically feminine. She is not open to any advice, especially if it comes from Elizabeth, makes recurring speeches, monotonous tirades, exasperating rant, full of oddities and peculiarities. She

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does not like any kind of censure. She does not like being contradicted. Her incessant argumentative remarks dissuade people from interrupting her, knowing very well the outcome. Even the Jane who is known for her forbearance finds her grievances hard to bear, when Mrs. Bennet displays "a longer irritation than usual" about the absence of Bingley, confessing to Elizabeth how much the lack of self-control of her mother revives her suffering ("Oh that my dear mother had more command over herself! she can have no idea of the pain she gives me by her continual reflections on him").

Yet another stressed and ridiculed aspect is her nervous ailment. Mrs. Bennet seems to use her alleged weakness to attract attention from the inmates of the house. Yet she fails to endear herself to anyone. However there are characters who empathize with her in her dreary moments. Those hypochondriacs are referred to as poor honey in her letters. These egocentric characters are found in most novels of Jane Austen who use their real or imagined ailments to win people's sympathy. This behaviour had the ability to infuriate Jane, who speaks with certain sarcastic frustration about it in her letters to her sister. The narrator has fun describing her misguided joy, her absurdities devastating to those around her. Ever since she learns that Lydia's wedding is a fact, she hastens to announce the "good news" to all Meryton, brazenly triumphant. No adversity could dampen her spirits for long.

Mrs. Bennet was least bothered about the way in which she could effect her daughter, Lydia's marriage. Initially, Lydia's elopement had caused the Bennet family much grief and consternation but Mrs. Bennet eventually reverted to her good spirits when she learnt that Lydia would be legally married to Wickham. She just wanted to see Lydia well settled which was her long felt desire.

Some critics are of the opinion that it would be unjust to see Mrs. Bennet in a poor light. She has good reasons to be obsessed with her daughter's early settlement in marriage. It is natural for a mother of five daughters to be overly anxious about the well-being of her daughters. With a husband who does not evince much interest in their settlement, Mrs. Bennet is left all alone to fend for herself. The cynicism of Mr Bennet would not prevent Mr Collins from inheriting Longbourn.

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In the neighbourhood where there are innumerable young ladies to be married and few interesting parties, she is very keen that her daughters should find a better match than all the other aspirants in the marriage market. In this regard, she is always mindful of her own daughters and wants every young man to get the attention of her. On the other hand, Mr Bennet did not hold his daughters in as much high esteem as the mother. Frustrated by her "mediocre intelligence", he scoffs at her with his "sarcastic humor".

Sadist Strain

Mr. Bennet has a sadistic strain in his character which manifests itself towards Mrs. Bennet in particular. For instance he refuses to accept legitimate requests from her regarding visiting Mr. Bingley, who could be a prospective groom for Jane. With good intentions in his mind of visiting Mr. Bingley, he does not disclose this openly to Mrs. Bennet. As Mrs Bennet rants and raves over Mr. Bennet's indifference, it turns out that Mr. Bennet had already visited him. Again, when Mrs. Bennet rebels against the entail by which Mr. Collins should inherit the property in the event of Mr. Bennet's death, Mr. Bennet declares that he hopes he would survive her.

Mrs. Bennet is aware of the fact that Mr. Bennet takes pleasure in contradicting her and has no compassion for her poor nerves. She really suffered a lot from the ironical remarks of Mr. Bennet besides a total lack of sensitivity on his part. Mostly she felt misunderstood. The lack of love and sympathy of her own family made her seek solace outside her family among friends and acquaintances apart from her own brother and sister-in-law.

Mrs. Bennet in a Very Poor Light

The author has portrayed Mrs. Bennet in a very poor light. Jane Austen herself seems to treat this character with a lot of indifference. She seems to agree with Mr. Bennet in ridiculing her and noting all her absurd interruptions. She did not condone her foolishness nor her awkward mannerisms. When Jane asks her show gratitude to her brother, who had given a huge sum for Lydia's wedding, she replied that he did that as he did not have children. She tells Jane "If he had not had a family of his own, I and my children must have had all his money, you know; and it is

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the first time we have ever had anything from him, except a few presents". Lydia's marriage does not give Mrs Bennet the satisfaction that she wanted. After her marriage, Lydia could not be in close proximity to her mother. But Mrs. Bennet always wanted to let the neighbours know that Wickham's enrolment in the regiment precluded all of Lydia's personal desires, including her Lydia's desire to be with her mother. She would tell people, "Lydia does not leave me because she is married, but only because her husband's regiment happens to be so far off. If that had been nearer, she would not have gone so soon", and if she was able to joyfully "for all her maternal feelings settle her most deserving daughters", the marriage of Jane will only heighten her "delighted pride" during the year that the Bingley spent at Netherfield.

Lady Catherine

Lady Catherine is yet another character whom Jane Austen treats with contempt and ridicule. Lady Catherine, lacks refinement and her pride and condescending attitude towards people is offensive not only to Elizabeth but also to Lady Catherine's nephew Mr. Darcy. Just as the foolish Mrs Bennet embarrassed Elizabeth amidst gatherings, an indifferent Lady Catherine was quite repulsive to Darcy. Jane Austen, was actually holding up a mirror to the society that she was a part of.

Duties of Men and Women

In the real sense of the word, Mrs. Bennet has not really groomed them well enough for housekeeping. She looks for ways and means to let Jane and Bingley alone together, according to Hugh Thomson. Mrs. Bennet has not prepared her daughters to face the world. The daughters were not apprised of domestic matters. Neither did she give them any idea about managing financial matters. Thomas Gisborne theorized in *An Enquiry Into the Duties of Men*, published in 1794, and in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, published in 1797, the space reserved for men and women. According to him, women are by instinct destined to be involved in the household matters. Therefore, their role is to keep the house and monitor the chores within the confines of the house

Mrs. Bennet overtly mocks Charlotte Lucas when she is compelled to enter the kitchen in order to supervise the tarts making. In this connection, Mrs. Bennet pompously says that her

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"daughters are brought up differently"; also, she retaliates vehemently when Mr. Collins, on the day of his arrival, believed that his cousins had a hand in the preparation of dinner. She adds that they had lived an affluent life, since Mr. Bennet spends annually his entire income. Mrs Bennet "had no turn for economy", and as for Lydia only the expenses amounted to approximately £90 per year.

The reader observes the unfolding plot and the other characters mostly from her viewpoint of the protagonist, Elizabeth. The second of the Bennet daughters, she is twenty years old and is intelligent, shrewd, cheerful, amiable, pretty, and witty. Unfortunately she judges people by the first impression. Like her sisters, Elizabeth had an allowance / pin money of £50 per annum (Interest on £1,000 from her mother's fortune by settlement upon her death). As the story opens, her closest relationships are with her father (as his favourite daughter), her sister Jane, her Aunt Gardiner, and her best friend Charlotte Lucas. She is also not favoured by Mrs. Bennet because of her resistance to her mother's plans. Elizabeth is treated on par with her plain sister who Mrs. Bennet looks down upon. As the story develops, so does her bond with Mr. Darcy. The course of Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship is ultimately decided when Darcy gets rid of his pride, and Elizabeth overcomes her prejudice. The bond finally culminates in a total surrender to their love for each other.

Mary Bennet is the only plain Bennet sister, and she mostly reads and plays music, although she is often anxious to exhibit her talents accomplishments and is rather proud about them. She works hard for knowledge and fame, but has to settle for mediocrity.

Mary too had an allowance of £50 per annum before her marriage. Like both her two younger sisters, Kitty and Lydia, she is seen as being foolish by Mr. Bennet. Mary is not very clever but imagines herself to be wise. When Mr. Collins' proposal is rejected outright by Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet hopes Mary would be persuaded to accept him. The readers are coaxed to believe that Mary entertained that idea as well. However, neither of them know that Collins is already engaged to Charlotte Lucas by this time. Mary does not make frequent appearances in the novel.

Lydia

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Catherine, or Kitty Bennet, barely eighteen is the fourth daughter. She bears a close resemblance to Lydia, in terms of behaviour. Though older to Lydia by two years, she emulates her diligently and seeks the attention of the officers in the regiment. Like all her sisters, Kitty had an allowance. She appears but little, mostly as Lydia's associate although she is also projected as being envious of Lydia and also a ridiculous young woman. However, it is said that, with Lydia's negative influence eliminated and with a reasonable exposure to her well-behaved older sisters, she has changed considerably by the end of the novel.

Lydia is the youngest Bennet sister. She is 15-years-old when the novel opens. Lydia is portrayed as a strong, healthy, dynamic young, impulsive lady with a good complexion and an affable countenance. Ironically, she is the also the tallest and the most incorrigible of the sisters. Lydia is a younger version of her mother. Like her mother Lydia is foolish, conceited and shallow. Besides, she is also superficial, childish, immature, and irresponsible. At parties she is boisterous, flippant and high- spirited, inviting unwanted attention. She can be also garrulous with total strangers.

She dominates her older sister Kitty, whom she treats disdainfully. She opposes all elder sisters, Jane's and Elizabeth's, attempts to correct her behaviour, and is vehemently supported in the family by her mother, with whom she shares a special bond with her for years. Mrs. Bennet has filled Lydia's head with thoughts of lace, bonnets, clothing, men in regimentals. Her expenditure always exceeds her allowance. Sometimes, she borrows money from her sisters and does not bother to return the money.

Lydia's priorities in life revolve around shopping and 'socializing', especially with the officers of the militia, trying to solicit as much attention to herself as she can. This leads to her elopement with George Wickham, although he has no intention of marrying her. Lydia disregards the moral code of her society, and has no regrets for the ignominy she causes her family

Jane Austen, also wrote that Lydia has "high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence" which has been fortified into an over-self-assurance, due to her mother's years of

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indulging her. It is believed that this is Jane Austen's way describing the characteristics of some of the naive people of her era and holding up a mirror to them.

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