

# The Pride and Prejudice of the Characters in Jane Austen's Novel

## *Pride and Prejudice*



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### Abstract

In this essay, I will discuss the terms “pride” and “prejudice” and how they are conveyed in Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*. I claim that the title of the book describes the flaws of almost every character in the book, and not just the protagonists Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. I will first examine how these flaws show themselves in Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, and how they are not present in Jane Bennet and Mr Bingley, so as to be able to know what to look for in other characters, and compare them to the protagonists. I will then discuss the relation between the terms “pride” and “prejudice”, and also the role of the community as a whole. To support and enforce my discussion and my argument I will use books and articles by other writers who have analyzed Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, the terms “pride” and “prejudice” and different characters and phenomena in it.

Front page: The picture is from the film *Pride & Prejudice* (2005). Turned into greyscale by the writer of this essay. Found at: <http://images4.fanpop.com/image/photos/17200000/Pride-and-Prejudice-pride-and-prejudice-2005-17217511-2324-1500.jpg> 2011-11-24

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## Introduction

As *Pride and Prejudice* is a very well-known novel, innumerable critics have analyzed it and given their opinion of it. Everett Zimmerman is one of those critics; he states in his article “Pride and Prejudice in *Pride and Prejudice*” that this novel is Jane Austen’s best novel. He praises it in the following way: “The moral concerns of this novel are, it must be admitted, narrower than those of the later novels, but this very limitation leads to the happy resolution which tempts critics of *Pride and Prejudice* to compare it to a Mozart composition” (p. 73).

Personally, I like *Pride and Prejudice* because it has so many interesting components: an intriguing plot, humorous language full of irony, and many well-described characters with original personality traits and common flaws. I particularly like how Jane Austen describes the actions of the peripheral characters; she speaks about their peculiarities in a very amusing way, and she is very good at making the reader picture just how ridiculous the characters are.

*Pride and Prejudice* tells the story of Elizabeth Bennet and her family in nineteenth-century England. Elizabeth Bennet has four sisters, and the aim of their mother’s life is to marry them off, an aim which is ridiculed by the narrator throughout the story. Mostly, the plot follows Elizabeth Bennet and her eldest sister Jane Bennet in their pursuit of happiness. Jane and a wealthy man called Mr Bingley fall in love with each other, but his family and friends believe that the class difference is too large, so they separate them by convincing Mr Bingley that Jane does not truly love him. Meanwhile, Mr Bingley’s friend Mr Darcy, who immediately becomes disliked by most people in the neighborhood, falls in love with Elizabeth Bennet. However, she thinks that he is a very despicable man, partly because of his proud manners and partly because of what others have told her about him. She declines his offer of marriage but she later realizes that she has misjudged the character of Mr Darcy, as well as the characters of others.

The traditional view of the book is that Elizabeth Bennet stands for the prejudice in the title and that Mr Darcy stands for the pride. This seems to be correct; Elizabeth judges Mr Darcy too quickly and with too little information, and Mr Darcy acts as if he were superior to the people in Hertfordshire.

In this essay I argue that it is not only Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet who show pride and prejudice, but many other characters do as well. Mr Darcy and Elizabeth are the protagonists and it is therefore easy to believe that the title of the book concerns their flaws only, but it does in fact describe the flaws of almost all of the characters in the book. Even the community itself is flawed mostly by prejudice, but also by pride.

In order to analyze the flaws of the peripheral characters I find it necessary first to examine the flaws of the main characters. In the first chapter, I will therefore discuss Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy and how they change in the story from being proud and prejudiced to self-aware and less narrow-minded. I will also mention Jane Bennet and Mr Bingley, because they are neither proud nor prejudiced. In the second chapter, I will discuss other characters which are proud or prejudiced; I have chosen to focus on Mr Collins, Lady Catherine, Lydia Bennet and Mr Bennet. In these minor characters, the pride and the prejudice exist in a mixture to an extent that it is complicated to tell the flaws apart, and that is what makes them interesting and different from the main characters. In the second chapter, I will also discuss the prejudices and narrow-mindedness of the community as a whole.

A background for my analysis of these flaws is the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, which offers three explanations of the word "pride": "a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction that you get because you or people connected with you have done or possess something good", "your feelings of your own worth and respect for yourself" and lastly "the belief that you are better or more important than other people". For the word "prejudice" only one definition is given: "an unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially when formed without enough thought or knowledge".

## Chapter One: The Removal of the Character Flaws Pride and Prejudice

In this chapter, I will focus on the main characters of the novel and their pride and prejudice, because it is necessary to first see how these flaws are shown in the characters who obviously suffer from them. Elizabeth's prejudice and Mr Darcy's pride will therefore be in focus, although Elizabeth also suffers from a bit of pride and Mr Darcy is a bit prejudiced too. I will also compare them to Jane Bennet and Mr Bingley since they are unique by being exemplary characters throughout the novel.

It is widely acknowledged that the title *Pride and Prejudice* is connected to the behavior of the main characters Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. Everett Zimmerman, for example, writes in his article "Pride and Prejudice in *Pride and Prejudice*" that the title of Jane Austen's novel refers to Mr. Darcy's pride and Elizabeth Bennet's prejudice against him (p. 64). However, Elizabeth claims that she is proud; she says the following when Charlotte Lucas says that Mr Darcy has a right to be proud: "That is very true, and I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*" (p. 18). That quote makes it clear that Elizabeth dislikes him mostly because he has hurt her pride, or perhaps her vanity, when he said that she was not pretty enough to dance with. There is only a small difference between pride and vanity, but Mary Bennet points out the difference: "Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us" (p. 18). Elizabeth is therefore vain rather than proud. Nicholas Marsh says the following in his book *Jane Austen: The Novels*: "We can also recognise how hurtful Darcy's original slight must have been, and remember the heady flattery of Wickham's attention [. . .] So this explanation carries some conviction: Elizabeth has been vain, and her vanity has contributed a great deal towards her prejudice" (p. 36). So her vanity is what generates her prejudice.

Her initial prejudice makes it easier for her to believe what Mr Wickham later tells her of Mr Darcy concerning their history. When Mr Wickham has given her his side of the story she

says the following: “I had supposed him to be despising his fellow-creatures in general, but did not suspect him of descending to such malicious revenge, such injustice, such inhumanity as this” (p. 65). This proves that she has misunderstood his character to be misanthropic, and not just proud. Since she has already judged Mr Wickham to be amiable, and has decided that Mr Darcy definitely is not, her faint dislike of Mr Darcy easily turns into a strong dislike that is bordering on hatred, and her prejudices against him are further encouraged.

Elizabeth’s regard for Mr Wickham is a different kind of prejudice than that involving the attitude toward Mr Darcy; she judges his character after knowing very little of him. Since prejudices are usually negative opinions which are formed without enough knowledge, Elizabeth’s opinion of Mr Wickham cannot be classified as a traditional prejudice, however faulty her opinion of him is. She is making a prejudgement, which is almost like a prejudice. She judges him to be better than he really is because she does not know enough about him, and she is therefore making a prejudgement. However, it is similar to being prejudiced and one can say that it originates from the same state of mind or attitude. In both cases, opinions have been formed too quickly and with insufficient knowledge.

However, opinions can change, and that is what Elizabeth’s opinions do. The thing which will start to change Elizabeth’s opinions is the fact that she receives a letter from Mr Darcy after she has declined his offer of marriage. She starts to read it with a prejudiced mind, and when she has read the letter once, her prejudices against Mr Darcy remain. The narrator says that “she wished to discredit it entirely” (p. 159), but Elizabeth cannot resist rereading the letter even though it upsets her very much; she probably reads it again *because* it upsets her. However, after reading it closely and contemplating Mr Wickham’s and Mr Darcy’s behavior she is forced to admit that Mr Wickham has deceived her and everyone else in the neighborhood. Hence, this letter removes a great part of her prejudices, but one prejudice still remains: Elizabeth does not believe Mr Darcy to be an agreeable man. When she visits Pemberley with her uncle and aunt she is very surprised to hear the housekeeper speak so well

of him. However, when she sees Mr Darcy a while later she notices that he behaves very agreeably toward her and her relatives. The combination of the housekeeper's praise of Mr Darcy and his increased civility make her remove her last prejudice against him.

While Elizabeth suffers from a prejudiced mind, Mr Darcy suffers from pride. When Mr Darcy is first introduced in the story, the narrator says that the people at the ball were disgusted by his proud manners, because he only talked to his friends and did not wish to be introduced to anyone in the room. When he speaks to Mr Bingley at the ball one can see that he does think himself to be superior to the other people there; Mr Bingley tries to persuade Mr Darcy to dance, but he answers: "At such an assembly as this it would be insupportable. Your sisters are engaged, and there is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with" (p. 11). When he says "such an assembly as this", he is clearly referring to the fact that it is a public ball in the countryside with inferior and, according to his standards, inelegant people. As for him not wanting to be introduced to anyone in the room, one cannot blame it entirely on shyness or inability to speak to strangers, which is the reason Mr Darcy himself later gives (p. 137). R. E. Ewin states the following in his article "Pride, Prejudice and Shyness": "Darcy is not ill at ease with people; it is more that there is a large class of people to whom he thinks it proper to pay no attention and of whom he thinks it proper that he should not care about what interests them" (p. 145). I agree with R. E. Ewin. Mr Darcy does not think it necessary to speak to people of lower rank; he believes them to be unimportant people to whom he does not have to recommend himself, and he does not see his unpleasing manners as a problem.

That Mr Darcy does have to mind his manners is made clear to him when he proposes to Elizabeth. He expects her answer to be favorable and he is surprised when Elizabeth rejects him; he says so himself when he finds out that her feelings have changed since his first proposal: "I came to you without a doubt of my reception" (p. 284). Mr Darcy could not suppose that a woman so inferior to him would decline his offer of marriage. He is also

unknowing of the fact that he is proud in a negative way, and that Elizabeth disapproves of it. So at first, when Mr Darcy's offer is declined, he is very angry because he cannot understand why Elizabeth declined his offer. However, Mr Darcy eventually starts to take Elizabeth's critique of him seriously, and he proves that he is trying to change when he behaves so agreeably toward Elizabeth and her relatives.

Even though Elizabeth's and Mr Darcy's flaws are different, their removal is a consequence of the same event. When Mr Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, he is honest with her and tells her everything about his feelings, and Elizabeth is honest about her feelings in return. The fact that they are so honest about everything, such as Mr Darcy's opinion of her rank and Elizabeth's reasons for turning him down, is the thing which triggers the change in them; they teach each other that they have both thought and acted wrongly. Another similarity in their personal changes is that they are both angry at first after the proposal, and they refuse to realize that they have been wrong. However, when they have calmed down they are sensible enough to acknowledge that the other one was right. Mr Darcy was humbled by the rejection, he says so himself in p. 284: "By you I was properly humbled". As I have mentioned before, by reading Mr Darcy's letter Elizabeth realizes that she has been prejudiced.

After Mr Darcy and Elizabeth have gone through their changes, they are close to being as humble and free of prejudice as Mr Bingley and Jane Bennet. Mr Bingley is described as gentlemanlike, lively and unreserved (p.10 and 11), and he does not seem to demand much to be satisfied. For example, when he is at the first ball, he says the following to Mr Darcy: "Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several of them you see uncommonly pretty" (p. 11). This sentence really highlights the difference between Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley. A further proof of his tolerance toward people can be found at the end of the novel where it is stated that Mr Bingley and Jane often let the troublesome couple Lydia and Mr Wickham stay with them, and often "so long,

that even Bingley's good humour was overcome, and he proceeded so far as to *talk* of giving them a hint to be gone" (p. 299).

Mr Bingley's future wife Jane Bennet has a very similar personality; for example, when Elizabeth tells her what Mr Wickham has told her about how Mr Darcy has treated him, she tries to come up with a scenario in which both of them are innocent. Another thing which shows that Jane has an unprejudiced mind is the fact that she finds Mr Bingley's sisters amiable; even when they have followed Mr Bingley to town and Caroline Bingley has made it clear that she does not want Jane to marry Mr Bingley, Jane says the following: "Caroline is incapable of wilfully deceiving anyone, and all that I can hope in this case is that she is deceived herself" (p. 96). Jane wants to see good in everyone, and she actually manages to find good qualities in all people. For example, when Lydia and Mr Wickham are getting married, Jane sees the marriage as a proof of Mr Wickham's capacity to change for the better.

Mr Bingley and Jane are static characters, but they do not have to change since they are humble and tolerant from the start. However, Jane becomes less disposed to see everyone as nice people in the end of the novel; when Miss Bingley writes to Jane to tell her how happy she is that she will be her sister, the narrator states that Jane was not deceived by it. Despite this small change in Jane, herself and Mr Bingley function as a steady contrast to Elizabeth and Mr Darcy throughout the novel. Both Jane and Mr Bingley start out as kind, humble and unprejudiced people, while Elizabeth and Mr Darcy start out as proud and prejudiced. So Jane and Mr Bingley become a sort of standard or role models that the reader can measure more brittle characters up against. Jane and Mr Bingley are probably the biggest contrasts to the characters who are flawed throughout the novel, such as the characters which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Two: Pride and Prejudice in the Peripheral Characters

This chapter will be devoted to four peripheral characters and the community as a whole. Since the title of the novel refers to almost every character in it, I have chosen to examine the pride and the prejudices in Mr Collins, Lady Catherine, Lydia Bennet, Mr Bennet and the community of Hertfordshire. I will examine in what way the pride and prejudices in those characters are similar to the pride and prejudices of Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, and also in what way they are different; the four characters I will focus on are for example static.

The character in *Pride and Prejudice* which has been laughed at by readers the most must certainly be Mr Collins, the vicar. His manners are so uptight and stiff, and in addition to that his politeness is extremely exaggerated; Jane Austen really highlights his ridiculous character. However, with his uptight manners come both pride and prejudice. It is very clear that Mr Collins is proud; the narrator states it on p. 57: “his veneration for her [Lady Catherine] as his patroness, mingling with a very good opinion of himself, of his authority as a clergyman, and his right as a rector, made him altogether a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance, and humility”. This usage of the word “pride” obviously refers to the definition of it as a personality trait which people have if they think themselves to be better than other people. He also possesses a more positive kind of pride, similar to Elizabeth’s pride (or vanity); one example of it is when he sneaks out of Longbourne House to propose to Charlotte Lucas. He does not want the Bennets to know that he is going to ask for Charlotte’s hand before she has said yes because he does not want his humiliation to be public if she turns him down. That is a more positive kind of pride since it does not affect himself or other people negatively; it is natural to want to avoid being embarrassed.

As mentioned before, Mr Collins is also prejudiced. He thinks that the Bennets are inferior to him, and that is very clear when Elizabeth urges him not to introduce himself to Mr Darcy at Mr Bingley’s ball. Mr Collins answers her in a very patronizing way and implies that she

has a limited understanding of things and that she does not know what is appropriate behaviour (p. 79). It is obvious by this speech that he is prejudiced toward Elizabeth, he judges her unjustly and has preconceived notions about her in the very beginning of their acquaintance. Furthermore, Mr Collins is also prejudiced against the upper class, or perhaps “prejudiced” is not exactly the correct word; he seems to believe that all people of that class are good, elegant and well-behaved. He is making a prejudgement, like Elizabeth does when she first meets Mr Wickham. At Mr Bingley’s ball, when Mr Collins has introduced himself to Mr Darcy, he returns to Elizabeth and says: “He answered me with the utmost civility [. . .] Upon the whole, I am much pleased with him” (p. 79). However, Elizabeth witnessed the meeting from where she was standing, and Mr Darcy did not look very civil. It is therefore clear that Mr Collins is prejudiced toward Mr Darcy. Another example of his prejudice is his admiration for Lady Catherine; even though she acts superior to almost everyone he still thinks that she is an extraordinary and flawless person. In short, one can say that Mr Collins is a snob, because he thinks highly of himself and has an even higher regard for people of the upper class.

Lady Catherine, in her turn, also possesses pride and prejudice. She is extremely proud of all of her abilities; when Elizabeth dines at Rosings, Lady Catherine boasts about her musical taste and says that she would have been very good at playing the piano if she had ever learnt to do it. Furthermore, she possesses the bad kind of pride; she is condescending to the Collinses, the Lucases and Elizabeth, and Mr Collins states that “she likes to have the distinction of rank preserved” (p. 126). She also believes Elizabeth’s family to be inferior, just as is Mr Darcy’s attitude in the first half of the novel. When she tries to dissuade Elizabeth from marrying Mr Darcy, she says: “You *are* a gentleman’s daughter. But who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition” (p. 274). As she says this toward the end of the novel, it is clear that she does not change, unlike Mr Darcy. Lady Catherine does not hesitate to give her opinions about everything, and this

arrogance comes from her pride, the matter is not that she is carefree of what others think of her, the matter is that she simply assumes that she will be liked.

Lady Catherine is not just proud; she is prejudiced too. She assumes that she knows best about everything and she assumes that everyone wants her to share her knowledge with them, which is a sort of prejudice, because it is as if she assumes that other people do not already know anything about the things that she lectures about. It is also important to point out that by being proud she becomes prejudiced, because she believes that everyone of inferior rank is less elegant and less educated. Lady Catherine believes herself to be a highly evolved being because of her abilities and of course, her rank in society. However, other people also see her as a highly evolved being because she is upper-class. For example, when Lady Catherine visits the Bennets to dissuade Elizabeth from marrying Mr Darcy, she is quite rude to Mrs Bennet and Elizabeth, but Mrs Bennet still chooses to see Lady Catherine as a very civil woman (p. 276), probably because of her high social rank.

A character who is very unlike Lady Catherine is Lydia Bennet; she is different because of her rank in society, and also because of how she is treated. However, they still have similarities. They are both certain that people always want to hear what they have to say about everything, and they are both static characters. They are both very outspoken, but their remarks are received differently, because people have more respect for Lady Catherine. Furthermore, Lydia possesses the less negative variety of pride; she is proud of her own abilities and is therefore fearless when it comes to social relationships. One example is when she reminds Mr Bingley that he has promised to give a ball at Netherfield. The narrator says that she “abruptly reminded him of his promise” (p. 38). She does it abruptly since she does not care about behaving appropriately or politely; she only cares about what she wants. In addition to that, she does not consider what others think. When Mr Bennet states that she is very silly, she simply continues to talk about Captain Carter (p. 25), and when Elizabeth says that she does not want to hear about her and Mr Wickham’s wedding, she tells her all about it

anyway (p. 244). This shows that Lydia seems to think that people who criticize or contradict her must be wrong, which is a kind of prejudice. She has decided that people who do not want what she wants are wrong, and she cannot even consider that *she* might be wrong.

Similarly to Lydia Bennet, Mr Bennet takes much pride in his opinions. He considers himself to be witty and intelligent, and he loves to laugh at other people. He has those qualities in common with his daughter Elizabeth, but unlike Elizabeth, Mr Bennet is quite arrogant. When Mr Bennet laughs at others, he is supposing himself to be less ridiculous, or silly, or unintelligent, which makes him look superior, and he possesses therefore the negative kind of pride. Since he ridicules his wife, his three youngest daughters and Mr Collins, it is clear that he feels himself to be better than they are. He is obviously bitter over his marriage to such a silly woman as Mrs Bennet, so he laughs at her and shows very clearly that he lacks respect for her and that he thinks that she is stupid. He does not act like that toward Mrs Bennet only; he is very disrespectful in general, a flaw which is related to his pride. He is also prejudiced since he assumes that most of the other people in the world are less intelligent than him. Dr. Adli Odeh says in "Father Figures in the Novels of Jane Austen" that Mr Bennet knows that he is not a good parent, but that he does not care enough to try to change (p. 36-37). However, Dr Ale Odeh later states that Mr Bennet does change a little after Lydia has married Mr Wickham; Mr Bennet is stricter with Kitty and he does not let her visit Lydia and Mr Wickham (p. 38). This means that Mr Bennet can learn from his mistakes, but it does not change his character much; he still ridicules others, and he is still proud and prejudiced. Mr Bennet is, like Lady Catherine, an excellent example of how pride and prejudice can blend together into a mixture where the two flaws are highly related and hard to tell apart from each other.

The community in which these four characters live play a great role in the novel; William Deresiewicz claims that "the community turns out to be the novel's true point of departure" (p. 503) and that the community is one of the novel's principal figures in his article "Community

and Cognition in *Pride and Prejudice*". He also claims that the first scenes tell "the story of a community: of communal expectations, communal conventions, communal activities" (p 503). Later on in this article, he states that the community affects the thoughts of the individuals in it, and that the people in the community harden their opinions together when they speak (p. 507). I agree with William Deresiewicz, the community certainly seems to affect the thoughts of the individuals, and the community is prejudiced. As William Deresiewicz puts it: "Elizabeth, like her community, won't let the facts stand in the way of what she wants to believe" (p. 509). So the community judges quickly without having enough information. Even though the community consists of individuals, the community's judgements and opinions seem to be harsher than that of a typical individual in it. The community dominates the individuals and their thoughts, by convincing them that what they think is right since "everyone else", which is in fact the community, seems to think it.

Lastly, I would like to point out that I believe the characters and the community in *Pride and Prejudice* to be more prejudiced than proud, even though the word "pride" is mentioned far more often than the word "prejudice". Tanja Dromnes, Sandra Lee Kleppe, Kenneth Mikalsen and Sigrid Solhaug state in "The Distribution and Frequency of the Terms 'Pride' and 'Prejudice' in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" that the word "pride", and the related words "proud" and "proudly", are mentioned 70 times, and the word "prejudice" is mentioned only eight times. I see this as a confirmation of my belief that the existence of prejudice in the novel is a bit more subtle than the existence of pride. Many characters are said to be proud, and very few are said to be prejudiced, which I think means that it is up to the reader to see the prejudice that exists in the characters of the novel. It might also be because it is harder to discover prejudices in a person than to discover pride. Since pride most certainly affects the manner of the proud person, and prejudices do not necessarily affect manners, prejudices are easier to hide.

## Conclusion

My aim in this essay was to show how common the flaws pride and prejudice are in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. I argued that almost every character in it is either proud or prejudiced, or both. In addition to being prejudiced, Elizabeth is a bit vain and Mr Darcy is not only proud; he is not really aware of the fact that one has to behave politely to everyone. Even though the two protagonists have different flaws, they are still similar; when they are given proof that they are wrong they are sensible enough to admit that they have been wrong and try to change, and they learn from each other. They do not, however, learn from Jane Bennet and Mr Bingley who are role models in their vicinity; those two characters only function as a contrast to help the reader see in what way other characters are flawed.

The other characters are indeed flawed. Mr Collins is proud of his position as vicar, and he is also condescending to the Bennets, and hence prejudiced since he assumes that they are less intelligent and elegant. His patroness Lady Catherine suffers from the same kind of pride which is related to her rank in society, and this pride is combined with more prejudice. Mr Bennet is also proud, condescending and prejudiced, and his daughter Lydia is proud and ignorant of opinions of others. The community in which they live is prejudiced, narrow-minded and harsher in its judgements than the individuals that it is composed of.

There is also a relation between the words "pride" and "prejudice", which is very clear in the peripheral characters, and especially in those who believe themselves to be above the middle class. Those who suffer from pride assume that they are better than others, which means that they also assume that others are less intelligent, elegant or well-behaved, which means that they are prejudiced toward others.

One can interpret the characters differently, and I am convinced that this extraordinary complexity in many of the characters will never stop to amaze readers, and critics will surely continue to find new ways to look at the vivid characters that Jane Austen once created.

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