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Book Analysis: *Pride and Prejudice*

How does Jane Austen utilize free indirect discourse to develop the theme that pride and prejudice prevent people from truly understanding one another?

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, in Steventon, Hampshire, England. She was the seventh child of eight. Austen's family supported her education and assisted her with anonymously publishing her work. Her novels vividly portray English middle-class life during the early 19th century and showcase her brilliance in writing social commentary. Austen incorporated irony, parody, sarcasm, free indirect speech, and a great deal of dialogue into her work. Her novels are similar in that they often follow the vibrant love lives of witty, pragmatic heroines. Austen's stories about these headstrong female protagonists may have been influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792, shortly before Austen began the initial version of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1796. Wollstonecraft's argument claimed liberty and equality for women and critiqued the idea that women were objects incapable of thinking for themselves. Austen didn't receive much money or recognition in her time, but today, over two centuries after her death, her works are cherished, iconic, and timeless classics.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, a lucrative marriage is a financial necessity for most young women. When the single, wealthy Mr. Bingley moves into the residence, Mrs. Bennet desires for one of her five daughters to marry him. Upon their first meeting, Mr. Bingley and the eldest Bennet daughter, Jane, fall in love. Meanwhile, the opposite is true for another rich bachelor named Mr. Darcy and the second-eldest Bennet daughter, Elizabeth. Their pride and prejudices against each other complicate their relationship. Despite the difference in their social status, Mr. Darcy falls for Elizabeth and proposes to her. However, Elizabeth rejects him due to misunderstandings about his part in trying to break up Jane and Mr. Bingley. She is also fed lies about Mr. Darcy's mistreatment of his old friend Wickham. While on a trip to England, Elizabeth visits Pemberley, Mr. Darcy's home, and starts to see him in a new light. Mr. Darcy saves the Bennet family's reputation by persuading Wickham to marry the youngest Bennet sister, Lydia,

after he elopes with her. By the end, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth have both reassessed their pride and prejudices. When Mr. Darcy proposes for the second time, Elizabeth gladly accepts his love.

The overarching theme of the novel is that pride and prejudice prevent people from truly understanding one another. The ball at the beginning of the novel is where we are first introduced to Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth overhears a conversation between the two men about her, in which Mr. Darcy states, “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*.” (13) Mr. Darcy’s pride is understandable to an extent. After all, he is handsome, rich, and of high social status. However, it’s clear that Mr. Darcy views himself as above everyone else. He refuses to dance with any of the women at the ball besides Mr. Bingley’s sister because he doesn’t find them attractive or sophisticated enough for him. This greatly contrasts with Mr. Bingley, who has a high social status but happily interacts with everyone in the room. Upon returning from the ball, Mrs. Bennet tells her husband about Mr. Darcy’s rudeness, commenting about how “Lizzy does not lose much by not suiting *his* fancy; for he is the most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing.” (15) Elizabeth also shares this view, and her negative opinion of Mr. Darcy remains constant until much later in the novel. While it’s true that Mr. Darcy was unfriendly and quite rude, he didn’t harm anyone. A single interaction is never enough to reveal the entirety of one’s true character. Nevertheless, when Wickham later tells Elizabeth about how Mr. Darcy cheated money from him, she accepts it as the truth because she already thinks lowly of Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy discover their love for each other only after they reevaluate their pride and prejudices. Austen’s central message is that those who learn to be more open-minded are the ones who find joy.

A secondary theme is that love triumphs all. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet’s love story is one of the most beloved in English literature. Before they reach their happy ending, the two

had to first overcome their personal biases and misjudgments. In chapter 34, when Elizabeth rejects Mr. Darcy's first proposal, she questions him, asking, "why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will..." (186) While confessing his love for Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy brings up how he didn't want to fall for her due to the inferiority of her social standing. Only after her blatant rejection does Mr. Darcy start reassessing his pride and realizing that he has to work on himself. Another barrier to their romance is Mr. Darcy's snobbish aunt, Lady Catherine. In chapter 56, Lady Catherine visits the Bennets' home to ensure that Elizabeth does not marry her nephew. Her reasoning for why Elizabeth shouldn't accept Mr. Darcy's hand in marriage was that "honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it... do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you willfully act against the inclinations of all." (336) Lady Catherine asserts that Mr. Darcy has been engaged to her daughter since infancy. She threatens Elizabeth that accepting Mr. Darcy's proposal would mean accepting a life of disapproval and rejection. Of course, Elizabeth disregards Lady Catherine and happily marries her love. Austen demonstrates that true love can overpower any challenge, whether that's personality complications, societal expectations, or an elitist aunt.

Furthermore, Austen utilizes a narrative technique called free indirect discourse, a blend of first-person and third-person points of view. Free indirect discourse occurs when the narrator shifts from describing the worldview from an outside perspective to inhabiting the character's perspective. Early on in the text, we are told that Mr. Darcy "was looked at with great admiration...till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud..." (12) Austen weaves effortlessly in and out of her character's minds, in the process introducing the readers to moments when the outside worldview and a given character's worldview are at odds with one another. In this case, the third-person narrator is

infected by the thoughts of the people at the party, particularly Mrs. Bennet and Elizabeth. Free indirect discourse demonstrates to the reader that the characters are blinded by their prejudices and assumptions. Thus, this technique reinforces the theme of how pride and prejudice prevent the formation of genuine relationships. Another instance of this technique is in chapter 16, when Elizabeth observes Wickham at a supper party, with the narrator stating that “his manners recommended him to everybody. Whatever he said, was said well; and whatever he did, done gracefully.” (82) It’s evident that the narrator took on Elizabeth’s thoughts. Similar to her false judgment of Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth forms an incorrect assessment of Wickham’s nature. She thinks of him in a positive light and accepts his lies about Mr. Darcy. It is only when Wickham elopes with Lydia and Mr. Darcy saves the Bennet family that Elizabeth is finally able to reach a better understanding of the two men. The novel dances between third-person narration and first-person experience, enabling the reader to form inferences about the characters’ flaws in judgment.

Naming the novel *Pride and Prejudice* reflects Austen’s primary theme about reassessing those very traits. In a society based on social classes, it’s natural that everyone has biases and different perceptions of how life should be. For instance, when Elizabeth walks to Mr. Bingley’s house to visit her sister and is caught in the rain, she is judged for having “nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker” and for “really look[ing] almost wild.” (35-36) This view is shared by the antagonistic, arrogant Miss Bingley, who tries to direct Mr. Darcy’s attention away from Elizabeth by criticizing her. She disapproves of both her brother’s admiration towards Jane and of Mr. Darcy’s admiration towards Elizabeth because of the Bennets’ lack of connections. She appears even more prideful than Mr. Darcy and is prejudiced against those of lower statuses. *Pride and Prejudice* began in the 1790s, initially titled *First Impressions*. The idea that first impressions are often flawed also reinforces the central message

about pride and prejudice. When Elizabeth rejects his first proposal and explains how much she despises him, Mr. Darcy responds, “I thank you for explaining it so fully. My faults, according to this calculation, are heavy indeed!” (188) Elizabeth’s first impression of Mr. Darcy lead to her beliefs that Mr. Darcy reduced Wickham into poverty and tore apart Jane and Mr. Bingley’s relationship out of ill will. Neither of her accusations reflects the complete truth, which is withheld from the readers and Elizabeth until Mr. Darcy’s letter to her. *Pride and Prejudice* and *First Impressions* are both fitting titles for Austen’s masterpiece as they convey how personal biases may cloud better judgment, preventing the development of human connections.

Ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* is a Regency-era social satire about the search for happiness, love, and understanding in a world of inflexible expectations and social rules. The novel reassures readers that a happy ending will come for those who look beyond their initial judgments and practice compassion. As shown by the many works of art and literature adapted from the novel, its themes have remained relevant for centuries. *Pride and Prejudice* is a classic among classics because it reflects the pleasures and disappointments of love, as well as the social obstacles that couples may confront, in an unconventional manner. Reading Austen’s novels feels like having a conversation with a whimsical, gossipy friend. Moreover, Austen demonstrated a sharp control of free indirect discourse, which was not an established writing technique during her time. In a way, she revolutionized the modern novel because free indirect discourse now pops up so often that it’s almost imperceptible to most readers. This novel touched my heart and reminded me of the significance of an open mind. I look forward to reading all of Austen’s other works. Although these words were empty to Miss Bingley, after reading *Pride and Prejudice*, I wholeheartedly agree that “there is no enjoyment like reading... When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library.” (54)

Works Cited

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3. “Mary Wollstonecraft.” *Mary Wollstonecraft | Biography, Books and Facts*,
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Jane Austen was a major English novelist and an iconic figure of the world literature. She is best known for portraying the romantic lives of the middle class English people. Her excellence in writing social commentary and realistic situations earned her the privilege of being the most widely read authors of English literature. Unfortunately, Austen's most extraordinary works *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* did not gain much praise during her lifetime, however, they are known as historical milestones and classics in literature today.

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775 in Steventon Hampshire, England. She was the 7th child of 8. Jane was closest to her sister Cassandra who also remained her best friend for life. Their parents encouraged learning, writing and acting in their children which provided Jane with the inspirations and context for her future endeavors. Jane was a passionate writer and her earliest known writings have been found to be dated around 1787. She began her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility* in 1795 and completed her masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* in 1797. *Northanger Abbey*, her next novel was finished in 1799.

After her father's death in 1805, Jane moved to Bath with her family. Her brother, Henry helped her find publishers and her need for money resulted in Jane publishing *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. The novels were published anonymously and they received excellent reviews from both the *Critical Review* and the *Quarterly Review*. Austen was an established novelist by the time she published *Mansfield Park* in 1814. Her new and fresh style of writing

was welcomed by readers and her upcoming novels were awaited. The readers loved her intelligent character sketching and homely settings. Emma, another beautifully written story appeared as a novel in 1815.

Although her health started to deteriorate in early 1816, Austen remained a busy writer even towards the end of her life. She worked on producing Persuasion until 1816 and began writing Sanditon in 1817. However, she was unable to complete it due to health issues which were later found to be Addison's disease. When her condition worsened, Austen wrote her will in April 1817. She was taken to Winchester for treatment where she died in the early hours of July 18 in her sister's arms at the age of 41. Jane Austen's grave is in Winchester Cathedral. Austen's identity as an author was revealed only after her death when her sister Cassandra and brother Henry arranged the publication of Persuasion and Northanger Abbey in which Henry included a note introducing his sister, Jane Austen as the author.

Like her sister, Jane never married. However, her novels serve as a window to her personal life.

The details and delicacy of relationships written in her novels reveal actual feelings and romantic aspirations of the writer who like her characters must have been through the pleasures and disappointments of love.

Jane Austen's timeless stories, their beautiful construction and modernity were the turning point of the transition of English literature from 18th century neo-classicism to 19th century romanticism.

Source: "Mary Wollstonecraft." *Mary Wollstonecraft | Biography, Books and Facts*,
<https://www.famousauthors.org/mary-wollstonecraft>

She was of the opinion that men and women are both born equal, with equal intelligence and abilities. However, women, even the educated ones, are expected to be subservient to men and that she felt was such a waste of an educated mind. She abhorred the 'mindless' tittering socialites, who never harbored a serious notion in their heads and behaved as though they were helpless without their men. The simpering socialites sickened her and turned her stomach, especially after she had served as a ladies maid to Sarah Dawson, and later as governess to a titled family.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an unconventional person; her home life was rather dreary and dour and compelled her to seek her own fortune. Sadly, the job she landed was as a ladies maid and was no better than her life at home. She was forced to return home to nurse her ailing mother until her mother passed away.

The most daring feat that Mary probably ever performed is getting her sister out of a miserable marriage. She encouraged her sister to leave her husband and his intimidating ways; she hid her until a divorce could be arranged, and then along with her sister and her girlhood friend, Fanny Blood, moved away to start a new life. Fanny Blood's sister joined them too and the women together set up a school. The school's purpose was to secure financial independence for them and it was located in the liberal-minded Newington Green, home to the Dissenters; a progressive-minded group of people who believed in equality for all.

Wollstonecraft was a product of the French Revolution, especially in her ideas. She embraced the ideas of liberty and equality and was rather mortified when Edmund Burke reviled the revolution. In response to his work, she penned 'A Vindication on The Rights of Men'. This was followed by her most popular and famed work 'A Vindication on the Rights of Women'. The book clearly spelled out her observations and beliefs that women are kept subservient only so that men may be proud of their own maleness. It is men who describe the desirable qualities of good women and women take up the refrain and behave true to type. The fluttering and fluttering social beings, leading an unproductive existence of beauty routines and fainting spells nauseated her and she made no bones about it.

Wollstonecraft abhorred marriage and refused to marry the men she had affairs with; not that they wanted to marry her either. Finally, when expecting her second daughter she convinced William Godwin to marry her. She gave birth to a daughter – Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin – who later became the prolific writer of *Frankenstein* – Mary Shelly.

Mary Wollstonecraft's earlier works dealt with women and independence of thought. But her later work described the more intimate notion of women being entitled to enjoying sexual relations. This made her famously infamous, and for almost a century she was reviled. It was only with the birth of the feminist movements that she was vindicated.