

Pride and Prejudice

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Love

Pride and Prejudice contains one of the most cherished love stories in English literature: the courtship between Darcy and Elizabeth. As in any good love story, the lovers must elude and overcome numerous stumbling blocks, beginning with the tensions caused by the lovers' own personal qualities. Elizabeth's pride makes her misjudge Darcy on the basis of a poor first impression, while Darcy's prejudice against Elizabeth's poor social standing blinds him, for a time, to her many virtues. (Of course, one could also say that Elizabeth is guilty of prejudice and Darcy of pride—the title cuts both ways.) Austen, meanwhile, poses countless smaller obstacles to the realization of the love between Elizabeth and Darcy, including Lady Catherine's attempt to control her nephew, Miss Bingley's snobbery, Mrs. Bennet's idiocy, and Wickham's deceit. In each case, anxieties about social connections, or the desire for better social connections, interfere with the workings of love. Darcy and Elizabeth's realization of a mutual and tender love seems to imply that Austen views love as something independent of these social forces, as something that can be captured if only an individual is able to escape the warping effects of hierarchical society. Austen does sound some more realist (or, one could say, cynical) notes about love, using the character of Charlotte Lucas, who marries the buffoon Mr. Collins for his money, to demonstrate that the heart does not always dictate marriage. Yet with her central characters, Austen suggests that true love is a force separate from society and one that can conquer even the most difficult of circumstances.

Reputation

Pride and Prejudice depicts a society in which a woman's reputation is of the utmost importance. A woman is expected to behave in certain ways. Stepping outside the social norms makes her vulnerable to ostracism. This theme appears in the novel, when Elizabeth walks to Netherfield and arrives with muddy skirts, to the shock of the reputation-conscious Miss Bingley and her friends. At other points, the ill-mannered, ridiculous behavior of Mrs. Bennet gives her a bad reputation with the more refined (and snobbish) Darcys and Bingleys. Austen pokes gentle fun at the snobs in these examples, but later in the novel, when Lydia elopes with Wickham and lives with him out of wedlock, the author treats reputation as a very serious matter. By becoming Wickham's lover without benefit of marriage, Lydia clearly places herself outside the social pale, and her disgrace threatens the entire Bennet family. The fact that Lydia's judgment, however terrible, would likely have condemned the other Bennet sisters to marriageless lives seems grossly unfair. Why should Elizabeth's reputation suffer along with Lydia's? Darcy's intervention on the Bennets' behalf thus becomes all the more generous, but some readers might resent that such an intervention was necessary at all. If Darcy's money had failed to convince Wickham to marry Lydia, would Darcy have still married Elizabeth? Does his transcendence of prejudice extend that far? The happy ending of *Pride and Prejudice* is certainly emotionally satisfying, but in many ways it leaves the theme of reputation, and the importance placed on reputation, unexplored. One can ask of *Pride and Prejudice*, to what extent does it critique social structures, and to what extent does it simply accept their inevitability?

Class

The theme of class is related to reputation, in that both reflect the strictly regimented nature of life for the middle and upper classes in Regency England. The lines of class are strictly drawn. While the Bennets, who are middle class, may socialize with the upper-class Bingleys and Darcys, they are clearly their social inferiors and are treated as such. Austen satirizes this kind of class-consciousness, particularly in the character of Mr. Collins, who spends most of his time toadying to his upper-class patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Though Mr. Collins offers an extreme example, he is not the only one to hold such views. His conception of the

importance of class is shared, among others, by Mr. Darcy, who believes in the dignity of his lineage; Miss Bingley, who dislikes anyone not as socially accepted as she is; and Wickham, who will do anything he can to get enough money to raise himself into a higher station. Mr. Collins's views are merely the most extreme and obvious. The satire directed at Mr. Collins is therefore also more subtly directed at the entire social hierarchy and the conception of all those within it at its correctness, in complete disregard of other, more worthy virtues. Through the Darcy-Elizabeth and Bingley-Jane marriages, Austen shows the power of love and happiness to overcome class boundaries and prejudices, thereby implying that such prejudices are hollow, unfeeling, and unproductive. Of course, this whole discussion of class must be made with the understanding that Austen herself is often criticized as being a classist: she doesn't really represent anyone from the lower classes; those servants she does portray are generally happy with their lot. Austen does criticize class structure but only a limited slice of that structure.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Courtship

In a sense, *Pride and Prejudice* is the story of two courtships—those between Darcy and Elizabeth and between Bingley and Jane. Within this broad structure appear other, smaller courtships: Mr. Collins's aborted wooing of Elizabeth, followed by his successful wooing of Charlotte Lucas; Miss Bingley's unsuccessful attempt to attract Darcy; Wickham's pursuit first of Elizabeth, then of the never-seen Miss King, and finally of Lydia. Courtship therefore takes on a profound, if often unspoken, importance in the novel. Marriage is the ultimate goal, courtship constitutes the real working-out of love. Courtship becomes a sort of forge of a person's personality, and each courtship becomes a microcosm for different sorts of love (or different ways to abuse love as a means to social advancement).

Journeys

Nearly every scene in *Pride and Prejudice* takes place indoors, and the action centers around the Bennet home in the small village of Longbourn. Nevertheless, journeys—even short ones—function repeatedly as catalysts for change in the novel. Elizabeth’s first journey, by which she intends simply to visit Charlotte and Mr. Collins, brings her into contact with Mr. Darcy, and leads to his first proposal. Her second journey takes her to Derby and Pemberley, where she fans the growing flame of her affection for Darcy. The third journey, meanwhile, sends various people in pursuit of Wickham and Lydia, and the journey ends with Darcy tracking them down and saving the Bennet family honor, in the process demonstrating his continued devotion to Elizabeth.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Pemberley

Pride and Prejudice is remarkably free of explicit symbolism, which perhaps has something to do with the novel’s reliance on dialogue over description. Nevertheless, Pemberley, Darcy’s estate, sits at the center of the novel, literally and figuratively, as a geographic symbol of the man who owns it. Elizabeth visits it at a time when her feelings toward Darcy are beginning to warm; she is enchanted by its beauty and charm, and by the picturesque countryside, just as she will be charmed, increasingly, by the gifts of its owner. Austen makes the connection explicit when she describes the stream that flows beside the mansion. “In front,” she writes, “a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance.” Darcy possesses a “natural importance” that is “swelled” by his arrogance, but which coexists with a genuine honesty and lack of “artificial appearance.” Like the stream, he is neither “formal, nor falsely adorned.” Pemberley even offers a symbol-within-a-symbol for their budding romance: when Elizabeth encounters Darcy on the estate, she is crossing a small bridge, suggesting the broad gulf of

misunderstanding and class prejudice that lies between them—and the bridge that their love will build across it.

Marriage

Pride and Prejudice is a love story, but its author is also concerned with pointing out the inequality that governs the relationships between men and women and how it affects women's choices and options regarding marriage. Austen portrays a world in which choices for individuals are very limited, based almost exclusively on a family's social rank and connections. To be born a woman into such a world means having even less choice about whom to marry or how to determine the shape of one's life. The way that society controls and weakens women helps to explain in part Mrs. Bennet's hysteria about marrying off her daughters, and why such marriages must always involve practical, financial considerations. As members of the upper class, the Bennet sisters are not expected to work or make a career for themselves. Yet as women they are not allowed to inherit anything. As a result, marriage is basically their only option for attaining wealth and social standing. Yet Austen is also critical of women who marry solely for security, like Charlotte. The ideal for her is represented by Elizabeth, who refuses to trade her independence for financial comfort and in the end marries for love.