Mrs. Bennett is delighted to learn that the nearby estate of Netherfield has been purchased by one Charles Bingley of London. Further, she is fairly thrilled to hear that the newcomer is both rich and single. “What a fine thing for our girls!” she exudes to her husband, urging him to pay a call on Bingley. Mr. Bennett does so, but without informing his wife, whose vexation gives him great pleasure.

The parish rector, William Collins, seeks a wife, not because his heart runs to marriage but because his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, insists that as a clergyman he should be married. Because the Bennets have no sons, Collins, as their closest male relative, is heir to their estate. He therefore seeks marriage to one of their daughters as a conciliatory and facile means to the end of pleasing Lady Catherine. Conveniently, he also finds the Bennet sisters captivating.

Ironically, at the same time Collins visits the Bennets, Bingley arrives to reciprocate Mr. Bennet’s call. The charming new neighbor is accompanied by his handsome and wealthy friend, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. The two men converse with Elizabeth and Jane as well as their mother. Mrs. Bennet, however, regards

continued on next page
Darcy's dogmatic view of city life as superior to country life as shockingly rude. Darcy also manages to offend Elizabeth with his condescending attitude toward women and their accomplishments. On the other hand, Bingley's good looks and gracious manners impress everyone positively.

At the first opportune moment, Collinsquires Mrs. Bennet about her "fair" daughter, Jane, in becoming his wife. Now hopeful that a match will come about between Jane and Bingley, Mrs. Bennet suggests to Collins, "There is Elizabeth." The nectar wasters no time in making his object of his affection and proposing marriage to Elizabeth, who turns him down in no uncertain terms, severely wounding his pride. While the failed betrothal dismays Lizzy's mother, her father takes joy in it.

A few months later another new bachelor whom the Bennet sisters soon come to regard as eligible arrives in the neighborhood. George Wickham, an officer stationed with the militia in Meryton, fascinates the younger girls, Kitty and Lydia, in particular. Wickham also endears himself to Lizzy, to whom he candidly reveals details of his past. His ties to Darcy are especially intriguing. As the godson of Darcy's late father, Wickham alleges that the younger Mr. Darcy has unjustly deprived him of his inheritance. The self-effacing officer, however, has no desire to expose Darcy publicly.

Charles Bingley gives a ball at Netherfield for the entire neighborhood. Before the guests arrive, he and Darcy converse about the Bennet daughters and Wickham. Still divided in their feelings toward Jane and Elizabeth, the two men agree to leave the countryside and return to London. Rather mysteriously they also agree to remain silent concerning their past acquaintance with Wickham.

Caroline Bingley, Charles' sister, arrives and expresses to Darcy her disapproval of her brother's "excessive regard for Jane Bennet," a woman of "low connections." Nevertheless, Bingley's admiration of Jane is apparent throughout the evening. When Elizabeth Bennet enters Bingley's drawing room, she is dismayed to find that the man whose heart she had hoped to conquer on this special occasion—Wickham—is absent from the proceedings. Her former assumptions about Darcy's arrogant, grasping nature are apparently confirmed. Acting under Darcy's influence, Bingley purposely omitted Wickham from the guest list.

Then Lizzy encounters Charlotte Lucas, her best friend and a pragmatic woman who, by virtue of age and financial status, is well nigh desperate for a husband. Charlotte breaks the news that she soon will be married to—Mr. Collins. To Lizzy, the absurdity of Mr. Collins' making two offers of marriage within three days is nothing in comparison to the shock of his having been accepted. When Darcy asks Lizzy for a dance, she scorches him. Caroline Bingley's subsequent attempt to capture Darcy's interest by expressing an inordinate dislike for Elizabeth and her inferior family connections ironically causes Darcy to admire Lizzy even more.

At the end of the evening Bingley shocks his guests by announcing that he will leave Netherfield permanently. No one is more distraught than Mrs. Bennet, who once regarded all her daughters' prospects as ruined, for she has also just learned that Wickham and his regiment are moving some distance away to Brighton. She and Lydia scheme to have the whole family spend the summer at the shore near the officers. In the end Mr. Bennett consents for Lydia alone to follow the troops to Brighton.

A few months later Jane travels to London to visit her aunt and uncle, the Gardiners; and in March Lizzy pays a call on Charlotte and her new husband, Mr. Collins, in Kent. On the second day of her visit, Darcy arrives at the nearby estate of his aunt and Collins' patroness, Lady Catherine. Lizzy learns from Darcy's cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, that Darcy has recently shown a great deal of kindness and selflessness by saving a friend from an "imprudent" marriage. She interprets this information to mean that Darcy has prevented Bingley's becoming engaged to Jane. On the same day the Collinses discuss Darcy's prospects for marrying Lady Catherine's "ticky and cross" daughter, Anne.

Almost a week later Mr. and Mrs. Collins along with Elizabeth Bennet are invited to Lady Catherine's, where Elizabeth is reunited with Darcy. On the following morning Darcy calls on her at the Collinses' home. There he confesses that in spite of the defects of her family, she has entirely taken possession of his heart and he can no longer deny his passion for her. Therefore, on the basis of the strength of his love alone, he asks her to be his wife. Lizzy replies that she will accept no man who chooses to like her against his own will, reason and character. Worse yet, he has ruined Jane's prospects for happiness with Bingley. When she also accuses Darcy of having cheated Wickham out of his inheritance, he exerts himself.

Shortly thereafter Lizzy receives a letter from Jane with the disturbing news that Lydia and Wickham have run away together without the benefit of marriage. Worse yet, Wickham has been found to be a man of great debt whose "record is bad in every way." Hearing of Lizzy's distress, Darcy returns to speak with her. As they converse about Wickham, Lizzy acknowledges her own stubbornness and pride while Darcy tries to take the blame for Lydia's ruin upon himself. He had known of the dangers of her association with Wickham and kept quiet when he should have exposed the wretched man. Lizzy then reports that her father has gone to London to seek help.

A few days later word arrives at the Bennet house that Lydia and Wickham are married—through the good graces of their uncle Mr. Gardiner, who has paid off Wickham's debts and given Lydia a dowry, or so Lizzy assumes. Since she has already told Darcy of her sister's disgrace, a matter which she might have concealed had she known things would turn out so well, Lizzy can only conclude that Darcy's influence is nothing of the sort. He had known of the dangers of her association with Wickham and kept quiet when he should have exposed the wretched man. Lizzy then reports that her father has gone to London to seek help.

Although neither Elizabeth nor Darcy judgements each other accurately at first, each becomes willing to change an initial opinion. When Darcy tempers his negative attitude toward the Bennets, Lizzy realizes that there is some truth in his criticism of her family. Gradually both of Austen's central characters move toward a position of balance, truth and sound judgment. From this position neither pride nor prejudice has the power to divert them from the path to a mutually understandable of love. Only love has the power to surmount all obstacles and achieve happiness in love.
Pride & Prejudice

by Jane Austen (1775 - 1817)
Type of Work: comedy of manners
Setting: Longbourn, an English country village in Hertfordshire; early nineteenth century

Mr. Charles Bingley, Jane's rich and congenial suitor
Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, Bingley's arrogant, wealthy friend
Elizabeth, their intelligent, fiery and outspoken middle daughter
Jane, Elizabeth's beautiful older sister who is also charitable, gracious and elegant
Mr. Bennet, a quick-witted, sarcastic man of modest income who is the father of five daughters
Mrs. Bennet, his opinionated wife whose chief business in life is to find suitable husbands for her daughters
Lydia, the Bennets' impetuous youngest daughter who is preoccupied with fashion and flirtation

Type of Work: comedy of manners
Setting: Longbourn, an English country village in Hertfordshire; early nineteenth century
Mr. Bennet, who lives on his inheritance from a line of landed gentry, represents the lowest level of English aristocracy. His marriage to a middle-class lawyer's daughter has done nothing to advance him financially or socially. In fact, some would call the match ruinous. It is Mr. Bennet's behavior, however, not her class, that causes her to look down on her as a woman completely ignorant of decorum and propriety.

Charlotte Lucas's family is in a socio-economic position similar to the Bennets. Her father, Sir William Lucas, is a knight who has little money to go with his title. He is quite satisfied with his life, however, for he can spend all his time socializing with his friends in the country.

The Bennets' nephew, Mr. Collins, is at an even lower social level. As the village clergyman, he has a modicum of education but no money. Under an old law that excludes daughters from inheritance, he stands, however, to inherit the Bennets' estate.

Of the four marriages in *Pride and Prejudice* brings about the social elevation of one member of the couple. Elizabeth Bennet marries into one of England's wealthiest aristocratic families. Her sister Jane also marries a man eminently wealthier than she. Thus Mr. and Mrs. Bennet realize enormous social advancement through their two elder daughters' marriages.

All of the characters in Austen's story, Wickham, the son of a steward, most prizes money, seeing it as a ticket to status and pleasure. He trifles with the affections of Lydia Bennet, a 15-year-old girl of wit and discernment who has almost destroyed her family. She is has been all too sympathetic with the dy and shrewd Wickham, who has accused Darcy of neglecting the duties and abusing the privileges of his class. She finds it especially reprehensible that an aristocrat would cheat a faithful servant out of the rewards he so justly intended him to have.

Wickham's lies create a misunderstanding between Elizabeth and Darcy that is compounded by Darcy's pride of class as represented in the principle of "noblesse oblige," the idea that it is beneath the dignity of a gentleman to complain or explain when he has been falsely accused. Darcy's adherence to this code is indicative of his own misplaced pride. In the climax of the plot he admits that had he simply confronted Elizabeth with the truth about Wickham, he might have prevented Lydia's elopement with the rascal.

Ultimately Elizabeth and Darcy come to a constructive mutual understanding of class relationships. Elizabeth admits that there has been some basis for Darcy's initially negative response to her family. She also accepts class superiority as valid and good when it is employed to help others as Darcy has employed his position and material resources to bring about the marriage of Wickham and Lydia. Also for Darcy the truth is reinforced that the institution of aristocracy should not be regarded as a source of pride, a rigid code of conduct or as any end in itself. Instead it is a means to serving human need and happiness.

Jane Austen is not merely a clever storyteller and skilled character creator. Her six novels provide valuable insight into social and moral issues. In the words of Christopher Gillie, their principal theme is "the education and chastening of the judgment." *Pride and Prejudice* offers a delightful look at this process of internal growth in the novel's two central characters. Ultimately Austen differentiates between characters who are merely products of the society in which they live and those rarer beings like Lizzy and Darcy who develop as individuals. Most importantly, *Pride and Prejudice* suggests that a person's virtues and accomplishments are far more significant than his rank and possessions.
During the Regency period of British fashion (1790–1820) caps were worn inside on informal occasions by housekeepers and servants as well as all classes of older girls and women, including old maids. Jane Austen began wearing them at the rather young age of 23. Often lavishly trimmed, they served more practical purposes than the one Austen mentions in her 1798 letter (quoted above). They provided warmth indoors and could serve the same function outdoors when worn under a bonnet or hat.

Bonnets were more popular than caps, especially for young women. They were most often constructed of lace, straw, or velvet and trimmed to match various outfits. They served the practical purpose of shading the head to protect complexion outdoors.

The portrait of Jane Austen in one of her caps was adapted from a sketch made by her sister Cassandra around 1810. Austen’s nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, commissioned the adaptation, which now hangs in London’s National Portrait Gallery. He also wrote a well-known biography of his famous aunt.