

# Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

May 2011

These study materials are produced for use with the  
Classic Players production of *Pride and Prejudice*.

# smart

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Allen Fredericks as Mr. Bennet and Carmen Scott as Mrs. Bennet in the 2011 Classic Players production



David Bean as Darcy and Christi Massa as Elizabeth Bennet in the 2011 Classic Players production

## The Plot: The Long of It

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 >>>*

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was originally published in 1813 as a novel. Having become one of the most popular novels ever written, it has been adapted for stage and screen many times over. The 2011 Classic Players performances feature a stage adaptation by playwright David Burke, a faculty member in the department of Theatrical Arts at Bob Jones University.



## Pride and Prejudice plot, *from page one*

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, Collins queries Mrs. Bennet about interesting 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 rector wastes no time in emending the 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 scorns 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 sees 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. Bennet 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 “sickly 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 exits hastily.

Shortly thereafter Lizzy receives a letter from Jane with the disturbing news that Lydia and Wickham have run away together without the benefit of matrimony. 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 will never want to see her again because of this family scandal.

The Bennets regain a measure of equilibrium after the bride and groom return to Longbourn. Lydia is strangely evasive, however, about the details of their marriage.

About a week later the Bennets are surprised by a visit from none other than Lady Catherine. She has come to speak to Lizzy about Darcy, who, she says, was betrothed by family tradition to her daughter when the two were still in their cradles. For the sake of honor and decorum, she urges Lizzy to abandon any matrimonial interest she may have in her well-bred nephew.

Just before leaving, Lady Catherine unwittingly reveals a truth about Darcy that Lizzy would never have suspected. It is he, not her Uncle Gardiner, who patched together a wedding between Lydia and Wickham, thus saving the Bennet family from disgrace. Ironically, this tidbit tossed off by Lady Catherine to insult Elizabeth becomes the determining circumstance that leads Elizabeth and Darcy to an understanding of themselves and each other.

After Lady Catherine takes her leave, Jane and Lizzy go into the garden to discuss the scene just as Darcy arrives unexpectedly. He is quite displeased to hear that his aunt has revealed his role in the Wickham marriage, but Lizzy sadly reassures him of her gratitude, saying, “My family can never repay you.”

Uncomfortable assuming the status of a saviour of the Bennet family, Darcy turns the conversation away from his charitable act to tell Lizzy that the affections and wishes concerning the two of them he expressed so long ago remain unchanged.

Lizzy responds, “My sentiments for you, Mr. Darcy, have undergone so material a change since your earlier declarations as to cause me to receive with gratitude and pleasure your present assurances.”

Thus in the case of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, when prejudice has been dissolved and pride humbled, love at last prevails.

The play’s final scene represents the happiest day of Mrs. Bennet’s life. ☞



Becca Kaser as Jane and Ben Toler as Bingley in the 2011 Classic Players production

## First Impressions

Jane Austen began working on a manuscript which she titled *First Impressions* when she was only 21 years old. She revised and reworked the piece many times until its publication as *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813. Because *First Impressions* is no longer extant, we have no way of knowing the degree to which the two works are similar. There is, however, an interesting relationship between their titles.

*First Impressions* suggests a popular literary theme usually referred to as the appearance versus reality theme. Writers who incorporate this theme in their works reveal the difference between what a character appears to be on the surface—perhaps as the result of a mistaken first impression or pretense—and what he in reality is. It is only when the external appearance of a character has been unwrapped that his true inner being will become apparent.

Much of the action of *Pride and Prejudice* consists of the removing of barriers to romantic love created by the first impressions Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy make upon each other. Elizabeth, who takes pride in her ability to discern reality beneath appearances, forms mistaken first impressions of both Darcy and George Wickham. She misjudges Darcy not only because she regards him as proud but also because she is prejudiced against him. This prejudice is aroused both internally by her bias against aristocrats, whom she regards as superficial, and externally by the lies Wickham tells her about Darcy. When the truth is known, she castigates herself for her own folly and lack of discernment.

Darcy is also initially prejudiced against country life in general and against Elizabeth and her family in particular because of their social status. This negative attitude grows over time as he observes Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters’ imprudent behavior. Mr. Bennet also impresses Darcy negatively as one who shows poor judgment and lack of diligence as a father, spending his time reading books rather than becoming involved in the rearing of his daughters.

Although neither Elizabeth nor Darcy judges 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 mature understanding of love. Only then are they able to surmount all obstacles and achieve happiness in love. ☞





Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, Bingley's arrogant, wealthy friend



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



Elizabeth, their intelligent, fiery and outspoken middle daughter

# 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. George Wickham, an army officer



Lydia, the Bennets' impetuous youngest daughter who is preoccupied with fashion and flirtation



Jane, Elizabeth's beautiful older sister who is also charitable, gracious and elegant in manners



# Marriage and Social Hierarchy in *Pride and Prejudice*

English novels from the 18th century are characteristically middle-class in their values and outlook, hence their focus on commonplace characters and the problems they encounter in everyday life. In *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen limits the sphere of domestic drama even further to three or four families in a country village. Within this unique little commonwealth, characters have their own distinct subjects of discourse and ideas about social matters. But their uppermost concern is with that rite essential to the preservation of any society, large or small: marriage.

*Pride and Prejudice* encompasses the courtship and eventual marriage or betrothal of four couples: Darcy and Elizabeth, Bingley and Jane, Wickham and Lydia, and Collins and Charlotte. The social diversity of these pairs reflects the dynamics of English society in Austen's day, a time of social mobility. Through marriage a person could move upward or downward on the social scale. Money was also beginning to replace social status in society's hierarchy of values. Austen's novels suggest, however, that men and women alike should be held in esteem for their virtue, accomplishment and abilities rather than their rank or wealth.

In the small society Austen depicts, Lady Catherine de Bourg is the highest-ranking member, the representative of an old aristocracy that is in rapid decline in the late 19th century. Even though she is demanding and boorish, self-serving flatterers like Collins still fawn on her. But as insulting and self-important as she is, Lady Catherine has no real power over the affairs of others. In fact, her grand confrontation with Elizabeth over Darcy has an effect opposite to her intent.

Darcy, the wealthy master of Pemberley, is just beneath Lady Catherine on the social scale. For this reason alone she views him as the male in her circle best suited to marry her daughter, Anne.

Bingley is also quite wealthy, but his social position is beneath Darcy's because his wealth has been acquired in trade by his father. His money has, however, given him the opportunity to become Darcy's friend. Bingley is a pleasant, content man who enjoys his wealth and has no aspirations to advance socially. His sister Caroline, however, aspires to acquire greater riches and social status by marrying Darcy.

“Jane Austen had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings of characters of ordinary life, which is the most wonderful I ever met with.”

—Sir Walter Scott, 1825

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 Mrs. Bennet's behavior, however, not her class, that causes her superiors 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.

Each 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.

Of all 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 who is far above him socially. But rather than becoming an outcast for his moral misconduct, he advances to the position of brother-in-law to Darcy, the son of his former master. Lydia, who like Wickham rebels against all social and moral norms, is also like him redeemed by a marriage facilitated by Darcy's graciousness. In the end it is fitting that Lydia, who has behaved shamelessly, should have a husband who marries her for money alone.

Darcy's act of great kindness toward his social inferiors is, in fact, the linchpin of Austen's plot. It not only upholds the institution of family and regains social respectability for the Bennet family, but it also propels Darcy and Elizabeth toward each other.

Ironically, Lady Catherine in a disparaging remark reveals Darcy's magnanimity to Elizabeth, who in an instant recognizes its true significance. Immediately she begins to see Darcy's social superiority to the Bennets in a positive light. She also realizes that her family's behavior, not their lack of money, has been an obstacle to her relationship to Darcy. Yet he has taken an incalculable social risk by casting his lot with them at the low point of their social fortunes, an association that earlier in the plot would have been unthinkable for a man of his pride.

The climax of Austen's plot—the union of Elizabeth and Darcy—comes about only after both characters have undergone significant internal change. In the beginning of the story Darcy is self-important

and aloof from lower-class society. It is only when he becomes attracted to Lizzy's character that he is willing to step down from his lofty position.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, is never a respecter of class. She reacts, for example, to the idea of marrying Collins to improve her family's financial and social position as odious. She is never insecure in Darcy's presence, nor does she defer to his point of view. Instead, she considers herself his equal. Her refusal to recognize a social barrier between them is, in fact, an important element in Darcy's attraction to her.

In the beginning of Austen's story Elizabeth Bennet has no regard for social hierarchy. One might say that she is prejudiced against it or that she prefers to deal with her fellow human beings apart from their status in society. She sees no virtue whatsoever in the pride Darcy takes in his position as an aristocrat. Ironically, at the same time she has her own struggles with pride, both family and personal.

By the end of the plot, however, Elizabeth realizes that her prejudice for taking every man at his word and her pride in her own powers of discernment have almost destroyed her family. She has been all too sympathetic with the sly 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 his late master 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 individualists. Most importantly, *Pride and Prejudice* suggests that a person's virtues and accomplishments are far more significant than his rank and possessions. 📖

“Instead of description, the common and easy resource of novelists, Jane Austen has the rare and difficult art of dramatic presentation: instead of telling us what her characters are and what they feel, she presents the people, and they reveal themselves. In this she has never perhaps been surpassed, not even by Shakespeare himself. If ever living beings can be said to have moved across the page of fiction as they lived, speaking as they spoke and feeling as they felt, they do so in *Pride and Prejudice*.”

—George Henry Lewes, 1859



Lauren Jacobs as Lydia and John Cox as Wickham in the 2011 Classic Players production



“I have made myself two or three caps to wear in the evenings since I came home, and they save me a world of torment as to hair-dressing!” —Jane Austen, 1798

## Regency Haberdashery

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. 📖



Jane Austen, in an adaptation of a sketch by her sister Casandra



A silhouette of Jane Austen from *The Illustrated Letters of Jane Austen*



(top to bottom) Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth and Jane in their caps and bonnets, from the 2011 *Classic Players* production. Costume design by Jeffrey Stegall.

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