

## ENGLISH ADVANCED: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

### To what extent has your interpretation to *Pride and Prejudice* been shaped by Austen's enduring characterization of Elizabeth Bennet?

Jane Austen's '*Pride and Prejudice*' acts to didactically critique and contest the social normalities of Regency England- utilizing a Bildungsroman to challenge social hierarchies and gender confinements which characterized marriages of the period . Austen diligently positions the responder to perceive societies strict echelons through the reformist lense of Elizabeth. Elizabeth's blatant disregard for social pedigree and thus, contextual restraints, allows her relationship with Darcy to flourish- her self-reliant and defiant character attesting the role of social nobility and its significance within Regency England. Likewise, the acumen, courage and autonomy personified by Elizabeth depicts Austen's strong contestation of traditional gender roles and expectations. Moreover, Elizabeth's characterization alludes to the social, economic and cultural shortcomings of the Regency Era,transient across historical milieu and still prominent today.

Seeking to satirise love as a social and economic construct, Austen portrays the contextual institutionalism of marriage- a platform in which women could secure financial stability and express an established social position. This is encapsulated through Elizabeth's response to the marriage of Charlotte and Mr Collins- Elizabeth commenting Charlotte would rather 'sacrifice every better feeling to worldly advantage'. Here, the conflation of Austen and Elizabeth's narrative voice accentuate the economic considerations of marriage- often a predecessor to a female's personal wants and desires. Austen positions the reader to recognize the immobile position women - unable to choose suitors based on love and instead prioritizing their financial and social needs. Though women were expected to marry purely for economic purpose, Austen acts to challenge this, highlighting her belief that marriage should encompass love on an equal or higher basis to social standing and economic mobility. Austen voices her emerging feminist view through the characterisation of Elizabeth, arguing she would only 'act in a manner' that would 'constitute her own happiness.' - the use of personal pronoun in conjunction with Elizabeth's independent characterization supporting Austen's liberalist views. By defying the social norms of Regency England, Austen acts to emphasize her critique of traditionalist marriages,broadcasting a view of marriage and love extremely progressive when related to the conservative context of Regency England. June Sturrock, Professor of Literature, supports this notion suggesting that Austen illustrates her own views of marriage through not only *Pride and Prejudice's* narration but Elizabeth Bennet. Thus, as a fundamental pillar of England's economic and social fabric, Austen depicts the economic and social institutionalism of marriage through Elizabeth's liberalist characterization.

Composing during an epoch that prioritised class structure and social standing, Austen acts to epitomize the futility and frivolity of social echelons and the expectations around inter-hierarchical relations of the Regency era. Darcy's first proposal highlights this intention, asking Elizabeth 'Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? ... whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?'. As Darcy continues to declare his love and its indecency, Austen satirizes the significance of the social hierarchy, conveying further the vanity of Regency marriages - motivated commonly by social perception. Darcy's personal beliefs concerning class are further demonstrated through Austen's employment of rhetorical question, ignorant tone and metaphor in which Darcy describes Elizabeth as 'beneath' him, emphasizing not only the couples social differences, but the influence of social degree in Regency society. Austen furthers her critique of traditional social standards through the tirade of Lady Du Bourgh, asserting 'Do you not consider that a connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?' when trying to discourage Elizabeth from becoming romantically involved with Darcy. Here, through clear caricature of Regency

ideals, Austen alludes to the strict regime associated with Regency social circles, indicating the social immobility governing characters of the context. However, as Elizabeth vocally contradicts both these characters and their traditional ideologies, S. Gracombé - literature Professor contends to the 'cultural' reflection of *Pride and Prejudice* and the inequalities mirrored by its text. Furthermore Austen, through the characterization of Elizabeth, critiques the constructs of social echelons - a social convention constituting not just Regency England but modernity today.

Using Regency England as contextual reflection, Austen uses Elizabeth and her character to illuminate the repressive social position of females within society. The feminist undertones of Austen's work are encapsulated by Mr Collins - "if she is really headstrong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogether be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation" - in which Austen succeeds in accentuating the submissive and subordinate expectations of women in addition to social constraints suppressing females of the time. Independence, intelligence and strength were qualities socially deplorable for women- evident through the connotations used to implicate those 'headstrong' to 'not be a ... desirable wife'. This again reinforces the social constraints and expectations of femininity within the Regency context. As the novel progresses, Austen too acts to portray the social development of society and contextual shifts in gender perception. This can be seen as Darcy advocates for female education asserting "and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading." Darcy's insistence on women partaking in 'improvement' by 'extensive reading' addresses the social shift of the context- his use of high modality and connotative implication of 'substantial' elucidating traditionalist feminine gender constructions challenged by new women of strong character and academia. As Elizabeth consistently asserts her independence, the transitioning social role of women is illuminated, a notion corroborated by Gracombé, declaring *Pride and Prejudice* 'tests the boundaries of gender roles'. Nonetheless, through the female depictions of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen acts to communicate Regency constructions of gender, portraying the shifting feminist acumen that pervaded social ideals and acted has to influence the modern woman.

In conclusion, the Bildungsroman: '*Pride and Prejudice*' is a clear contentestion of Regency social customs and normalities providing a liberalist view of marriage, gender and class within her context. Austen frames Elizabeth as an independant and diligent character-factors allowing her character to develop a true relationship and ultimately marriage with Darcy - irrespective of social prestige or her expected role as a 'female'. Elizabeth's contention of social echelons - seen through her and Darcy's relationship- allow the responder to perceive the influence of prestige and reputation inherent to the context. Similarly, the autonomous nature of Elizabeth is a explicitly depicts Austen as a liberal feminist- contesting gender roles and their constricting limitations. Nonetheless, Elizabeth's diligent characterization accentuates a strong critique of cultural, social and economic customs of the Regency Era as well as society today.