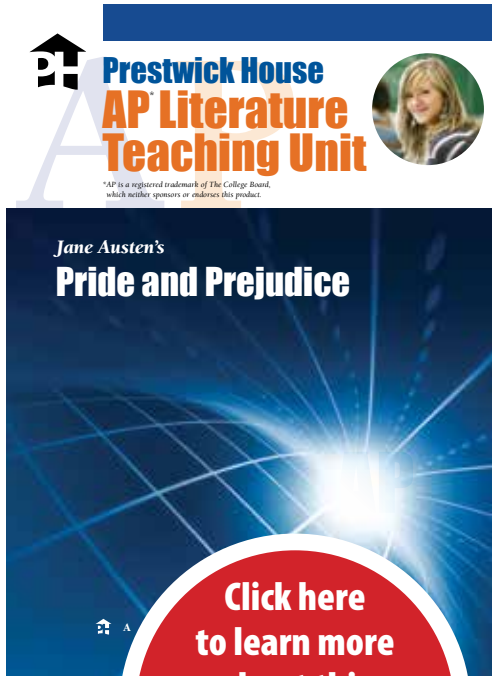




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Teaching Unit

Pride and Prejudice

by Jane Austen

written by Eva M. Richardson



Prestwick House

Item No. 303086

Pride and Prejudice

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace the development of the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy.
2. analyze different attitudes and expectations associated with marriage.
3. explore the themes of pride and prejudice and the danger of first impressions as they apply to Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy, Jane, Mr. Wickham, and other characters.
4. discuss the novel as a critical commentary on the rigidity of the social class system in Regency England.
5. describe and evaluate the choices Austen's characters are faced with and the decisions they make based on their social surroundings.
6. discuss the novel as a critical commentary on female education and the unfairness of property inheritance laws in the nineteenth century.
7. examine the language of *Pride and Prejudice* and analyze the impact Austen's irony and sarcasm have on the reader.
8. trace rules and expectations of social decorum and analyze how the novel complicates nineteenth-century notions of propriety.
9. analyze the effect Austen's use of free indirect discourse has on the reader.
10. explain and analyze different perspectives on the idea of transgression presented by the novel.
11. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
12. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. offer a close reading of *Pride and Prejudice* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Background Information

ENGLAND DURING THE REGENCY PERIOD

Jane Austen's novels were published during England's Regency period, which lasted from 1810 until 1820. In 1810, when England's monarch King George III was deemed incompetent to rule the country because of an ongoing struggle with mental illness, his son, George Augustus Frederick, who later became George IV, was established by Parliament as Prince Regent and took over the leadership of the kingdom on behalf of his father. The Prince Regent reigned as a quasi-king until 1820, when George III died, and the Prince Regent was officially crowned King George IV.

During the Regency period, the English middle class gained considerable prestige and social status. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the English economy had expanded profitably since approximately 1750 due to an increase in manufacturing and commerce. Profits from an expanding colonial system likewise benefited middle-class businessmen and investors. Consequently, many middle-class merchants and professionals had experienced a sharp increase in wealth and, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, had established themselves as members of the upper class. Eager to improve not only their monetary standing but their social status and reputation within English society as well, these newly rich members of the upper class strived to align themselves with England's landed aristocracy. Many purchased estates and country homes that rivaled aristocratic mansions in splendor and luxury. Although these new-money upper class families, known as the **landed gentry**, did not hold hereditary titles, they commonly considered themselves to be on the same social level as the traditional landed aristocracy due to their wealth and possessions.

Austen's novels take place almost exclusively within the privileged circle of England's landed gentry and aristocracy. Historically, it is important to bear in mind that less than two percent of England's population enjoyed the social status and lifestyle of the upper classes. Most of England's population was composed of modest middle-class families, workers, housekeepers, servants, soldiers, etc. While the industrial revolution had enabled a small fraction of middle-class businessmen to become wealthy and move into the upper class, many Englishmen were suffering from the ramifications of the economic changes that were taking place. Technological advances led to increased mechanization in the workplace. Machines were replacing manual labor and laying off workers. Unemployment was rampant among England's working classes, leading to starvation and poverty for many families and causing workers' riots and social unrest. Politically, few citizens had the right to participate in government, and rich landowners dominated Parliamentary elections and political decisions.

Another political development that heavily influenced English society during the Regency period is only marginally referred to in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Following the French Revolution in 1789, the relationship between England and France quickly deteriorated. While many Englishmen had originally been sympathetic to the ideals of brotherhood, equality, and freedom championed during the early days of the French Revolution, France's deterioration into a state of chaos, known as the Reign of Terror, when rivalry between different factions in French society led to violence and mass executions, caused disapproval and fear among the English. In the late

Literary and Narrative Techniques

ELEMENTS OF IRONY

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen assumes an ironic tone in order to comment on the faults and inadequacies of her characters. Her use of irony likewise enables her to gently ridicule the strict social rules and standards she describes without directly and overtly criticizing the society she herself lived in. Much of the dialogue within *Pride and Prejudice* is characterized by a tone of irony. For example, when Mr. Bennet interacts with Mrs. Bennet, he frequently expresses his sense of intellectual superiority and his capacity for rational thought by assuming an ironic tone when conversing with his wife:

‘Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves’. ‘You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.’ (Vol. I, chapter 7).

Irony is a literary device that involves a breach between what a writer, speaker, or narrator says in a text and what is understood by the reader or by other characters. There are three major types of irony used in fiction, poetry, and drama: **situational irony**, **verbal irony**, and **dramatic or tragic irony**.

Situational Irony:

Situational irony occurs when an event that takes place (in a novel, poem, or on stage in a play) produces a completely unexpected outcome.

Verbal Irony:

Verbal irony occurs when a writer, speaker, or narrator uses words to say one thing when he or she really means the opposite of what he or she says. One popular form of verbal irony is **sarcasm**.

Dramatic or Tragic Irony:

Dramatic irony occurs when the words or actions of a character reveal his or her ignorance toward a particular situation, while the reader correctly understands the situation.

Austen incorporates a combination of different ironic elements throughout most of her novel. Her famous opening lines, for example, already introduce an atmosphere of irony to the reader when the narrator explains that “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” (Vol. I, chapter 1). This “universal truth” might apply to the worldview of a character like Mrs. Bennet, but it certainly does not apply to all characters. Upper-class males, for example, do not depend on marriage for their financial survival and, therefore, do not have to subscribe to the validity of this “universal truth.”

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How and why does the character of Mr. Darcy develop over the course of the novel?
2. What different attitudes toward “female accomplishment” does the novel present? To what extent do these different attitudes function as a critical commentary on female education and gender relations?
3. To what extent are Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy characters who transgress boundaries? To what extent are Mr. Wickham, Lydia, Mrs. Bennet, and Mr. Collins characters who transgress boundaries?
4. What effect do instances of irony and sarcasm have on the reader? How does Austen’s narrative style help reinforce her critical perspective on social class and gender relations in Regency England?
5. Which characters can be considered dynamic characters? Which characters do not change over the course of the novel and why?
6. How do first impressions influence plot development in the novel?
7. To what extent are pride and prejudice characteristics that shape the attitudes of different characters, such as Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, etc.? Does the novel present different notions of pride?
8. What lessons are Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy able to learn from one another?
9. What are the different perspectives on marriage portrayed by Austen?
10. To what extent do the characters of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy represent the opposition between romantic passion and idealism versus rational thought and skepticism?
11. How does the novel present community life in Meryton?
12. How does the novel present attitudes of jealousy, envy, and greed, particularly with regard to the relationship between the Lucas family and the Bennets, Miss Bingley and Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham?
13. Can Elizabeth Bennet be considered a progressive, even rebellious female character who goes against social expectations set upon women?

Pride and Prejudice

Volume I

Chapter 1

1. Which central themes and narrative characteristics of the novel are introduced in the famous opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*?

2. Why does Mrs. Bennet state that it is impossible for her and her daughters to visit Mr. Bingley if Mr. Bennet does not visit him first?

3. Why does Mr. Bennet prefer Elizabeth over his other daughters?

4. To what extent does the statement that it was the “business of [Mrs. Bennet’s] life” to “get her daughters married” serve as a commentary on hereditary practices among England’s landowners?

Volume II

Chapter I

1. How does Mr. Bingley's absence from Netherfield and his almost certain rejection of Jane emphasize the importance of adhering to the rules of social decorum for a young woman?

2. Given Bingley's absence, contrast Jane's behavior regarding her attachment with Mrs. Bennet's.

3. How does Mr. Bingley's absence affect Elizabeth's attitude toward the dangers of first impressions? Why is this ironic?

4. What goal does Elizabeth believe the Bingley sisters are pursuing by setting up their brother with Georgiana Darcy?

Volume III

Chapter 1

1. What does Elizabeth's initial reaction to Pemberley reveal about the significance of property, particularly for women, in the world of *Pride and Prejudice*?

2. Why is Elizabeth so touched by the account Mr. Darcy's housekeeper gives of her master?

3. Why is Elizabeth shocked and uncomfortable when she unexpectedly meets Mr. Darcy at Pemberley?

4. What can readers infer from Mr. Darcy's second encounter with the Gardiners and Elizabeth in the gardens of Pemberley?

5. Why is Elizabeth pleased when Mr. Darcy enters into a conversation with the Gardiners?

6. What particularly delights Elizabeth when she learns that Georgiana Darcy would like to make her acquaintance?
