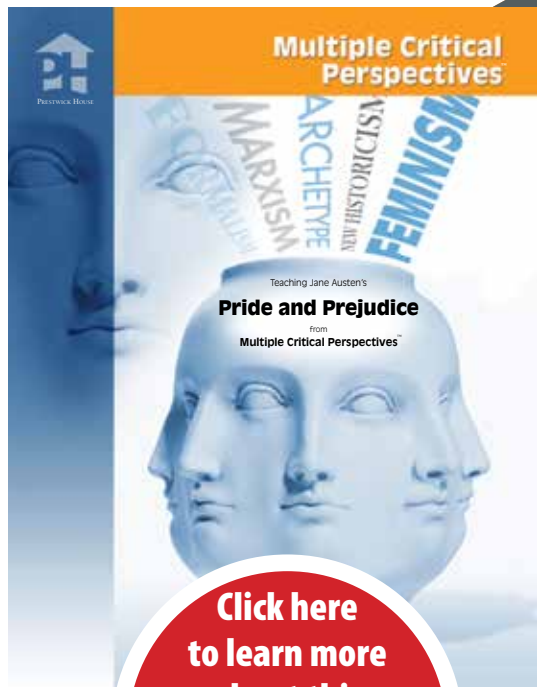




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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Jane Austen's

## **Pride and Prejudice**

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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*

*P* *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* is a novel detailing the social relationships among middle- and upper class families in England's countryside during the Regency period. At the center of the novel stands its heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, who pursues an idealistic vision of life, love, and marriage within the conservative, restraining social order of her community. She eventually unites with Mr. Darcy, a wealthy landowner, in a marriage founded on mutual respect and sincere affection. Austen's novel incorporates elements of the **comedy of Manners**. The narrative style of *Pride and Prejudice* relies heavily on the use of **irony** and **satire**.

All novels rely on certain conventional elements, including **plot**. (Elizabeth Bennet is the daughter of a middle-class country gentleman living in nineteenth-century England. Her mother is intent on finding husbands for Elizabeth and her four sisters, since the family estate will be passed on to a male cousin after the father's death, and Mrs. Bennet and her daughters will be left with nothing. When Mr. Bingley, a rich gentleman, moves into a neighboring estate, Mrs. Bennet is determined to secure him as a husband for one of her daughters. Mr. Bingley, indeed, falls in love with the eldest Bennet daughter, Jane, but his arrogant sister Miss Bingley and his best friend, the proud, wealthy, and supercilious Mr. Darcy, discourage him from pursuing Jane. Unpopular in the neighborhood, Mr. Darcy develops an affection for Elizabeth, but suppresses his feelings for her since her witty, yet biting demeanor toward him convince him that Elizabeth is not interested in his advances. Besides, the discrepancy in social class between the two make them an unsuitable match for one another. When Mr. Darcy finds he cannot deny his love for Elizabeth any longer, he proposes to her but is rejected. It is only after Elizabeth learns more about Mr. Darcy's past and experiences his generous and caring character first hand that she changes her mind. In the end, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy—like Jane and Mr. Bingley—discover they are made for one another, defy social protocol, and marry).

**Character** is another crucial element of the novel. (Elizabeth is the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*. Her personal growth and psychological development as a character are central to the text. Other major characters are Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth's sister Jane, and Mr. Bingley. These four major characters can be considered **dynamic characters** because they change over the course of the novel. In fact, Elizabeth's and Mr. Darcy's personal development and the lessons they learn as a result of their experiences constitute the core of the novel. Other characters are **static characters** because they do not significantly change over the course of the novel. Some of the static characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins, and Miss Bingley).

Another significant element of the novel is **setting**, or time and place (*Pride and Prejudice* takes place during the early nineteenth-century, the time known as the Regency period in England. Most of the novel

## New Historicism Applied to *Pride and Prejudice*



### Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.



## Activity One

### Examining the Class Structure of British Society in Early Nineteenth-Century England as Represented in *Pride and Prejudice*

1. Review with your students the class structure of early-nineteenth-century England. Explain that, between approximately 1750 and 1830, the Industrial Revolution transformed England and Europe from an agricultural society to an industrial, capitalist economy.

The Industrial Revolution had far-reaching effects on social class and family structures. England witnessed the rise of a middle class that could develop wealth and status independent of aristocratic origins. Many of these “new-money” middle-class families aspired to become members of the upper class. They purchased land, settled in elaborate and luxurious country mansions, and became known as the landed gentry. By the nineteenth century, a social class system consisted of three distinctive groups:

- The **working class** consisted of agricultural workers, factory workers, mine workers, maids, servants, housekeepers, soldiers, and the poor; more than 80% of Britain’s population belonged to the working class; they were excluded from political participation.
  - The **middle class**, or bourgeoisie consisted of merchants, traders, businessmen, professionals etc.; the middle class gained more importance and power following the industrial revolution; the middle-class demanded political participation, and the Reform Act of 1832 eventually extended voting rights to members of the middle class.
  - The **upper class** consisted of the old **hereditary aristocracy** and the new **landed gentry**, who had come into money through commercial enterprise and ascended from the middle class. Members of the upper class did not work and frequently employed farmers to work their land.
2. Divide class into pairs or small groups and assign one of the following chapters to each pair or group:
    - Volume I, Chapter 3
    - Volume I, Chapter 5
    - Volume I, Chapter 8
    - Volume I, Chapter 9
    - Volume II, Chapter 6
    - Volume III, Chapter 1



## Feminist Criticism Applied to *Pride and Prejudice*



### Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to re-evaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.



## Activity One

### Evaluating Different Views on Marriage in the Patriarchal Society of *Pride and Prejudice*

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small group) review the following sections:
  - Volume I, Chapter 1 – Mrs. Bennet's attitude toward marriage, the laws of inheritance
  - Volume I, Chapter 6 – Charlotte's view on marriage, Elizabeth's view on marriage
  - Volume I, Chapter 19 – Mr. Collins' proposal and view on marriage
  - Volume I, Chapter 22 – Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins' proposal, Elizabeth's reaction
  - Volume II, Chapter 19 – the Bennet marriage
  - Volume III, Chapter 8 – Elizabeth's views on her potential union with Mr. Darcy, her idea of an ideal marriage
2. Students should take detailed notes on the different views on marriage presented by each character.
3. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion:
  - Why is marriage the “business” of Mrs. Bennet's life? What makes marriage a central element of the society presented in *Pride and Prejudice*?
  - How does Elizabeth evaluate the role of parental choice with regard to her marriage plans? What about other characters?
  - What does Charlotte hope to gain from marriage? To what extent does her view coincide with the views held by others in her community?
  - How does Elizabeth envision an ideal marriage? How does her view on marriage differ from other characters' views? Why does her view on marriage differ?
  - How does the novel represent the union between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet? What is Austen criticizing through her depiction of the Bennets?
  - What does Mr. Bennet's behavior toward Mrs. Bennet reveal about his attitude toward patriarchal culture? Toward women?
  - Why does Mr. Collins structure his marriage proposal as a business proposal?
  - How different is Mr. Collins' proposal to Charlotte from his proposal to Elizabeth? What do his proposals reveal about his attitude toward marriage? Toward women?
  - What is the connection between marriage and female power (or lack thereof) in the novel?

## Psychoanalytic/Freudian Theory Applied to *Pride and Prejudice*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

#### Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



## Activity One

### Examining the Text as A Testament to Austen's Own Life Experiences

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Psychoanalytic/Freudian Theory Activity One Fact Sheet: Jane Austen
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups and have each review the sheet.
3. Have each group note any characters, incidents, or implied views in the novel that could be inferred as representing Jane Austen's personal life or views.
4. Reconvene the class and discuss the following:
  - How does Elizabeth's role within her family mirror Austen's own experiences within her own family?
  - What is the significance of a strong sister-sister bond in the novel and in Austen's personal life?
  - How might the death of Austen's father have impacted her portrayal of Mr. Bennet? What are the dangers associated with an absent father in *Pride and Prejudice*?
  - How does Austen embody the independent spirit described in the character of Elizabeth Bennet?
  - How is authorship a sign of independence?
  - How does Elizabeth Bennet's attitude toward marriage highlight or parallel Austen's?
  - How might the writing of *Pride and Prejudice* have functioned as a vehicle to express Austen's imaginative or idealistic views in life?
  - Why might Cassandra have destroyed her sister's letters after her death?