

My reading of the book

I prefer nonfiction to fiction. However, my extensive reading about human evolution, evolutionary psychology and modern politics raised my curiosity about the changes that have come about since the Industrial Revolution.

Jane Austen's novels of manners were reputed to provide a great depiction of society at that moment in time. I bought *Pride and Prejudice* out of historical interest but found myself engrossed in the story, written by this 21-year-old woman of society at the height of the British Empire.

Historical Setting

Though not published until 1813, Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* about 1800. This was before the Napoleonic wars, between the Revolutionary War and War of 1812 against America. It was the height of British Empire: they were populating the colonies of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The British East India Company dominated India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The British Navy dominated the oceans. Britain took control of South Africa through the Boer War.

It was the dawn of the industrial revolution, and as such the twilight of the traditional land-based aristocracy about which Austen wrote. There were as yet no trains or steamships. Travel was by horse-drawn carriages, shays and wagons. Thus, the setting of the book consists of towns within a day's drive of London, and of course London itself.

Leisure

To be a person of leisure had been the pinnacle of social standing from the time of Aristotle. It was assumed that you could not achieve much in letters, science or philosophy without a good education and the independence and leisure time afforded by unearned wealth.

The personages within this novel who work for a living are lower in the social pecking order than the gentleman of leisure. One minor character made enough money in business to be knighted, but nonetheless must strain to support the expense of a life of leisure.

Compelled by their life of leisure to find diversions to amuse themselves, the men choose among hunting, playing cards, and reading. The ladies pursue music, foreign languages and reading as well. Balls are a staple of social life and being able to dance well is de rigueur. They frequently invited one another to dinner and for walks in the private parks on their estates.

Such a life of leisure left Charles Darwin, Sir Humphrey Davey, Robert Maxwell, Francis Galton, the Huxley family and others to make vast contributions to science and the humanities. It is said that more genius abounded at that time and place than any other in history. Nonetheless, these remained the exception. Most of the idle rich did not make such good accountings of their good fortunes.

Money: gold and currency

Austen often mentions the wealth and income in pounds sterling of the principals, ranging from £1,000 in wealth to £10,000 annual income. How much money is that? Inflation is computed to have [reduced its value by 99.1% since 1800](#). The pound is now worth about \$1.30. At this conversion, these amounts would run from \$130,000 to \$1,300,000.

Approaching it using a gold standard, in 1800 there were 4.[35 pounds sterling](#) to one ounce of gold. Counting gold at \$4350/oz, that would make one historical pound worth about \$1,000 in today's money. Using this metric, the figures above would be \$1,000,000 and \$10,000,000.

Any way you figure it, Austen's characters were comfortably in the upper middle class to moderately rich. The Internet occasionally entertains us with conjectures about how much money one needs for a comfortable retirement at 65. A central guess would be about \$2 million. Enough to retire immediately, i.e., FY money, is put at about \$5 million. Only the richest of Austen's protagonists could afford not to be somewhat parsimonious.

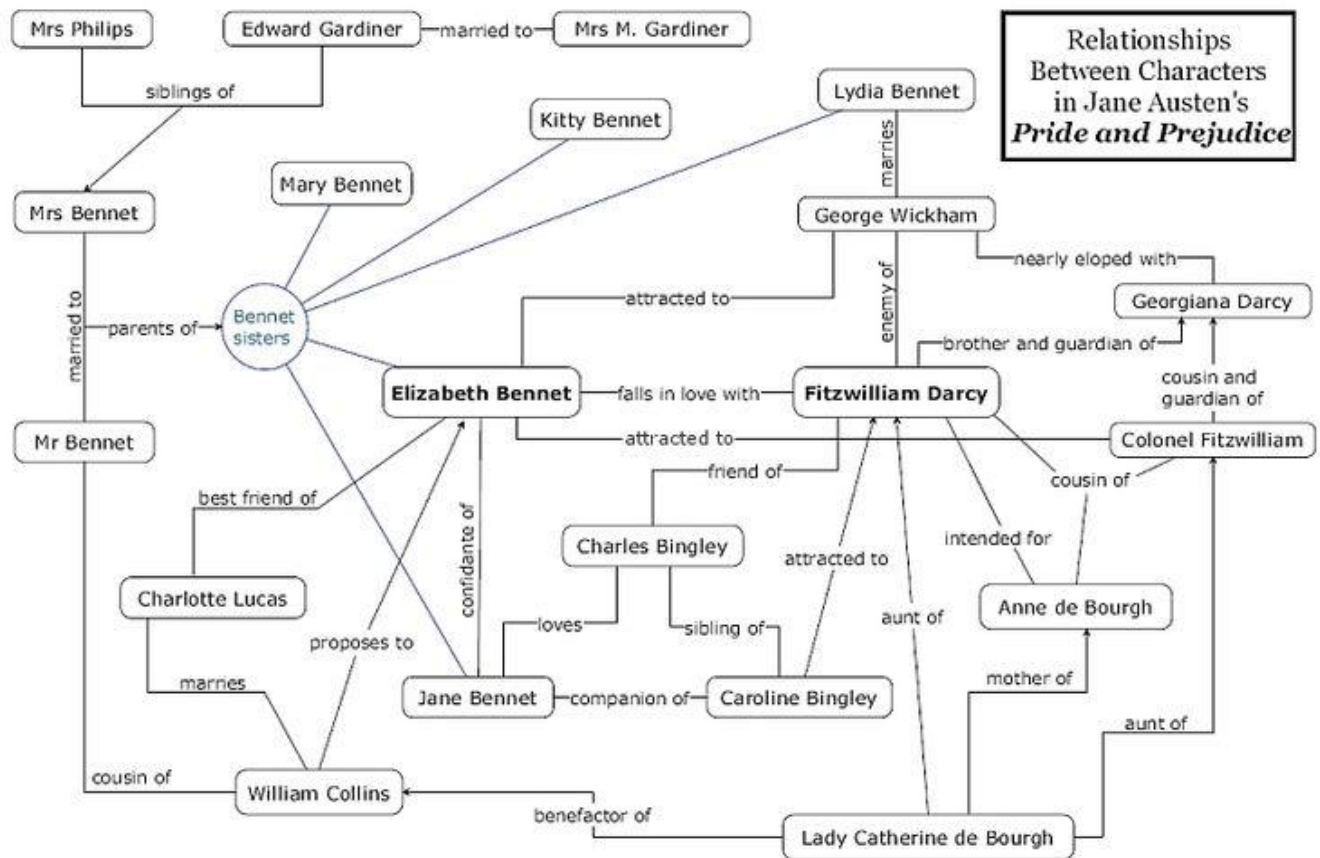
Affection: kissing, embracing, making love

Though love and marriage are the central themes of the book, there is no mention whatsoever of kisses and embraces. The plot moves via exchanges of words, mostly verbal, often by letter.

The single suggestion of sex is central to a major scandal in the plot line. A flighty young Lydia and renowned bounder Warwick elope, share quarters for a couple of weeks before they marry. The affair brings the entire Bennet family into disrepute, threatening to ruin the marital chances of Lydia's four older sisters.

Family and connections

Austen expects the reader to have a prodigious memory for connections. The following diagram portrays only the more important characters – there must be twice that number of minor characters. Many devices are used to designate them. The principal character is Elizabeth, Lizzie, Eliza, Miss Bennet, or the second sister. This multiplicity of identifications applies as well to even minor characters, making it something of a challenge to follow the narrative and even figure out who is speaking the dialogue.



The principal characters share family relations, and socialize as families.

Marrying, and bearing children to carry on the family line, is a chief concern. One of the foundations of the plotline is that the Bennet estate is entailed, meaning that it must pass not to one of the five Bennet daughters but to the nearest male blood relative. It is thus imperative that the sisters ensure their subsistence by marrying men of substance. The families of substance, meanwhile, jealously guard their wealth. "Prejudice" in the book's title is the bias against marrying a wife of lower social status and/or fewer social graces.

Pride and Prejudice Review. By Jane Austen

The well-known opening line of the book is “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Yes. Society’s objective was to perpetuate itself through marriage and children. Thus, the emphasis on creating the social devices through which young men and women would meet large numbers of potential mates without curtailing their contacts by committing themselves prematurely. Equally important were the strictures about how they would conduct themselves. Sexual release would be only through marriage, to ensure that women would be assured protection and support, and that children would enjoy two parents.

The assumption, vastly in contradiction to the view today, is that if the partners found themselves personally and socially compatible, the intimate element of the relationship would work. There was none of the “try before you buy” mentality that prevails in the 21st century. It cannot have been perfect, but then, neither is the ethos that has replaced it. At least they reproduced themselves.

Reputation

Reputation is borne by an entire family. Much of the plot concerns individuals who allow their conduct to bring down the family reputation. The worst is Lydia, who eloped and lived in sin before marriage. Mrs. Bennet’s brother, Mr. Gardiner, the single truly noble character in the book, is tainted by being a tradesman living in a less than fashionable district in London.

The rich Lady Catherine de Bourgh pushes the plot to a conclusion with her steadfast insistence that the Bennet family is too poor, too lacking in connections, to be joined in marriage to the Darcy family.

Plot intricacies

Austen expects the reader to retain great amounts of information as the plot develops. Remembering the characters alone is daunting. Remembering their interactions is almost impossible. Interactions include:

- What are the actual facts of a situation
- What the characters believe they know
- Individual’s private interpretations of events, dialog and letters,
- How characters represent their thoughts via conversation and letters between one another.
- Which of the characters know which facts or hold which (false) opinions

This book is well suited to an e-book format, allowing the reader to search for who said what to whom on which occasion.

Pride and Prejudice Review. By Jane Austen

Austen had a gift for limning individual characteristics. Though the personalities appear to be overdrawn – too obsequious, too brusque, too impulsive, too flighty and such – these extremes appear necessary to move the plot along its intricate path. The twists of the plot likewise tax the reader's credulity. In the end, however, it makes a story that serves its purpose. Though I approached the book as a study of its time, place and society, I found myself so enraptured that I could not put it down.

Time to reconsider those other classics for which I never found time: Tess of the d'Urbervilles, the Bronte books and such.