

The influence of society

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In order to fully understand the meaning of a text, different approaches are used in analyzing or interpreting literature. When dealing with Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, one approach that is particularly appropriate is the topical/historical approach, as it stresses the relationship between the novel and its historical setting. By understanding the world in which Austen lived, a better understanding of her novel and her characters can be reached.

Through the character of Elizabeth Bennet, most importantly, Austen both could reveal her own feelings about her society and satirize the practices and beliefs held by the upper classes. Although often considered a Victorian author, Jane Austen lived during the time of the Romantic Period, from 1775 to 1817. The era was turbulent. As Reidhead writes, " England experienced the ordeal of change from a primarily agricultural society, where wealth and power had been concentrated in the landholding aristocracy, to a modern industrial nation" (Reidhead 2). This was the beginning of what was called the " two nations"- the division between the rich and the poor in England (Reidhead 4). In terms of social structure, the Industrial Revolution " witnessed the triumph of a middle class of industrialists and businessmen over a landed class of nobility and gentry" (Cashell). Varying degrees of economic independence, social influence and power created firm distinctions between the classes. The gap between the upper and middle classes is especially apparent in *Pride and Prejudice* between the Bingleys and the Bennets. Mr. Bingley is financially well off, having " inherited property to the amount of nearly a hundred thousand pounds from his father..." (Austen 11). Like Mr. Bingley, those who were born into wealth usually stayed wealthy throughout their lives because of inheritance. In addition, individuals who

belonged to the middle or lower classes tended to be reminded of their status by those who belonged to the upper class. Mr. Bingley's sisters demonstrate this in their reaction to Elizabeth Bennet's appearance, as it "created a great deal of surprise.— That she should have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley..." (Austen 23). Elizabeth was thought less of because of her "less-than-proper" behavior. Similarly, Elizabeth and her family also experience the ill favor of Lady Catherine De Bourgh because of their social status and lack of wealth. Lady Catherine describes Elizabeth as "a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world" and "without family, connections, or fortune" (Austen 231-232). By underlining the pretention and snobbery of the nobility, even toward families as sympathetically-rendered as the Bennets, Austen lampoons the British upper classes. Her critique makes sense in the context of the time: Aristocrats often held the belief that a powerful family, connections and a fortune were what made a person worth something. It is clear that Austen depicts the harsh realities of the society in which she lived throughout the novel. As difficult as it was to belong to the middle or lower classes, being a woman in the eighteenth century had similar disadvantages. Women "were provided only with limited (or no) schooling, were subjected to a rigid code of sexual behavior, and (especially after marriage) were bereft of legal rights" (Reidhead 5). When it came to the education of women, the attitude was that their education "needn't be of the same extended, classical and commercial character as that of men" ("Women's Rights"). Lady Catherine De Bourgh shows this attitude when she questions Elizabeth on her lack of

education and creative outlets: “ Do your sisters play and sing?” “ One of them does.” “ Why did you not all learn?-You ought all to have learned. The Miss Webbs all play, and their father has not so good an income as your’s.- Do you draw?” “ No, not at all.” “ What, none of you?” “ Not one.” “ That is very strange. But I suppose you had no opportunity...” (Austen 109). Lady Catherine only inquires Elizabeth’s talents in playing instruments, singing and drawing, not in the intellectual education that a man would be expected to receive. This is because “ the professions, the universities, the politics were not open to women” (“ Women’s Rights”). For the most part, “ women were instructed to...accept that their roles in life involved child rearing, housekeeping, and nothing more” (Reidhead 5). Women were also not permitted to ever live alone. Women “ were dependent on their male family members” to “ secure their future in case their husband treated them badly or they did not get married at all” (“ Women’s Rights”). Lady Catherine supports this regulation as she states “ young women should always be properly guarded and attended, according to their situation in life” (Austen 139). This also explains the reason that “ Miss Bingley [was] to live with her brother and keep his house...,” as she was still unmarried (Austen 11). To sum it up, “ women survived by pleasing and charming if they were in the middle classes...” (Weldon 35). The most practical way for women to survive was to be married. Many women “ were willing to marry just because marriage was the only allowed route to financial security or to escape an uncongenial family situation” (“ Women’s Rights”). This was certainly the case with Elizabeth’s best friend, Charlotte Lucas. “ Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was

the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune..." (Austen 83). Charlotte finally receives what she wants when she accepts Mr. Collins' proposal. She tells Elizabeth, " I am not romantic you know, I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (Austen 85). Charlotte, like most women in the eighteenth century, treats marriage as a business arrangement rather than a decision out of love. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet makes it " the business of her life to get her daughters married" (Austen 4). She is afraid, like many women, that if she does not marry her daughters, they will not be taken care of when she and her husband pass away. Far from limited to fiction, her worries were echoed by other women across eighteenth-century Britain. Despite the attitudes of many of her contemporaries, Jane Austen had a range of opinions on matters like love and marriage, which she showed through the character of Elizabeth. As most of the other characters throughout the novel are complying with the demands and expectations of society, Elizabeth refuses to treat her life as a business endeavor and follows the desires of her heart, not of society. Importantly, Elizabeth turns down a marriage proposal which would have been a very good decision to accept from an economic standpoint. When talking with Mr. Collins, Elizabeth explains that " my feelings in every respect forbid it"-because she is not in love with him, she cannot accept his proposal (Austen 74). Unlike her friend Charlotte, and most women of her time, Elizabeth refuses to be married unless it is out of sincere love for another. This is definitely the opinion of the author. As Harding

writes, “ we know too, at the biographical level, that Jane Austen herself, in a precisely similar situation to Charlotte’s, spent a night of psychological crisis in deciding to revoke her acceptance of an ‘ advantageous’ proposal made” (Harding 298). When Elizabeth does decide to marry, the union between herself and Mr. Darcy “ is not only to their mutual advantage, but brings together widely separate outlooks and social positions” (Duckworth 308). Mr. Darcy, being very well off financially, does not hold the same beliefs that are held by his aunt, Lady Catherine, when it comes to people of the middle and lower classes. He chooses to look past the prejudices and the labels that society pins upon groups of people based on their social and economic status; he loves Elizabeth for who she is. Elizabeth does the same as she learns that individuals should not be judged by what others say about them or by their reputation. Thus, Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage bridges the gap between the upper and middle classes. Yet it also reveals Austen’s idea of a truly “ good” marriage arrangement. Austen proposes that one must rid themselves of all pride, and of all prejudices, in order for this kind of great union to be attained. With this idea, Austen shows herself to be ahead of her time—but still shaped by it. Works Cited Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001. 3-254. Cashell, Brian W. “ Middle Class.” Wikipedia. 20 Mar. 2007. 18 Apr. 2007. Duckworth, Alistair. “ *Pride and Prejudice: the Reconstitution of Society*.” Rev. of *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. 306-315. Harding, D. W. “ “ Regulated Hatred”: an Aspect in the Work of Jane Austen.” Rev. of *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. 1998: 296-299. Reidhead, Julia, ed. “ The Romantic Period.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company,

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