

# Class stratification in pride and prejudice

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



Humanity has been entrenched in multiple centuries of class division and stratification for most of its civilized history. The division of power and privilege is perhaps the defining feature of humanity. No other species has nearly the same level of inequality of the distribution of resources.

Modern social stratification of course has its roots in the days of early feudalism, wherein social classes were defined by birth. Feudalism developed into industrialism/capitalism, and thus the modern conception of the social class was born. With the conception of social classes comes with the various antagonisms between them, i. e. the rich vs the poor, the proletariat vs the bourgeoisie.

These antagonisms are the subject of much analysis in both popular culture and the more ivory tower type intellectual circles alike. From all the way up top of the ivory tower comes works like *Das Kapital* (including all 3 volumes) by Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, who both in detail described the various problems with centralizing the means of production and capital accumulation. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum is a popular romance novel titled *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, who focuses on the relationship between 2 people who's financial backgrounds are wildly different. Through Jane Austen's excellent use of characterization, the contrasting social platitudes and norms of the various class strata in 1800s England is revealed in great detail.

To begin, the most basic of the differences between social classes is not the beliefs and the convictions held by those within it, but rather the behaviors and the way in which they present themselves to others. In *Pride and*

Prejudice this is detailed excellently in the first few chapters. For example, in chapter four Austen directly characterizes the Bingley family in contrast with the rest of the party. They were in fact very fine ladies; not deficient in good humour when they were pleased, nor in the power of making themselves agreeable when they chose it, but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank, and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others.

The Bingley family is shown to be middle class by the parties standards, but because of their inflated spending habits and association with those of higher rank, they deem themselves worthy of acting down upon those who are less fortunate or even as fortunate as themselves. Not only does this detail the livelihood and presentation of those considered high class, which is one of thrift, grandiose presentations of wealth, and patronization, but it also details the desperation of those in lower socioeconomic standings to fraudulently present themselves as being above what they truly are.

However, the behaviors and presentations are not the only major differences between the middle and the upper class, even the ways in which the classes think vary greatly. Pride and Prejudice once again outlines this with great detail on page 357, during Darcy's speech to Elizabeth. I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good

principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately an only son (for many years an only child), I was spoilt by my parents, who, though good themselves (my father, particularly, all that was benevolent and amiable), allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my own family circle; to think meanly of all the rest of the world; to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. Darcy outlines the way he's been thinking for almost his entire life. Greed, egocentrism, and alienation are all fundamental parts of the upper class mindset.

Even when Darcy's most basic principles, that being the ones he was raised on, contradict his actions, he chooses to ignore them, and instead to disregard any semblance of care for others. It's only once he meets Elizabeth, who is a part of the middle class, does he begin to see the error in his ways. Elizabeth teaches him to become self aware, and to care for, or at the very least respect the lives of other people. This mindset isn't exclusive to Darcy either, as many of the other affluent characters demonstrate the same way of thought. In brief, the rich view the world through an entirely different perspective compared to the poor, one of egocentrism, cognitive dissonance, and greed.

The differences between the two social standings are exemplified greatly throughout the book. There is a massive divergence of the behaviors and presentations regarding each of the class's, wherein those of high social standing act according to the doctrine of extravagance, while those who are in a lower social standing often try to imitate such acts of grandiosity. The class differences don't stop at actions, even the way in which the affluent think is distinct in contrast to the rest of humanity. They think only about themselves, and how they are perceived by people of equivalent or higher standing, with blatant disregard to the opinions and well-being of those they consider below them. To conclude, the stark contrast of those with rank vs those without is both deep and all-encompassing. The presence of class is almost omnipresent in its influence on everyday life.