
JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE & PREJUDICE*: A PLOT TOO NEAT TO BE PLAUSIBLE

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Article Received: 5 February 2026

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Article Revised: 25 February 2026

Krishnath College Campus, 1, Sahid Surya Sen Road, Gorabazar.

Published on: 18 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.4465>

ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's handling of plot in *Pride and Prejudice* is something quite new and excellent and more different from her customary method. *Pride and Prejudice* has a main plot admirably suited to Jane Austen's process. She seems to be deliberately kept out the action to satisfy the exigencies of the plot. As in all her novels, character and plot are both equally important; although the characters seem to direct the plot and it is obvious, from the way they advance the action, that it is as much their duty to advance the plot, as it is the plot's to display them. The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is intricate, but it is not merely mechanical; it is morally and psychologically intricate, the plot being the manifestation of actions and states of mind. Jane Austen's greatest skill as an artist lies in developing a carefully-planned plot, stripped of all unnecessary details, in which plot is the main interest. Maugham remarked, "By a story most of us mean a connected and coherent narrative with the beginning, a middle and an end."

KEYWORDS: *Comedy of Manners, balanced plot, follies and foibles, symmetrical plot, antithesis.*

The term Comedy of Manners has been used to describe a type of play which satirises the extremes of fashions and manners, the acquired follies of a highly sophisticated society. Ridicule is directed at those who lack the polished urbanity admired by such an elegant society and especially at those who vainly strive for it -- the jealous husbands, the would-be wives or dandies or lovers. In this form of comedy, the plot, (unrealistic, but clever and complex), is less important than characters who are seldom highly individual. Both plots and characters are less important than the air of retired cynicism and the witty scintillating

dialogues. The essential attributes of the Comedy of Manners are intelligent and witty female characters. Brilliant comedy and perceptive social satire are well exemplified in the comedies of Moliere, Congreve, Sheridan and Oscar Wilde.

Pride and Prejudice, like other novels of Jane Austen, is restricted in scope, dealing with traditional provincial life, but these are themes which Jane Austen felt she could handle most successfully. Personal relationships are explored with humorous ironic detachment and even the expression of emotions is not direct. The effect is one of sparkling wit playing gently and rampantly around the characters, but instead of being more typical, Jane Austen's figures ring true. In the Comedy of Manners, any element of brittle falseness is always apparent as the world reflected is essentially shallow. This is not the case with *Pride and Prejudice*. 'Pride' and 'Prejudice' can easily be made to stand for Darcy and Elizabeth. The story is about courtship and marriage. Elizabeth's misinterpretation of Darcy's words and smile point out the true meaning -- he is thinking of her and of Pemberley, not of Jane and Netherfield -- and her reply constitutes direct encouragement, particularly when accompanied by the blush, which he misinterprets in his turn. Though Elizabeth Bennett is the key to *Pride and Prejudice*, she is a lens with a flaw. The flaw of Elizabeth's faulty judgement, ironically, interprets the events. She makes her first important appearance in her most important position, in relation to Mr Darcy, when she overhears, "not handsome enough to tempt me." Her experiences fall into two parts: the first, ending with Darcy's letter which follows his first proposal of marriage and when, in the second part of the novel, after she has realised the errors her prejudice has led her into, her judgement is directed inwards on herself, rather than outwards, on to other people, and more of the action takes place in her own mind, less in actual events. Like her, Darcy is also deluded about his own character. Elizabeth is the means of reforming him, as he is of her. Like her also, he is presented differently before and after his first proposal of marriage. But for the most part, Darcy is seen only through what he does and says, and through Elizabeth's interpretation of him. The irony and a good deal of the comedy of the first part come from the difference between what Mr Darcy means and what Elizabeth thinks he means, and what Elizabeth's replies intend and how they appear to Mr Darcy. Jane Austen makes Mr Darcy interesting by the same means as she makes Elizabeth charming, which makes him artistically suited to one another and imposes a pattern on the novel as a whole. Lydia's elopement is the only even seriously influencing the reactions between Darcy and Elizabeth which is not the direct result of the behaviour of one of them. The longest of the conversations are those between Darcy and Elizabeth after their engagement, which are

merely a review of what has gone before, giving an agreeable view of the relationship between them, which is necessary since they have been at cross purposes or under some restraint for the whole of their acquaintance. On Elizabeth's second Evening in Netherfield, Miss Bingley opens the conversation by asking her brother about the proposed ball. The talk goes on between Miss Bingley and Elizabeth, and it is only when Elizabeth teases him, not when Miss Bingley flatters him, that Darcy speaks himself : "Miss Bingley," said he, "has given me credit for more than can be." For a few lines, there is a rational though still light - hearted exchange between Elizabeth and Darcy, which is intimate but the setting is quite public. By the time Elizabeth and Darcy do marry, there are more serious practical obstacles to their union than even before, and that these are seen to be actually irrelevant. Darcy is as good match for Elizabeth as George Knightley is for Emma; the novel is therefore better balanced than *Northanger Abbey* or *Sense and Sensibility*, where the hero and heroine are unequal in intellect and role. "The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is not merely a possible solution of the plot, it is as inevitable as the conclusion of a properly constructed syllogism or geometrical demonstration", said W. L. Cross.

The substance of the novel is what the title indicates: the sin of pride obnoxious to the Christian doctrine which takes the form of a complacency about the self and a corresponding lower opinion or prejudice about others. Darcy's pride is humbled mid-way through the novel where he proposes to Elizabeth and to his astonishment, is rejected. The lesson he has to learn is not quite that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; it is more that we have so innate worth either of social status or of abilities. We have to earn our right to consideration by respect for others and continuous watchfulness of ourselves. Elizabeth's corresponding sin is more subtle, and her enlightenment requires the space of the whole novel. To begin with, she seems unconscious that she suffers from pride, at all quick of observation, encouraged by her father -- she takes delight in the follies and varieties of others. She sees everyone's mistakes, but her own. The false prophecies of friendship of Mrs Bingley and Mrs Hurst do not deceive her. She already has too low an opinion of them. She is quick to see and enjoy the fables of Mr Collins, as she has always taken pleasure from those of Sir William Lucas. She is quite unreasonably persistent in thinking ill of Darcy and just as perversely in thinking well of Wickham ; even when the evidence that he is a fortune-hunter, is placed before her. Elizabeth's pride in her own fallible perceptions is her governing characteristic.

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is highly symmetrical. The novel carries a number of events occurring at various points that balance each other and add to the symmetry of the plot. There are two arrivals of Bingley and Darcy at Netherfield Park, one at the beginning and the other at the end. The first inspires optimism, but ends in a fiasco. The second comes off in gloom, but brings fulfilment. There are two surprise marriages -- Charlotte gets married to Collins near the beginning, Lydia is married to Wickham near the end. Near the beginning, Darcy interferes in the Jane- Bingley affair and separates them. Near the end, he interferes in the Lydia-Wickham affair but brings about their marriage. Balanced events like these help Jane Austen to achieve quite a symmetrical plot. An important requisite of a good plot is that it excludes coincidences and reveals perfect correspondence between characters and action. In *Pride and Prejudice*, apart from such coincidences as Wickham and Darcy coming to Meryton at about the same time, Collin's patroness being Darcy's aunt, Darcy's coming to Pemberley a day earlier than scheduled, the action proceeds mainly from the behaviour of the various characters. Darcy's slighting of Elizabeth stems from his inherent prejudice against the rural gentry. Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy is mainly the result of her confidence in her own perception and her obstinate refusal to give all right to any evidence in favour. Lydia's elopement with Wickham may be traced to their infatuation and his sensuality, along with his habit of gambling. This interplay between the character and action adds to the plausibility and very similitude of the action.

There has been a tendency to take *Pride and Prejudice* as polar opposites like *Sense and Sensibilities*; whereas in the course of the novel, we see them associated with the same characters. The proud Lady Catharine is certainly prejudiced and the prejudiced Elizabeth inevitably be accused of pride: Catherine Bingley, after all, all declared that her manners are a "mix of pride and impertinence", and that we need not take the jealous Miss Bingley too literally as to Elizabeth's manners, since she speaks more truth than she knows. So does the sentimental Mary. Her pompous definiteness follow Elizabeth's flippant reference to her own pride, as well as, to Darcy's : "Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us." It is a distinction which, on the whole, works on the novel, for Elizabeth and Darcy are too proud to be vain.

As in most Comedy of Manners, there are antithesis on which the work turns. The most untrue of this is the one which contrasts the attitudes of the two pairs of central characters.

Darcy and Elizabeth tend consistently to adopt a low opinion of others. In this they are continuously compared with the other couple -- Bingley and Jane, who are modest about themselves and charitable about others, "Your humility, Mr Bingley, must disarm reproof", Says Elizabeth in painted reference to the arrogance of Darcy. The arrogant Darcy is convinced that Elizabeth loves him ; is too different about himself to believe that Jane returns his feelings. The same contrast is of more importance because Elizabeth's moral terrors matter more to the reader than Darcy's. These are the kinds of contrast on which the novel is based. Jane Austen insists that the scrupulous self-knowledge which she prizes is a product of her own kind of sceptical intelligence. In the comparison between the two central couples, faults are identified with excuses in their extreme and excellence lies in between, but the different beliefs that divide Elizabeth and Jane are not fundamental, for they concern the proper application of principles which they both share. Elizabeth's satire is opposed to Jane's candour. Austen's moral ideal is clear: it is most nearly approached by Darcy and Elizabeth at the point when they have acknowledged the necessity of Jane and Bingley's humility and candour. In their ultimate state of enlightenment, Jane Austen's hero and heroine illustrate a view of human pessimism, not from progressive optimism. The theme of moral education of Elizabeth, which is reproved by that of Darcy, does not sanction out but rebukes the contemporary doctrine of faith in the individual. For all its polished and technical maturity, the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* seems too neat to be plausible.

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is constructed on dramatic principles. Situations produce effects contrary to those expected, characters commit themselves to set positions and then reverse their attitudes. Darcy at first appears ill mannered and inconsiderate; he turns out to be a truly considerate character. Wickham at first appears well mannered, considered, honest; he turns out to be a villain. Lady Catherine visits Elizabeth to prevent her marriage with Darcy; She only helps to bring it about quickly. Elizabeth tells Collins that she would never refuse a first proposal and accept a second, but this is precisely what she does. "Such ironic reversal of fortune and expectation are characteristic of Jane Austen's plots." Love and marriage happen to be main themes in *Pride and Prejudice* and this is common to the main plot as well as the three sub plots. There is a hint in 'the surrounding families' that this will be the concern of more than one couple, the concern not only of Elizabeth and Darcy, but of Jane and Bingley, Mr Collins and Charlotte, and of Wickham and Elizabeth, Miss King and Lydia by turns. In most of its features, in presentation, through a faulty heroine whose dilemmas are of her own making and who is witty, independent and charming none the less;

in having many humorous but never dangerous minor characters ; and in having an air of great gaiety over a serious subject; in all these ways, *Pride and Prejudice* has always been a favourite novel with a more active plot.

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