

## CC 10 Semester IV

### British Literature : 19th Century

#### "Pride and Prejudice" as Comedy of Manners

Jane Austen was the quintessential producer of comedy of manners, its subject being the set of social conventions of a particular class in a particular time and place. The novel of manners describes in detail the customs, behaviors, habits, and expectations of a certain social group. Usually these conventions shape the behaviour of the main characters, and sometimes even stifle or repress them. Often the novel of manners is satiric, and it is always realistic in depiction. *Pride and Prejudice* is, at first glance, simply an amusing depiction of England's social conventions of the late eighteenth- and the beginning of the nineteenth-century, particularly those of the gentry. But at a deeper analysis reveals how in an ironic style, Austen indirectly criticises certain political, economical and sociological circumstances of her time.

The life painted by Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* was a life of the gentry in the countryside of England. *Pride and Prejudice* deals with the upper-middle class society of rural England who had enough leisure and financial freedom to have balls, dinners and other pastimes of the type. Women were forbidden by convention to move away in any society other than the one to which they belonged.

*Pride and Prejudice* depicts a society in which a woman's reputation is of the utmost importance. A woman is expected to behave in certain ways. Stepping outside the social norms makes her vulnerable to ostracism. This theme appears in the novel, when Elizabeth walks to Netherfield and arrives with muddy skirts, to the shock of the reputation-conscious Miss Bingley and her friends. At other points, the ill-mannered, ridiculous behavior of Mrs. Bennet gives her a bad reputation with the more refined (and snobbish) Darcys and Bingleys. Austen pokes gentle fun at the snobs in these examples, but later in the novel, when Lydia elopes with Wickham and lives with him out of wedlock, the author treats reputation as a very serious matter. By becoming Wickham's lover without benefit of marriage, Lydia clearly places herself outside the social pale, and her disgrace threatens the entire Bennet family.

In depicting this Jane Austen also presents the follies, whims, inconsistencies, meanness and thick skinned vulgarity of the 18th century people, in her own ironic manner. Social rank plays a very important role in this society. Social inferiority carries its own stigma in the matrimonial world. Conventions and class distinctions are adhered to with jealous care by social snobs and marriage between the members of a humble rustic family like the Bennets and an aristocratic family like the Bingleys or the Darcys, are the exceptions rather than the rule.

Austen satirizes this kind of class-consciousness, particularly in the character of Mr. Collins, who spends most of his time toadying to his upper-class patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Though Mr. Collins offers an extreme example, he is not the only one to hold such views. His conception of the importance of class is shared, among others, by Mr. Darcy, who believes in the dignity of his lineage; Miss Bingley, who dislikes anyone not as socially accepted as she is; and Wickham, who will do anything he can to get

enough money to raise himself into a higher station. Mr. Collins's views are merely the most extreme and obvious. The satire directed at Mr. Collins is therefore also more subtly directed at the entire social hierarchy and the conception of all those within it at its correctness, in complete disregard of other, more worthy virtues. Through the Darcy-Elizabeth and Bingley-Jane marriages, Austen shows the power of love and happiness to overcome class boundaries and prejudices, thereby implying that such prejudices are hollow, unfeeling, and unproductive.