

GENRE & FORM

The Genre of *Pride and Prejudice*

Novel of Manners, Comedy of Errors, Romance — What Kind of Book Is This?

Jane Austen • *Pride and Prejudice* • 1813
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Genre: Why Labelling Austen Is Harder Than It Looks

Pride and Prejudice resists simple genre classification. It is frequently called a romance, a comedy of manners, a satirical novel, and a realist novel — and it is all of these simultaneously. Understanding its genre means understanding how Austen combined and transformed the literary traditions available to her in 1813 into something entirely new.

1. The Novel of Manners

The 'novel of manners' depicts the social customs, conventions, and codes of a particular class and era, using them as both subject and moral test. Pride and Prejudice is the supreme example of this form. Every social interaction in the novel — a ball, a morning call, a dinner at Rosings — is simultaneously a realistic depiction of Regency social life and a moral drama in miniature.

...acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

— Narrator, Chapter 1

The opening sentence performs the novel-of-manners move perfectly: it presents a social convention as a universal truth, and the entire novel proceeds to expose the gap between the two. The 'manners' being examined are not mere politeness — they are the system of values that governs marriage, money, and social survival.

2. The Comedy of Manners

Within the novel-of-manners tradition, Pride and Prejudice belongs specifically to the comedy of manners — a form derived from Restoration drama, in which social pretension is exposed through wit, mistaken identity, and the gap between performance and reality. Mr. Collins is the novel's purest comic type: the self-important fool who cannot perceive his own absurdity.

...first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in full possession of his faculties, and well settled in the world, to marry a second time. Secondly, that I am convinced that matrimony will add very greatly to my happiness."

— Mr. Collins, Chapter 19

Collins lists his reasons for marriage in order of priority — parish duty first, personal happiness second, the woman herself a distant third. The comedy is architectural: the ordering of the list reveals the man entirely, without Austen needing to comment at all.

3. The Romance Plot

Beneath the social satire lies a recognisable romance structure: two people who are wrong for each other on the surface are revealed to be right for each other at the level of character. This structure — obstacle, recognition, resolution — goes back to Shakespeare's comedies and forward to every romantic comedy film ever made.

...I do not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must know how ardently I admire and love you."

— Fitzwilliam Darcy, Chapter 3

But Austen's romance is more demanding than the form usually requires. The obstacles are not external (a scheming rival, a disapproving parent) but internal: the protagonists' own cognitive failures. The recognition scene is not a revelation about the external world but a painful act of self-knowledge. This is what elevates Austen's romance above its genre conventions.

4. The Realist Novel

Pride and Prejudice also belongs to the tradition of the realist novel — fiction that renders social and psychological life with precision and without idealisation. Austen's Hertfordshire is meticulously specific: distances between houses, the exact value of incomes, the precise social consequences of an elopement. This specificity is not decoration — it is argument. The novel insists that material conditions determine emotional possibility.

*...wledged... the surrounding families should consider
...nging to themselves or to one of their daughters."*

— Narrator, Chapter 1

The Bennet family's financial situation — two thousand a year, five daughters, an entailed estate — is not backstory. It is the novel's structural premise. Realism here means that love cannot be understood apart from economics.

5. Austen's Unique Synthesis

What makes *Pride and Prejudice* endure is that Austen fuses these genres into something none of them alone could produce: a novel that is simultaneously funny and serious, satirical and sympathetic, romantic and unsentimental. The comedy of manners provides the surface; the realist novel provides the depth; the romance provides the emotional arc. Together they produce a work that satisfies on every level — which is why it has been continuously in print for over two centuries.

*...as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and
...e those who do not like her at least, I do not know."*

— Jane Austen, letter to her sister Cassandra

Austen's own pride in Elizabeth Bennet is the key to the novel's genre: it is, finally, a comedy in the deepest classical sense — a story that affirms human possibility against social constraint, and ends not just in marriage but in the achievement of self-knowledge.

