

CONCEPT EXPLANATION

What Does 'Prejudice' Mean in Pride and Prejudice?

Definition, Origin, and How Austen Uses the Word Across the Novel

Jane Austen • Pride and Prejudice • 1813
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Prejudice: A Word With Precise Meaning

The word 'prejudice' appears in the novel's title and throughout its pages, but Austen uses it with philosophical precision, not merely as a synonym for 'bias' or 'dislike.' Understanding exactly what she means by it — and how it differs from related concepts like 'vanity,' 'pride,' and 'first impressions' — is essential for reading the novel correctly.

1. The Literal Meaning

Prejudice comes from the Latin *præiudicium*: a judgment made in advance of evidence, a pre-judgment. In 18th-century English usage, it meant specifically a fixed opinion formed without adequate examination of the facts. It was not merely having an opinion — it was having an opinion that resisted revision even when evidence demanded it.

...ch some people possess of conversing easily with those I have never seen before."

— Darcy, Chapter 31 — his social awkwardness is mistaken

2. Elizabeth's Prejudice Against Darcy

Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy is formed at the Meryton ball, when he refuses to dance with her and she overhears his dismissal. From that moment, she interprets every subsequent action through a negative frame: his silence is arrogance, his caution is condescension, his concern for Bingley is manipulation. The prejudice is active — it shapes her perception, not just her opinion.

...ive his pride, if he had not mortified mine."

— Elizabeth Bennet, Chapter 5

3. Darcy's Prejudice Against Elizabeth's Family

Darcy's prejudice operates differently: it is social rather than personal. He does not dislike Elizabeth — he is attracted to her from early in the novel. But he judges her family as socially beneath him, and allows this social pre-judgment to override his personal feeling for months. His prejudice is the assumption that social class is a reliable indicator of moral worth.

4. The Moment Prejudice Is Overcome

...moment, I never knew myself."

— Elizabeth Bennet, Chapter 36

Elizabeth's self-recognition after reading Darcy's letter is the novel's definition of prejudice overcome: not merely changing an opinion, but recognising that one's entire framework of judgment has been distorted by emotional pre-commitment. True anti-prejudice, Austen argues, requires not just new evidence but a willingness to dismantle the self-image that the prejudice was protecting.

5. Prejudice vs. First Impressions

The novel's original title was *First Impressions*, which names the mechanism of prejudice without naming the flaw. Austen's revision to *Pride and Prejudice* was a deepening: first impressions are neutral — they may be accurate. Prejudice is first impressions that have calcified into certainty, that resist correction, that

become structural. The novel's argument is that intelligence without humility always hardens into prejudice.

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