

ICONIC QUOTES & SCENES

The Best Quotes About Prejudice in the Novel

Analysis of Bias, Misjudgment, and Self-Deception in *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen • *Pride and Prejudice* • 1813

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Prejudice in Pride and Prejudice: A Cognitive Failure

Prejudice, in Austen's novel, is not presented as simple bigotry — it is a cognitive failure, the habit of forming fixed judgments on insufficient evidence and then filtering all subsequent experience through those judgments. Elizabeth Bennet, the novel's most intelligent character, is its most sophisticated practitioner of prejudice. This is Austen's central irony: the sharpest mind makes the greatest error of judgment.

Quote 1 — The First Impression Fixed

"She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me."

— Fitzwilliam Darcy, Chapter 3

Darcy's dismissal of Elizabeth at the Meryton ball is itself an act of prejudice — pre-judgment based on social category rather than individual perception. Ironically, this moment of Darcy's prejudice against Elizabeth becomes the seed of Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy. Each character's bias toward the other originates in the other's bias toward them. Austen is showing that prejudice is always a closed loop.

Quote 2 — Elizabeth Acknowledges Her Own Bias

"How despicably have I acted! I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! Till this moment, I never knew myself."

— Elizabeth Bennet, Chapter 36

This is the most psychologically acute moment of self-recognition in the entire novel. After reading Darcy's letter about Wickham, Elizabeth undergoes a complete cognitive collapse. The phrase 'I never knew myself' is devastating: she had built her entire identity on her ability to judge character correctly, and this ability turns out to have been serving her ego rather than the truth.

Quote 3 — Wickham's Manipulation of Prejudice

"His countenance, voice, and manner had established him at once in the possession of every virtue."

— Narrator (describing Elizabeth's first impression of Wickham), Chapter 16

Wickham is Austen's study in how prejudice can be deliberately exploited. He is physically charming, socially fluent, and strategically honest — he confides in Elizabeth with an appearance of reluctance that feels like trust and actually functions as manipulation. Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy makes her cognitively receptive to Wickham's counter-narrative. She wants Wickham's story to be true because it confirms what she already believes.

Quote 4 — Jane's Counter-Prejudice: Excessive Charity

"Do not make yourself uneasy, my dear cousin, about your apparel. Lady Catherine is far from requiring that elegance of dress in us, which becomes herself and daughter. I would advise you merely to put on whatever of your clothes is superior to the rest."

— Mr. Collins, Chapter 29

Jane Bennet's opposite prejudice — her refusal to see fault in anyone — is Austen's complementary warning. Jane cannot believe Wickham is dishonest or Bingley's sisters are unkind, because her cognitive filter only admits positive interpretations. Austen's point is that both over-suspicion (Elizabeth) and over-charity (Jane) are forms of prejudice — both substitute a preferred narrative for accurate observation.

Quote 5 — The Resolution: Prejudice Overcome

"I knew that what I was doing was wrong... but I thought only of you."

— Fitzwilliam Darcy, Chapter 58

Darcy's admission in the second proposal scene is the counterpart to Elizabeth's 'I never knew myself.' Both characters have overcome their defining cognitive failure. Darcy's social prejudice — his assumption that Elizabeth's family connections made her an unsuitable object of serious attachment — has been dismantled by the force of her character. Elizabeth's intellectual prejudice — her assumption that her first impressions were correct — has been dismantled by the evidence of Darcy's actual conduct. The novel ends not with love conquering all, but with self-knowledge making love possible.

Synthesis: Prejudice as Self-Protection

Austen's deepest insight about prejudice is that it functions as psychological armour. Elizabeth's quick judgments protect her from vulnerability. Darcy's social contempt protects him from emotional risk. In both cases, prejudice is not stupidity — it is intelligence deployed defensively. The novel's argument is that genuine love requires dismantling these defences, which is why it takes two volumes of pride and prejudice before either character is capable of it.

