

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

# The Purpose of Pride and Prejudice

What Was Austen Trying to Achieve? Satire, Reform, and the Argument for Self-Knowledge

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Jane Austen • Pride and Prejudice • 1813  
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# What Was Austen Trying to Do?

*Pride and Prejudice* is often read as a romantic novel — and it is. But Austen's purposes were multiple and interconnected: social satire, moral argument, feminist critique, and a defence of the novel as a serious literary form. Understanding her purposes illuminates why the novel remains so richly meaningful two centuries on.

## 1. To Satirise the Marriage Market

Austen's primary satirical target is the system that reduced educated, intelligent women to their marriageability. The opening sentence — 'a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife' — immediately identifies the absurdity: the sentence is really about women's need for wealthy husbands, dressed up as a universal truth.

*...I am persuaded, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."*

— Narrator, Chapter 1

Every comic character in the novel — Mrs. Bennet's hysteria, Collins's pomposity, Lady Catherine's condescension — exists to expose the marriage market's cruelty and absurdity. But Austen's satire is never simply angry; it is comic because she understood that comedy reaches further than polemic.

## 2. To Argue for Self-Knowledge as the Basis of Good Judgment

Austen's deepest purpose is philosophical: she argues that accurate perception of others is impossible without accurate self-knowledge. Both Elizabeth and Darcy fail as judges of character precisely because they do not know themselves — Elizabeth's pride in her discernment, Darcy's pride in his social superiority. The novel's moral is not 'love conquers all' but 'self-knowledge makes love possible.'

*...at that moment, I never knew myself."*

— Elizabeth Bennet, Chapter 3

This moment — Elizabeth reading Darcy's letter and dismantling her own self-image — is the novel's philosophical centre. Austen is arguing that genuine intelligence requires the willingness to be wrong about yourself, which is the hardest kind of intelligence to exercise.

## 3. To Defend Women's Right to Choose

Elizabeth's refusal of Collins — and later her first refusal of Darcy — were radical acts in 1813. A woman refusing a financially advantageous proposal was socially aberrant. Austen presents Elizabeth's refusals not as romantic gestures but as moral necessities: to marry without love and respect would be a form of self-betrayal.

*...offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it."*

— Elizabeth Bennet to Darcy, Chapter 12

Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic acceptance of Collins is presented with compassion rather than condemnation — Austen acknowledges that not every woman has Elizabeth's options. But the novel's endorsement is clearly with Elizabeth's standard: marriage should be chosen, not settled for.

## 4. To Defend the Novel as Serious Literature

In Austen's era, novels — especially by women — were considered trivial entertainment at best and morally dangerous at worst. Austen's purpose included demonstrating that the novel could be a vehicle for serious moral and philosophical argument. The precision of her irony, the depth of her character analysis, and the rigour of her plotting all argue that fiction can think as clearly as any essay.

*enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of  
any thing than of a book!"*

— Miss Bingley (ironically — she is not reading)

Miss Bingley's hollow praise of reading — delivered while she ignores her book to pursue Darcy — is Austen's joke about superficial engagement with literature. The novel itself is the counter-argument: here is a book that rewards genuine attention on every page.

## 5. The Lasting Achievement

Austen achieved all of her purposes simultaneously — which is why *Pride and Prejudice* is both endlessly enjoyable and endlessly significant. The satire makes you laugh; the moral argument makes you think; the romance makes you feel; and the defence of women's autonomy still resonates in a world where the marriage market, though transformed, has not disappeared. The novel's purpose was, and remains, to show that intelligence, honesty, and self-knowledge are not obstacles to happiness but its only reliable foundations.

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