CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Five Bennet Sisters

Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia — Five Responses to the Same Impossible Situation

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Jane Austen • Pride and Prejudice • 1813

Five Sisters, Five Strategies for Survival

The five Bennet sisters are not merely plot devices — they are Austen's systematic study of the different ways intelligent, constrained women respond to an impossible situation: no profession, no independent income, and an estate that will pass to a male cousin on their father's death. Each sister represents a distinct strategy, and Austen judges each with quiet precision.

1. Jane Bennet — The Strategy of Universal Goodwill

Jane is the eldest and most beautiful sister. Her strategy is radical charity: she refuses to see fault in anyone, interpreting every ambiguous action as benign. This makes her universally liked and profoundly difficult to read — her feelings are so carefully concealed behind goodwill that Bingley, advised by Darcy, genuinely cannot tell if she cares for him.

apt to like people in general. You never see a fault in
rld are good and agreeable in your eyes."

— Elizabeth to Jane, Chapter 4

Jane's charity is both her greatest virtue and her greatest liability. Austen presents it with affection but also with clear eyes: excessive goodwill, like excessive cynicism, is a form of inaccuracy about the world.

2. Elizabeth Bennet — The Strategy of Wit and Discernment

Elizabeth's strategy is intellectual: she uses wit, irony, and sharp observation to maintain dignity and agency in a world that offers women little of either. Her father has trained her in this strategy — it is the primary bond between them. But wit without self-knowledge is a weapon that eventually wounds its user.

me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of
ways rises at every attempt to intimidate me."

— Elizabeth Bennet, Chapter 3

Elizabeth's courage is her defining quality — and her downfall. She is so committed to the idea of her own discernment that she cannot admit, until forced by Darcy's letter, that her discernment has been systematically wrong.

3. Mary Bennet — The Strategy of Moral Authority

Mary, the middle sister, has adopted a strategy of intellectual and moral superiority as compensation for being neither beautiful (like Jane) nor witty (like Elizabeth). She reads constantly, practises the piano obsessively, and delivers moral pronouncements at every opportunity. Austen's treatment of her is the novel's most uncomfortable comedy.

I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced
it is very common indeed."

— Mary Bennet, Chapter 5

Mary's observations are often technically correct — her pride/vanity distinction is philosophically precise — but delivered with no awareness of their social context. She has mistaken the performance of learning for actual wisdom.

4. Lydia Bennet — The Strategy of Pure Appetite

Lydia is the youngest and, by the novel's moral logic, the most dangerous. She has no strategy beyond the satisfaction of immediate desire: officers, balls, ribbons, and attention. Her elopement with Wickham is not a romantic rebellion — it is the consequence of having been raised with no moral education and no understanding of consequences.

d Mrs. Forster. I thought I should have died. And that ething, and then they soon found out what was the matter."

— Lydia Bennet, Chapter 47

Lydia's breezy account of her own ruin — told as comedy — is one of Austen's most chilling moments. Lydia cannot perceive the gravity of what she has done because she has never been taught to perceive gravity. The blame, Austen implies clearly, lies with her parents.

5. Kitty Bennet — The Strategy of Imitation

Kitty is the most overlooked sister — and deliberately so. Her strategy is imitation: she follows Lydia in everything, which nearly destroys her, and at the novel's end begins to follow Elizabeth instead, which saves her. Austen's point is quiet but sharp: Kitty is not a bad person, she is an impressionable one, and the direction of her impressions is everything.

etion in her coughs; she times them ill."

— Mr. Bennet, Chapter 7 — the novel's most dismis

Mr. Bennet's contemptuous dismissal of Kitty encapsulates the family's failure: the parents have sorted their daughters into the interesting (Jane, Elizabeth) and the disposable (Mary, Kitty, Lydia). The consequences of this sorting are the novel's secondary plot.