

THEME ANALYSIS

# Pride vs. Vanity in Pride and Prejudice

What Is the Difference? A Complete Character-by-Character Breakdown

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Jane Austen • Pride and Prejudice • 1813  
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# The Pride–Vanity Distinction: Austen's Central Moral Compass

In Chapter 5, Mary Bennet — the novel's resident pedant — delivers what is arguably the most philosophically precise observation in the entire book: pride and vanity are not synonyms. Austen plants this distinction early because everything that follows depends on it. Every major character can be mapped onto this axis, and understanding where they sit explains nearly every conflict in the novel.

*ings, though the words are often used synonymously.*

*out being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of*

*o what we would have others think of us."*

— Mary Bennet, Chapter 5

## 1. The Philosophical Distinction

Mary's definition is derived from 18th-century moral philosophy, particularly the tradition of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Smith, whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) Austen almost certainly read. Smith distinguishes between 'self-esteem' (an internal judgment of one's own worth) and 'love of praise' (dependence on external validation). Pride, in this framework, is self-esteem. Vanity is the love of praise.

The distinction matters morally because pride can be accurate — one can genuinely be a person of good character and know it — while vanity is always a form of dependence and therefore vulnerability. The vain person needs an audience. The proud person does not.

## 2. Darcy — Proud Without Being Vain

Darcy is the novel's primary illustration of legitimate pride. He has high standards, refuses to perform charm he doesn't feel, and is entirely indifferent to whether strangers like him. At the Meryton ball, he dances only twice — not because he is shy, but because he genuinely doesn't wish to dance with people he doesn't respect. This is pride: a settled, internal standard of behaviour that doesn't require external approval.

*which some people possess of conversing easily with*

*. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear*

*their concerns, as I often see done."*

— Fitzwilliam Darcy, Chapter 3

Darcy's social awkwardness is not rudeness — it is the absence of vanity. He will not pretend interest he doesn't feel. This is why Elizabeth's eventual assessment — 'He is not at all what I expected' — is so important: she was judging his pride as vanity, and she was wrong.

## 3. Wickham — Vain Without Being Proud

Wickham is the novel's purest example of vanity. He has no settled self-regard — his identity is entirely constructed from the reactions of others. He is charming because charm is a tool for generating approval.

He tells Elizabeth his Darcy story not because he believes in justice but because he correctly identifies that it will make her like him more.

*manner had established him at once in the possession*

*of every virtue."*

— Narrator, describing Elizabeth's first impression o

The phrase 'established him at once' is Austen's signal that something is wrong. Genuine virtue takes time to reveal; performed virtue is instantaneous. Wickham's social fluency — his ability to immediately seem trustworthy — is the hallmark of vanity, not character.

#### 4. Mrs. Bennet — Vanity as Social Anxiety

Mrs. Bennet's vanity takes a different form: she is obsessively concerned with what the neighbourhood thinks of her family. Her daughters' marriages are not primarily about their happiness but about their — and her — social standing. She cannot distinguish between her children's wellbeing and her own reputation.

*ughters happily settled at Netherfield, and all the others*

*ried, I shall have nothing to wish for."*

— Mrs. Bennet, Chapter 1

The comedy of Mrs. Bennet is that her vanity is transparent to everyone except herself. She believes she is a devoted mother; the reader sees a woman for whom her daughters are instruments of social performance. Austen's irony is gentle here but unmistakable.

#### 5. Elizabeth — Pride in Danger of Becoming Vanity

Elizabeth's most interesting quality — and her most dangerous flaw — is that her pride in her own judgment can shade into vanity. She prides herself on her ability to read character accurately. But this pride requires an audience: she performs her wit and discernment for others, especially her father. When Darcy's letter exposes the limits of her judgment, she faces a crisis not just of knowledge but of identity.

*I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who*

*abilities! Till this moment, I never knew myself."*

— Elizabeth Bennet, Chapter 3

The phrase 'valued myself' is telling: to value oneself in the eyes of others is vanity, not pride. Elizabeth's self-examination here is the moment she converts her performed discernment into genuine self-knowledge — replacing vanity with authentic pride.

