

TITLE & BACKGROUND

Why Is It Called Pride and Prejudice?

The History, Meaning, and Irony Behind Austen's Famous Title

Jane Austen • Pride and Prejudice • 1813
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From 'First Impressions' to 'Pride and Prejudice'

Jane Austen completed the first draft of the novel in 1797 under the title *First Impressions*. It was rejected by the publisher Cadell without even being read. Sixteen years later, heavily revised, it was published in January 1813 under an entirely new title: *Pride and Prejudice*. The change was not cosmetic — it was a philosophical reframing of the novel's entire argument.

1. Why 'First Impressions' Was Abandoned

The original title focused on the mechanism of error: both Elizabeth and Darcy form wrong first impressions of each other. This is accurate but shallow. By 1813, another novel called *First Impressions* had been published, making the title unavailable. But more importantly, Austen's revisions had deepened the novel into something more psychologically complex than a story about snap judgments.

...truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

— Narrator, Opening Line, Chapter 1

The famous opening sentence — unchanged from the 1797 draft — already contains the novel's mature irony: the 'truth universally acknowledged' is immediately shown to be a social prejudice, not a truth at all. The title *Pride and Prejudice* names the two cognitive forces that make such 'universal truths' possible: social pride that ranks people by birth and fortune, and prejudice that mistakes those rankings for moral reality.

2. The Source: Frances Burney's 'Cecilia'

The phrase 'pride and prejudice' appears three times in the final chapter of Frances Burney's 1782 novel *Cecilia*, in which a character delivers a speech lamenting that a marriage has been destroyed by 'PRIDE AND PREJUDICE.' Austen, a devoted reader of Burney, almost certainly borrowed the phrase directly. This is not plagiarism — it is literary conversation. Austen takes Burney's moral diagnosis and makes it her novel's structural engine.

...difference you owe your miseries, so complementary a difference is the result of your own choice."

— Frances Burney, *Cecilia* (1782), Vol. 1, Chapter 17

The difference is significant: in Burney, pride and prejudice are external social forces that destroy the heroine. In Austen, they are internal psychological states that the protagonists must diagnose and overcome in themselves. Austen internalises and deepens Burney's moral framework.

3. Which Character Represents Pride? Which Prejudice?

The traditional reading assigns pride to Darcy and prejudice to Elizabeth — but Austen's own letter suggests she saw it differently. Writing to her sister Cassandra, she called Elizabeth 'as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print.' Austen knew Elizabeth was the more complex figure. In fact, both characters share both qualities:

- Darcy displays pride (social condescension) AND prejudice (dismissing Elizabeth's family without knowing them individually).
- Elizabeth displays prejudice (against Darcy from the first ball) AND pride (in her own superior judgment, which turns out to be systematically wrong).

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

Mary Bennet's pedantic definition is Austen at her most ironic: the least perceptive character in the novel delivers its most philosophically precise observation. Pride, Austen insists, is not simply arrogance. It is the foundational story each person tells about their own worth — and that story can be accurate or catastrophically wrong.

4. The Title as Irony Engine

The title works as irony on multiple levels simultaneously. Most obviously, it announces the two flaws the protagonists must overcome. But it also describes the society that produced them: a world in which social pride (rank, fortune, family name) and social prejudice (against the poor, the new-money, the untitled) are the water everyone swims in.

some enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at

to young ladies who are slighted by other men."

— Fitzwilliam Darcy, Chapter 3

Darcy's famous insult at the Meryton ball is not merely personal rudeness — it is the entire social system speaking through him. He is performing aristocratic pride as a public identity. The title *Pride and Prejudice* names that performance and invites us to watch its dismantling over three volumes.

5. What the Title Promises — And Delivers

By naming the novel's central conflict in its title, Austen makes an unusual contract with the reader: she promises that both pride and prejudice will be examined, challenged, and ultimately transformed. The novel keeps this promise precisely. By the final chapter, Darcy has acknowledged his pride ('I have been a selfish being all my life'), and Elizabeth has acknowledged her prejudice ('Till this moment, I never knew myself'). The title is not just a label — it is a plot summary compressed into three words.

