

## The Victorian Age (1830 - 1900)

### The Society of the Time

The Victorian Age received its name after the English Queen, Victoria, who ruled from 1837 to 1901. During this period British industry and its Imperial power grew enormously. It was a period of relative political stability in England and there was great expansion of the British empire overseas. National consciousness was at its greatest and a solid set of beliefs and attitudes was established. Some of them can still be seen in 21<sup>st</sup> Century England, specially class consciousness.

The first part of the Victorian age marks the development of a strict code of social behavior. British society was divided between the upper and middle classes on the one hand and the large working class on the other hand. "Respectability" was among the most highly rated social traits. Most middle-class Victorians were in such comfortable positions that they refused to see the poverty of their own brothers and sisters - Those who did see the misery attributed it to be a consequence of their own immorality and laziness. In general they were

appalled by even the smallest violation of the rigorous code of respectability that they had created.

The Victorian women were expected to be weak, fragile, and delicate creatures, the essence of uselessness and Puritanism when compared to women of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is believed that if a middle class woman must work - should she be 'unfortunate' enough to be a spinster - should by all means "protect her feminine sensibilities": Distributing Bibles, for example, would have been considered a suitable occupation. Men also had to follow an equally rigid code of behavior and of prohibitions - gambling, the use of offensive language, and drunkenness, would automatically remove a man from the ranks of those considered respectable citizens.

A new strong industrial middle class came to replace the old aristocracy of land owners and the values of this new social order has remained.

### The English Language

Although the Romantic poets wished to introduce a simpler style of language, the English used by the middle classes was excessively polite and formal. Husbands called their wives "Mrs." and were treated with the same courtesy. The greatest formality was reserved to strangers, implying that they were important people. There were groups of people, such as the prosperous salesmen and the newly rich, who exaggerated the use of English. They carried the formality in the spoken language to absurd lengths. This "special" way of speaking

is known as "genteelism" which seeks to use a more sophisticated synonym in place of the common word. The genteel Victorians would never "help themselves to a slice of bread and jelly" - but "assisted themselves to a portion of bread with preserves"; they would never 'start a meal' - they would 'commence a collation'; they would never "use toothpaste" - but "employed dentifrice"; they would never "shut the door to a room" but "closed the portal to an accommodation".

### Jane Austen: (1775-1817)

Born in 1775, in the town of Steventon in Hampshire, England. Jane Austen died in 1817, a spinster. Austen was a clergyman's daughter. For her day, she was well educated, an education that was received primarily at home. Like her heroines, Austen grew up in comfortable, upper-middle class surroundings. Her novels are marked by their social insights and the interpersonal relationship of the pivotal fami-



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lies in the stories. Her novels are primarily novels of dialog, with little extraneous descriptions. Jane Austen is celebrated as being the first, outstanding, female novelist. She wrote six full-length novels as well as several shorter works. *Pride and Prejudice* is perhaps her most popular novel, gaining popular acclaim as soon as it was first published.

### 'Pride and Prejudice'

*Pride and Prejudice* is an amusing tale about the five Bennet sisters, and their mother's unrelenting drive to get them well married. With a scathing wit, Austen highlights the follies and foibles of a society in which a woman is only judged by who she marries, and a society in which a 'good-match' is more important than personal happiness. As the story opens, a young and wealthy, and most importantly single man, by the name of Mr. Bingley moves into the neighborhood. Mrs. Bennet wants to make his acquaintance straight away so that he can be introduced to her daughters before he has a chance to meet any of the other eligible girls in the neighborhood.

Mr. Bingley, much to Mrs. Bennet's joy, is taken, straightaway with her daughter Jane. Mr. Bingley also happens to have a rich friend by the name of Mr. Darcy whom everyone hopes will marry Elizabeth, thereby getting the two oldest girls well-settled. And once settled, they can help get their younger sisters well-married. To complicate matters, the Bennet estate is entailed to a male relative, Mr. Collins, who will inherit everything when Mr. Bennet dies. Mr. Collins, being a gentleman feels that this is unfair, so to even up matters, decides to marry one of the Bennet girls, preferably one of the eldest.

Elizabeth and her interactions with Darcy are the primary focus of the story. Throughout, Elizabeth has an undue influence over Jane, just as Darcy has over Bingley. Elizabeth is a strong willed young woman, and Darcy an arrogant, self-centered aristocrat. Together, they are explosive! In addition to Elizabeth and Jane, Austen also takes a

detailed look at one of the younger daughters, Lydia, who runs away with a Mr. Wickam. A move that not only ruins her own reputation, but which could also have the effect of ruining her sisters chances of ever making a good match.

Throughout, this story is told with humor and is full of intelligent insights into English society. It offers the reader a unique glimpse into the Victorian Age. The following extract includes Chapters I and II.

### Chapter I

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

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four<sup>1</sup> to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas<sup>2</sup>, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh, single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand<sup>3</sup> a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? how can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome? You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design<sup>4</sup> in settling here?"

"Design? Nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

"I see no occasion<sup>5</sup> for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better; for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party."

"My dear, you flatter me. I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up

daughters, she ought to give over<sup>6</sup> thinking of her own beauty."

"In such cases a woman has not often much beauty to think of."

"But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr. Bingley when he comes into the neighbourhood."

"It is more than I engage<sup>7</sup> for, I assure you."

"But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment<sup>8</sup> it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account; for in general, you know, they visit no newcomers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him if you do not."

"You are over-scrupulous, surely. I daresay Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls; though I must throw in' a good word for my little Lizzy."

"I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving her the preference."

"They have none of them much to recommend them;" replied he - "they are still all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters."

"Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves."

"You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."

"Ah, you do not know what I suffer."

"But I Dupe you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighbourhood."

"It will be no use to us if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them."

"Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty I will visit them all."

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts<sup>9</sup>, sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean<sup>10</sup> understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get their daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

### Chapter II

Mr. Bennet was among the earliest of those who waited on<sup>11</sup> Mr. Bingley. He had always intended to visit him, though to the last always assuring his wife that he should not go; and till the evening after the visit was paid she had no knowledge of it. It was then disclosed in the following manner. Observing his second

daughter employed in trimming a hat, he suddenly addressed her with:

"I hope Mr. Bingley will like it, Lizzy."

"We are not in a way to know what Mr. Bingley likes," said her mother resentfully, "since we are not to visit."

"But you forget, mamma," said Elizabeth, "that we shall meet him at the assemblies<sup>12</sup>, and that Mrs. Long has promised to introduce him."

"I do not believe Mrs. Long will do any such thing. She has two nieces of her own. She is a selfish, hypocritical woman, and I have no opinion<sup>13</sup> of her."

"No more have I," said Mr. Bennet, "and I am glad to find that you do not depend on her serving you<sup>14</sup>."

Mrs. Bennet deigned not to make any reply; but, unable to contain herself, began scolding one of her daughters.

"Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for Heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces."

"Kitty has no discretion in her coughs," said her father; "she times them ill<sup>15</sup>."

"I do not cough for my own amusement," replied Kitty fretfully. - "When is your next ball to be, Lizzy?"

"To-morrow fortnight."

"Ay, so it is," cried her mother. "And Mrs. Long does not come back till the day before; so it will be impossible for her to introduce him, for she will not know him herself."

"Then, my dear, you may have the advantage of your friend, and introduce Mr. Bingley to her."

"Impossible, Mr. Bennet, impossible, when I am not acquainted with him myself; how can you be so teasing?"

"I honour your circumspection. A fortnight's acquaintance is certainly very little. One cannot know what a man really is by the end of a fortnight. But if we do not venture, somebody else will; and, after all, Mrs. Long and her nieces must stand their chance, and therefore, as she will think it an act of kindness if you decline the office<sup>16</sup>, I will take it on myself."

The girls stared at their father Mrs. Bennet said only, "Nonsense, nonsense!"

"What can be the meaning of that emphatic exclamation?" cried he. "Do you consider the forms of

introduction, and the stress that is laid on them, as nonsense? I cannot quite agree with you there. -What say you, Mary? For you are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books, and make extracts."

Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.

"While Mary is adjusting her ideas," he continued, "Let us return to Mr. Bingley."

"I am sick of Mr. Bingley," cried his wife.

"I am sorry to hear that; but why did not you tell me so before? If I had known as much this morning, I certainly would not have called on him. It is very unlucky; but as I have actually paid the visit, we cannot escape the acquaintance now."

The astonishment of the ladies was just what he wished - that of Mrs. Bennet perhaps surpassing the rest; though when the first tumult of joy was over she began to declare that it was what she had expected all the while.

"How good it was in you, my dear Mr. Bennet! But I knew I should persuade you at last. I was sure you loved your girls too well to neglect such an acquaintance. Well, how pleased I am! and it is such a good joke, too, that you should have gone this morning, and never said a word about it till now."

"Now, Kitty, you may cough as much as you choose," said Mr. Bennet; and as he spoke he left the room, fatigued with the raptures of his wife.

"What an excellent father you have, girls!" said she, when the door was shut. "I do not know how you will ever make him amends<sup>17</sup> for his kindness; or me either, for that matter. At our time of life it is not so pleasant, I can tell you, to be making new acquaintance every day; but for your sakes we would do anything. - Lydia, my love, though you are the youngest, I daresay Mr. Bingley will dance with you at the next ball."

"Oh," said Lydia stoutly, "I am not afraid; for though I am the youngest, I'm the tallest."

The rest of the evening was spent in conjecturing how soon he would return Mr. Bennet's visit, and determining when they should ask him to dinner.

## DISCUSSION:

1. From the chapters above can you identify the theme of the Novel?
2. Describe Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's characters
3. What is the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.
4. With which character does Jane Austen sympathize? Why do you believe so?
5. In what manner does Jane Austen satirize the situation? Find examples of her irony.
6. In what way do these extracts reflect the Victorian society?

<sup>1</sup> four horse carriage

<sup>2</sup> religious feast celebrated on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September

<sup>3</sup> four or five thousand pounds

<sup>4</sup> objective, reason (archaic)

<sup>5</sup> reason (archaic)

<sup>6</sup> stop

<sup>7</sup> intend to do (archaic)

<sup>8</sup> marriage (archaic)

<sup>9</sup> win (archaic)

<sup>10</sup> limited (archaic)

<sup>11</sup> presented himself (archaic)

<sup>12</sup> local balls (archaic)

<sup>13</sup> low opinion (archaic)

<sup>14</sup> helping you

<sup>15</sup> times them badly

<sup>16</sup> responsibility

<sup>17</sup> thank him (archaic)

### Did you know that:

- Austen received little formal education, was tutored at home by her father, and lived with her family throughout her life?
- Austen's novels were originally published anonymously?
- Austen never left the south of England and had little or no contact with the literary community of London?
- Although her work received positive reviews, she was not a popular novelist during her lifetime?