

IB Extended Essay

How does Jane Austen use literary techniques to represent the role of women in early 1800s society in *Pride and Prejudice*?

Topic: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and women's role in early 19th century

Subject: English B

Session: May 2026

Word count: 3616

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Introduction

The second novel Jane Austen published was *Pride and Prejudice* which was released at the early moments of regency era in 1813. Austen was born in England to a middle-class family in 1775. She was mostly educated at home yet there was a short period of time she spent at Abbey School. When she was merely twelve years old, Austen was already writing. In 1795 she began to write her first novels which is known as her productive phase. In 1801 her family moved to a place called Bath (it was known as a resort town for the wealthy which had many gossips). It is said that Austen lived a quiet life. Though her quite life, Austen had access to the greater world through the help of her brothers resulting in Austen and her sister taking part in the privileged life of the gentry. Through her life she met many wealthy people and experienced privileged life which was reflected in most of her fiction. (Jane Austen , 2025)

Jane Austen was born in Georgian era yet most of her books were written and published in late Georgian era that is also known as the Regency era. The official Regency era was the nine-year period between 1811 and 1820 when George IV, Prince of Wales governed the United Kingdom by proxy as “Regent” while George III, his father, descended into madness after suffering from a blood cell disorder known as porphyria or bipolar disorder. Even though the official records suggest that the regency era lasted only nine years, for its cultural impact it is also referred as anytime between 1795 and 1837. In the regency era the society was rigidly stratified. The aristocracy and gentry had control over political power and wealth while the working classes

laboured in abject conditions. The Regency era women's roles were mainly limited by class and law. In all classes, a woman's duties were catered around marriage and family. With some contrasts, women from working class often laboured out of necessity while upper class women were expected to remain at home and marry well. Among the aristocracy and gentry, marriage was seen as an economic and social imperative, they were usually arranged. Legally, women had no independent rights. Upon marriage a woman's legal existence was subsumed under her husbands. In other words, married women were not allowed to own any property of their own and was seen as the property of their husbands. Any inheritance a woman brought into marriage automatically came under her husband's control. Thus, women had little to no legal claim to earnings, property or even their own children, the law treated a married couple as single unit represented by the husband. (regency period, 2026)

Jane Austen is an English author mainly known for her six novels which implicitly criticise and comment on the English landed gentry at the end of 18th century; writing during a period when women had limited social and economic independence. Austen used fiction as a means to examine the moral values, relationships and hierarchies that defined her world. Her novels, though often centered around domestic life and courtship, go far beyond the conventions of romance to explore deeper questions about individual agency, class and gender. The second published novel of Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, stands as one of the most enduring works of English literature for its wit, realism, social insight and also for its sharp commentary on gender and class. The story takes place in late 18th century and early nineteenth century England and it reflects the strict social structure of the Regency period when class hierarchy and gender expectations governed nearly every

aspect of life. The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* follows a linear, chronological narration. Elizabeth Bennet is the main character and the major conflict revolves around her struggle to find a matching husband. Centered around the lives of the Bennet family the narrative follows Elizabeth Bennet as she navigates issues of class, marriage and morality within a tightly structured social world. Austen's keen observation of manners coupled with her use of literary devices reveals the constraints placed upon women whose social value was often determined by marriage and economic dependence rather than intellect or individuality. This essay's aim is to examine how Jane Austen portrayed the reality of her life in one of her novels *Pride and Prejudice* by using literary techniques. (Jane Austen , 2025)

Usage of irony

Irony in literature is referred to the situations when a contrast between reality and expectations occurs. Jane Austen is known for her frequent usage of irony in her fiction. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen used irony in different forms and places throughout the book. The starting line "It is truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2025) is one of the most popular quotes from the book which contains a usage of verbal irony reflecting the society they live in. By this sentence Austen references to the importance of marriage in the Regency era and also it is an irony due to none of the main male characters being interested in marriage but instead the families of females and females themselves being in want of a marriage with a wealthy male. Marriage in modern societies refers to the concept of two individuals who care / love each other having a legal union thus the 'marriage' Jane Austen wrote about is not about romantic companionship but rather having financial stability. The

sentence suggests that marriage is important for men while marrying was what female individual's lives depended on and was an urgency rather than a mere request.

One of the other ways Jane Austen uses irony is at between Mrs. and Mr. Bennet's communication. Mr. Bennet frequently uses irony during their conversations with Mrs. Bennet which shifts his tone into a more mockery one. In the early pages of the novel and throughout the novel during conversations with Mrs. Bennet or his daughters, he has a sarcastic and witty tone that portrays him as if he's not as caring for his family. "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 hope 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 all.' '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, 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 understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news." (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2025) This quotation contains a conversation between Mrs and Mr Bennet which is also their first introduction to the book. Mr. Bennet's attitude towards the concept of taking trouble by meeting new people for his daughter's sake and also mocking his wife's struggles by saying "But I

hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year to come into the neighbourhood” suggests to the reader that Mr. Bennet does not care for his family and is an very ignorant person. His tone and actions represent that even though his family’s majority consist of women, their struggles seem a joke to him portraying how little the women were seen in early 19th century. Moreover, the introduction of Mrs. Bennet containing negative and harsh words such as ‘She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper’ shows that the narrator wants the readers to think that the mother of the main character is actually a worthless in the eyes of her and not as intelligent individual even though she successfully married and took her life into stability suggesting that most women who lived during early 19th century main focus in life being marriage and not growing as individuals. Austen uses irony in *Pride and Prejudice* to highlight the unfair social rules that women face, especially the pressure to marry for security instead of love. She also criticizes the hypocrisy of Regency society.

Characterization and Social expectations

Characterization is a literary device which is describing and providing information about specific characters in their work that is used by writers. Whereas social expectations are set forth to dictate what is considered acceptable in society. In *Pride and Prejudice* social expectations are approached as a part of daily life, as something that is normal thus the focus is not on this topic and since it is portrayed as normal its not as evident as other topics causing the reader to actually think the society in the novel is not much different than the modern society and not feel discomfort even though there are major differences. In addition to this characterization was used to give characters more depth and somewhat reflect the effect of society’s norms on

individuals. While introducing Mrs. Bennet the sentence “The business of her life was to get her daughters married” shows how importance the marriage is for Mrs. Bennet as well as the novel and their society. There are also such cases in the novel when Jane Austen explained the social expectation with details while using characterization: “....A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing drawing, dancing and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2025) Austen found opportunity to place the social norms in the readers mind without trying to achieve it by only using her characters. The occasions such as Mrs. Bennet purposely causing Jane to get sick to spend more time with Mr. Bingley, women talking behind each other’s back to win a male’s attention, male character talking about females as object are all references to the social expectations by using characterization. Women in the Regency era were expected to please their husbands regardless of their needs thus Austen’s usage of characterization mirrors the society she lived in. In addition, Elizabeth Bennet’s character is a massive contrast to how women are expected to behave resulting in her being miss-talked and perceived as an extraordinary individual. In the novel, most of the female characters are shown to be only interested in any male who happens to have a good yearly fortune resulting in Elizabeth being exactly opposite of social expectations since Elizabeth married because she loved Darcy and not only wanted to gain stability. Characterization of male characters are rather harsher and more direct while portraying the real society. “They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every

respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others.” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2025) This quotation is justifying the rude and unmannered acts of Darcy for he is a wealthy man whom many females desire to marry suggesting in that era most of the women did not have a chance to have a negative opinion about their spouses. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen presents several female characters to highlight how women are expected to marry, stay modest, and rely on men. Through Elizabeth Bennet, she also shows that these expectations are limiting and can be questioned.

Symbolism and Imagery

Symbolism is a figure of speech when something is used to represent another thing whilst imagery is specific choices of words that makes the reader recall such things as images or mental pictures, that engage one of the five senses: sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. Throughout the novel there are many usages of imagery and also repeated usages of symbolism. Through out the novel estates and houses symbolise wealth and stability, social and economic power that women are not allowed to have or easily control. The Longbourn also known as the Bennet home is an important symbol to the fact that females are not allowed to inherit any belongings showing that the house they live in, their home is temporary and male dependent. The balls and social events are also an important symbolism. Through out the book the importance of balls is constantly spoken about because of the fact that women have a chance to meet and interact with wealthy men. During balls or social events women are treated as objects that are being displayed rather than human beings. Even though balls are described as a lively atmosphere that is a place where women compete to catch attention and also a place where they are displayed. The imagery causes a

contrast with how the balls are perceived while they are actually a place where a lot of competition occurs. “To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love; and very lively hopes of Mr. Bingley’s heart were entertained.” , “...Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life, as I have this evening; and there are several of them you see uncommonly pretty.” , “Oh! She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very agreeable.” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2025) All of these quotes were about a ball and the quotation that belong to Mr. Bingley are written in a way that the things he says sounds like as if he’s talking about an object rather than a human being. Clothing and appearance had an important if not a critical role in woman’s lives. Women were expected to be clean and classy thus when Elizabeth showed up to see Jane in a muddy dress, the sisters of Mr. Bingley were shocked due to the fact that a woman willingly ruining her appearance was an absurd concept for them. Although there are many different examples for symbolism, the main symbolism is marriage as the central symbol of female life. Due to the fact that women not being able to inherit any belongings or earn their own money, marriage was the only option for women who longed to live a comfortable life. Marriage symbolised economic survival. Jane Austen uses vivid descriptions of settings and social events in *Pride and Prejudice* to show that women are limited by social rules, judged by how they look, and rely on marriage. However, through Elizabeth Bennet, Austen also shows that women can be independent and morally strong despite these limits.

Language and Tone

Language is a method of communication, while tone addresses to the attitude or feelings that a narrator conveys towards the subject, characters or plot through their

usage of language. Language is a set of gestures and words and phrases with meaning behind them which is used as a tool to convey a message. *Pride and Prejudice* main tone is a critical tone where the narrator mocks the characters while also discussing social injustices they go through. *Pride and Prejudice* implies that the wealthy individual of the story are not inherently cleverer or superior. With the help of language Austen sets

a critical tone towards characters whom fixate on social status. The overall style of *Pride and Prejudice* is ironic and witty. The narrator constantly points out that something may appear to have a meaning but actually have a completely different meaning that contradicts the other. The conversations between various characters and their inner monologue also help to the ironic style by making gaps between what the characters actually say and what can the reader interpret about the actuality of the situation the characters are in. Characters with lack of self-awareness oftenly make comments that show they are unaware of the reality around them whilst characters that have a better self-awareness sometimes purposely say things that contradict what they are actually meaning reflecting the opposite of what they feel. Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth are examples to characters who frequently use this way of verbal irony in their speech. For example, the dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet where Mr. Bennet says his wife that “if your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, if she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley,” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2025) what Mr. Bennet says contradicts with what he is implying since he mean quite the opposite of what he says. He implies that what Mrs. Bennet is doing because of her determination towards Jane’s marriage is unbelievable and even foolish for Mrs. Bennet’s willingness to endanger their daughter’s health for

marriage. The purpose of the way the perspective is shown is to express the reader the absurdity of the situation. Such as it is in this example, as in many others when Mr. Bennet speaks to his wife ironically, the act of irony is exaggerated furtherly due to the oblivious act of Mrs. Bennet to the fact that her husband is mocking her. Just as Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth also regularly makes statements that do not reflect her true meaning. For example the time when discussing the Bingley sisters she says to Jane, “Do clear them too or we shall be obliged to think ill of somebody,” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2025) she does not actually expect or want Jane to persuade her that nobody is at fault. In fact, Elizabeth is actually revealing that she has already made up her mind about the events being discussed and is firmly convinced that the Bingley sisters have behaved badly. Austen’s ironic style is important to the novel for two main reasons. First, the style adds vibrancy and interest to relatively straightforward plot events. The witty and ironic way in which *Pride and Prejudice* is written has always been a major part of its appeal, and therefore an appreciation of Austen’s style is essential to an appreciation of the novel. Second, the ironic style is linked to the themes of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Characters in the novel often misinterpret events and behaviour, and this confusion tends to exist because of the frequent gaps between literal and actual meaning. (*pride and prejudice*, 2022)

Conclusion

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* offer a criticism to the status of women in early nineteenth-century society by characterization, irony, imagery, symbolism, language, and tone. By creating a range of female characters Austen shows that women’s lives were shaped by social expectations focused on marriage, reputation,

and dependence on men. Characters such as Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Lydia Bennet and Jane Bennet are some characters that are example to these pressures, showing that while some women conform to societal norms for security, others challenge or resist them. This diversity in characterization portrays that women were not inherently passive or limited rather were restricted by the social norms. Usage of irony reinforces the criticism by exposing contradictions within Regency era values. The novel's opening line, which portrays marriage as a "truth universally acknowledged," directly shows how society reduces women's lives to the pursuit of husbands. Throughout the narrative, ironic commentary and dialogue reveal that societal ideals, such as marrying for financial security rather than affection are. Showing that Austen criticises the system that prioritizes economic and social considerations over women's happiness, while also having a light and humorous tone that enhances the effectiveness of her criticism. Imagery and symbolism are used to emphasize the restricted position of women furtherly. Houses and estates (such as Longbourn and Pemberley) represent stability and power, yet women are largely excluded from ownership or control which highlights their economic dependence. Social events such as balls and drawing rooms, though described attractively, act as places where women are competing for marriage. Restrictions on movement and physical space also portray social limitations. Through these images and symbols, Austen demonstrates that women's lives were restricted both physically and socially. Austen's language and tone play an important place in portraying women's position. The formal and polite style of dialogue illustrates the expectation that women must be controlled, and careful in their speech. At the same time, Austen's ironic and satirical tone exposes the absurdity of these expectations, particularly in her portrayal of characters like Mrs Bennet and the obsession with female "accomplishments." By

giving Elizabeth Bennet a witty and confident voice, Austen suggests that women possess intelligence and individuality even if society attempts to limit their expression. Ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* reveals that ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates that women in early nineteenth-century society were constrained by economic dependence, social expectations, and rigid behavioural codes. However, Austen does not depict these circumstances as immutable. Through Elizabeth's eventual marriage, the novel presents a more optimistic vision of relationships founded on mutual respect, understanding, and equality. In this way, Austen both reflects the realities of women's lives in her era and subtly challenges them, suggesting that women merit greater autonomy, respect, and individual recognition.

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