

Background: Pride and Prejudice

INTRODUCTION

READER'S GUIDE

1. Social Classes British society in the early 19th century consisted of three classes. Members of the *lower class* owned no property or wealth and made their living by manual labor or service to the higher classes. Members of the *middle class*, or *bourgeoisie*, possessed some property and wealth and generally worked at a trade or profession. Members of the *upper class*, which made up barely 2% of the entire British population, were wealthy landowners who did not have to work at all for a living.

The upper class itself was further divided into three levels. At the top was the *aristocracy*, hereditary titled lords, or peers, of immense property and power. In the middle was the *gentry*, wealthy landowners, such as those of whom Jane Austen writes. At the bottom of the upper class was the *squirearchy*, independent families with just enough property to enable them to live comfortably without working.

2. The Facts of Wealth The men and women who appear in the pages of *Pride and Prejudice* belong to the British upper-class landed gentry. Even the less wealthy among them, such as the Bennet family, live comfortably on an estate (a large farm) that generates enough income for them to afford several servants, a carriage, and other luxuries.

We are told that Charles Bingley has an income (in British pounds) of "four or five thousand a year" (page 1, line 27), and that Darcy enjoys an income of "ten thousand a year" (page 6, lines 30–31). What do these numbers mean?

In translating the value of British money almost 200 years ago into American money today, we have to allow for the changes caused by inflation, taxes, and other factors. Bingley's yearly income of some £5,000 (five thousand British pounds) in 1800 would amount to a comparable income today of about one million American dollars a year. Darcy's yearly income, in terms of American dollars, would be about two million dollars a year. The Bennet family lived on a modest gentry income of about £1,000 to £2,000, or almost a quarter of a million dollars (\$250,000) a year.

Compare this wealth of the landed gentry with the typical income of members of the lower class. In the period of the novel, a skilled worker who had a family to support would hardly have made £100 (about \$8,000) a year. An unskilled worker may have made less than £40 (about \$3,200) a year. Such figures as these give

you a better idea of the great differences in wealth between the social classes of Great Britain in Jane Austen's time.

3. Trade The upper class looked down upon people who engaged in trade. At that time, trade included occupations ranging from storekeeping to manufacturing and medicine. A true gentleman lived off the income from his estate, never by the work of his hands or brain.

4. Limited Economic Opportunities for Women In Jane Austen's society, marriage and inherited money were the only sources of security for women of the gentry. An unmarried woman with no independent income might have to resign herself to the lowly status of a governess, or teacher, to the children of some other family of the gentry class. Otherwise, she lived as a dependent spinster within her own family, as did Jane Austen. Writing had not yet become a respectable career for a woman. This helps explain why, during Jane Austen's lifetime, not one of her published and popular novels bore her name.

5. Primogeniture According to this very ancient "law of the first-born," the eldest son inherited all of an estate. Younger sons were forced to join the Church, buy a commission in the Army or Navy, or emigrate to one of the far-flung colonies of the British Empire.

6. Male Entailment Under this law, property was left to the nearest male relative. Thus, a family with no sons, such as the Bennet family, could see its estate inherited by a distant male cousin (Mr. Collins).

7. Social Formality Modern Americans are generally quite informal in their speech, dress, and other social manners. It may be difficult for you to realize just how formal social life was among the gentry in Jane Austen's time.

The formality of the period is well reflected in the speech and writing of the gentry. Most of Jane Austen's people express themselves in grammatically perfect, well-rounded sentences embellished with choice diction and elegant phrasing. Faced with this stately elegance of discourse, you may well ask, "Did people in those days really talk like that?"