

Society in Pride and Prejudice

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Pride and Prejudice depicts a society in which a woman’s reputation is of the utmost importance. A woman is expected to behave in certain ways. Stepping outside the social norms makes her vulnerable to ostracism. This theme appears in the novel, when Elizabeth walks to Netherfield and arrives with muddy skirts, to the shock of the reputation-conscious Miss Bingley and her friends. At other points, the ill-mannered, ridiculous behavior of Mrs. Bennet gives her a bad reputation with the more refined (and snobbish) Darcys and Bingleys.

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| *Mrs Bennet, a foolish and fussy gossip, is the sort who agrees with the novel’s opening words: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” She sees Bingley’s arrival as an opportunity for one of the girls to obtain a wealthy spouse …*  |

The society of the era focuses on:

* The centrality of advantageous marriage as a fundamental social value of that period. In 19th English society, single women’s options used to be extremely limited, and socially prescribed, of course. So, women’s potential and efforts had to be focused on a desperate pursuit of a husband “in possession of good fortune”, as their only means of a secure future; a preoccupation which Austen perceived as absurd, since it only reduced the role of women to that of subservient wives.
* The male dominant society of the period and the inequalities arisen as a result.
* The importance of holding a good reputation in 19th century English society.
* Marrying for love vs marrying for money, status and security.