<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character map</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the author</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character summaries</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note on page references</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background &amp; context</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre, structure &amp; language</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter-by-chapter analysis</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters &amp; relationships</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes, ideas &amp; values</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different interpretations</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions &amp; answers</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample answer</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References &amp; reading</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mr Collins
Clergyman; Mr Bennet's cousin; will inherit Longbourn.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh
Wealthy proprietor of Rosings Park; aunt of Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Colonel Fitzwilliam
Befriends Elizabeth.

Jane Bennet
Eldest Bennet daughter; marries Charles Bingley.

Charles Bingley
Tenant of Netherfield Park; marries Jane.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner
Visit Pemberley with Elizabeth.

Mr and Mrs Bennet
Married for 23 years; he is proprietor of Longbourn estate. Parents of five daughters.

Mary and Catherine (Kitty) Bennet
Third and fourth Bennet daughters.

Lydia Bennet
Youngest Bennet daughter; runs away with Wickham.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner
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Charlotte Lucas
Marries Mr Collins.

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Youngest Bennet daughter; runs away with Wickham.

Colonel and Mrs Forster
He commands Wickham's regiment; she befriends Lydia.

George Wickham
Member of militia regiment; grew up at Pemberley.

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Member of militia regiment; grew up at Pemberley.

Georgiana Darcy
Darcy's sister; once involved with Wickham.

Elizabeth Bennet
20 years old; lives with her family at Longbourn; marries Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Fitzwilliam Darcy
Proprietor of Pemberley estate; falls in love with and marries Elizabeth.

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OVERVIEW

About the author

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 in the village of Steventon in the English county of Hampshire, and was seventh of the eight children of George and Cassandra (nee Leigh). George was rector of the Steventon parish and he and Cassandra also ran a small school for boys of the neighbourhood. The Austen parents were very interested in literature and learning, and Cassandra wrote poetry.

Austen spent some years at boarding school but was predominantly educated at home. She began writing as a child and by her early twenties had completed draft versions of her novels Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice. In 1801 George Austen retired and Jane, along with her parents and elder sister (also named Cassandra) relocated to the resort town of Bath. The move was ostensibly to take advantage of the easier lifestyle and healthier environment of Bath but may also have been designed to enhance the daughters’ marriage opportunities. By this point, Austen had already experienced romantic disappointment. Around 1795 she seems to have fallen in love with a young Irishman named Tom Lefroy and to have had her feelings reciprocated. It was not considered a financially advantageous match, however, as Tom was obliged to enter a career in the law in order to support his family and Jane had no fortune to bring to a marriage. Living in Bath did not bring her into contact with any serious suitors, although in 1802 she initially accepted and then rejected a proposal from a family friend, Harris Bigg-Wither. Her actions in relation to this offer have been interpreted as a rejection of marrying for security or material comfort (Irvine 2005, p.3). Ultimately, Austen’s closest relationship would be with her sister Cassandra, who also remained unmarried following the death of her fiancé.

In 1805 George Austen died and his estate passed to his eldest son James; the Austen women were now dependent on their male relatives for support and were obliged to move in with James and his family. In 1809 they were offered the opportunity to live independently in a cottage in the village of Chawton in their home county of Hampshire. Austen had sold her first novel, Susan (later published as Northanger...
Abbey), in Bath but devoted herself more intensely to writing following the attainment of a secure base in Chawton. It was here that she revised and published *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and that she wrote *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815) and *Persuasion* (published posthumously in 1817). Austen was at work on another novel, *Sanditon*, when she fell ill in 1816. Jane Austen died on 18 July 1817 at the age of 41.

**Synopsis**

The Bennet family’s settled existence in the village of Meryton is disrupted by the arrival of Charles Bingley and his sisters at nearby Netherfield Park. A series of social events brings together Bingley and the eldest Bennet daughter, Jane, and the engagement of the two seems increasingly likely. The Bennet family also becomes acquainted with Bingley’s friend, the rich and imperious Fitzwilliam Darcy, who quickly makes himself disagreeable to the neighbourhood. The second Bennet daughter, Elizabeth, expresses a particular dislike for Darcy. The Bennet family is further unsettled by the sudden appearance of Mr Bennet’s cousin, Mr Collins, who stands to inherit the family estate. Having been encouraged by his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, to find a wife, he proposes to Elizabeth and is rejected, to the considerable anger and annoyance of Mrs Bennet. Mr Collins promptly transfers his attentions to Elizabeth’s friend, Charlotte Lucas, who does accept his offer of marriage.

The youngest Bennet daughters, Catherine (Kitty) and Lydia, are excited by the arrival of a militia regiment in the neighbourhood and the family quickly befriends many of the officers, including the charming and gregarious George Wickham. Wickham, the son of the elder Mr Darcy’s steward, tells Elizabeth of his mistreatment at the hands of the younger Mr Darcy, information that strengthens her animosity towards Darcy. Meanwhile, Jane’s hopes for marriage to Bingley are compromised by his return to London and by his sisters’ cool behaviour towards her. Bingley’s own inattention seems to confirm his disinterest.

Elizabeth visits Charlotte at her new home and is introduced to Lady Catherine. Darcy and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, arrive to visit their aunt at this time. The Colonel informs Elizabeth of Darcy’s recent
intervention in a friend’s relationship with a young woman, a connection. Darcy had considered unsuitable. Elizabeth assumes the Colonel is referring to Bingley and Jane and is incensed. When Darcy subsequently proposes to her, his arrogant demeanour and her understanding of his role in Wickham’s and Jane’s affairs prompts a spirited refusal. Darcy writes to Elizabeth, refuting Wickham’s claims and declaring he influenced Bingley because he believed Jane’s cool attitude was indicative of a lack of real feeling on her part. Further reports of Wickham’s behaviour and closer acquaintance with Darcy following a visit to his estate force Elizabeth to reassess her initial impressions of both men.

Wickham’s dissolute (immoral) nature is later confirmed when the family receives news of his and Lydia’s departure from Brighton. They are pursued by Elizabeth’s uncle, Mr Gardiner, and forced to marry and salvage the Bennet family’s reputation. Elizabeth later learns that Darcy was instrumental in achieving this resolution – news that further complicates her feelings for him. Bingley meanwhile has returned to Netherfield Park; he resolves issues with Jane and they are engaged, to the delight of the whole family. The subsequent revelation of Elizabeth and Darcy’s engagement produces emotions that are more mixed, from Mr Bennet’s incredulity to Lady Catherine’s outrage. The couple remain resolute and their happy future is assured.

Character summaries

Mr Bennet
Patriarch of the Bennet family. He belongs to the minor gentry, deriving a relatively small income from the land attached to his estate. Very fond of Elizabeth. As Mr Bennet has no sons, the inheritance of the estate will pass to Mr Collins.

Mrs Bennet
Mr Bennet’s wife of 23 years. Her principal object in life is to find husbands for her five daughters. Dotes on Lydia and is less fond of Elizabeth.

Jane Bennet
The eldest Bennet daughter. She is particularly close to Elizabeth and they share each other’s confidences. Befriended by the Bingley sisters
and ultimately marries their brother Charles. Known for her beauty and
good nature.

Elizabeth Bennet
Twenty years old; the second-eldest of the Bennet sisters. A bright and
independent woman. She is her father’s favourite and her mother’s least
favourite daughter. Marries Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Mary Bennet
The third daughter; considered the ‘intellectual’ of the family. She busies
herself with reading and music.

Catherine (Kitty) Bennet
The fourth daughter; 18 years old. She is particularly close to Lydia and
shares her enthusiasm for amusements.

Lydia Bennet
The youngest Bennet daughter; 15 years old. Has much in common
with Mrs Bennet and is her mother’s particular favourite. Very prone to
flirting, especially with the officers in Meryton. She runs away with, and
eventually marries, George Wickham.

Fitzwilliam Darcy
Twenty-eight years old; the owner of the magnificent country estate,
Pemberley. Has an income of 10,000 pounds a year, but a reputation
as a proud and ill-mannered man. Close friend of Charles Bingley and
potential suitor of Caroline Bingley and Anne de Bourgh. He falls in love
with, and marries, Elizabeth Bennet.

Charles Bingley
Inherits the fortune his father built through manufacturing and trade
interests; leases Netherfield Park with a view to establishing his own
country estate. He falls in love with Jane and, despite objections of his
family and close friend Darcy, succeeds in marrying her.

Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst
Charles Bingley’s sisters; each command a fortune of 20,000 pounds.
They join him at Netherfield, although their principal residence
remains in London. Louisa is married to Mr Hurst. Caroline endeavours,
unsuccessfully, to attract the romantic interest of Darcy.
Charlotte Lucas
Twenty-seven years old; the eldest child of Sir William and Lady Lucas; Elizabeth’s closest friend. She marries Mr Collins and moves to Hunsford parsonage.

Sir William Lucas and Maria Lucas
Sir William’s role as former mayor of Meryton led to his being knighted by George III. His daughter Maria shares her father’s awe for titles and status.

Mr Collins
Twenty-five years old; Mr Bennet’s cousin. The Bennets’ closest male relative; according to the laws of entail, stands to inherit Longbourn. A clergyman, he has recently secured the living of Hunsford parsonage. Under the patronage of Lady Catherine de Bourgh; shows excessive gratitude to her. Marries Charlotte Lucas.

Mr Wickham
A member of the militia regiment posted to Meryton. He is the son of the late Mr Darcy’s steward and has known Fitzwilliam Darcy since childhood. He marries Lydia and accepts a station in the north of the country.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Anne de Bourgh
A wealthy widow of high social standing, Lady Catherine lives with her daughter Anne at Rosings Park. She is the sister of Darcy’s late mother and intends for him to marry Anne.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner
Mr Gardiner, Mrs Bennet’s brother, is a businessman in trade in London. He and his wife have four small children. Mrs Gardiner is particularly close to Jane and Elizabeth; she often acts as Elizabeth’s confidante.

Colonel Fitzwilliam
Darcy’s cousin. Accompanies the latter on a visit to their aunt, Lady Catherine; develops a friendship with Elizabeth.

Georgiana Darcy
Sixteen years old; Darcy’s sister. It is rumoured that she is due to marry Charles Bingley. Was previously involved with Wickham.
Colonel and Mrs Forster
Colonel Forster commands the militia regiment stationed in Meryton. His wife becomes a close friend of Lydia; invites her to join them when the militia relocates to Brighton.

Mrs Reynolds
Housekeeper at Pemberley. Has known Darcy since he was a child; has a high opinion of him.

Note on page references
Throughout this text guide we have provided page references to the two editions of *Pride and Prejudice* published by Penguin: the ‘Black Classics’ edition (with the black strip across the bottom of the front cover, 2003), and the ‘Red Classics’ edition (2006). Page numbers are given as B and R respectively.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Social hierarchy

When Austen’s niece Anna ventured into writing, the novelist commented on a manuscript the latter sent her to critique: ‘3 or 4 families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on … You are but now coming to the heart and beauty of your book’ (Kelly 1989, p.116). Austen discovered a rich seam of material in the dynamics of families and small communities. Yet even within this limited perspective, *Pride and Prejudice* offers significant insight into the shifting social strata (layers) of late 18th-century society.

Austen was born into a society undergoing immense change yet still defined by a strict hierarchy which was largely determined by economic power. At the top of the hierarchy were the aristocracy, whose status was based on inherited wealth. The landed gentry existed on a social plane below the aristocracy. Their wealth was also inherited but based on property ownership; they lived on the interest generated by their capital. The aristocracy and gentry formed the power base of the old social order, and in Austen’s time their power was beginning to be challenged. The growth of a capitalist system (an economic model based on private rather than state ownership of commerce and industry) in the wake of the