



**Great Books**  
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*Pride and  
Prejudice*

**Examine your  
Humanity**

**Melbourne  
Public  
Humanities  
Initiative**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE**

## An introduction from Professor Clara Tuite

As an icon of the literary canon with a dynamic afterlife as a contemporary popular-culture classic, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is an exemplary 'crossover' phenomenon. It is both a bumptious fairy tale of romantic wish-fulfillment and the initiatory modern novel of social realism and observation. In its supreme self-reflexiveness, *Pride and Prejudice* is also a parable of style and aesthetic refinement, honing its ironies and its cool omniscience through a world of social detail and a new kind of psychological interiority that was seen to 'proclaim a knowledge of the human heart' (to quote Austen's contemporary Walter Scott).

A masterpiece both of indirection and assured comic exuberance, *Pride and Prejudice* is the most canonical and popular of Austen's novels – the carriage that transported the divine Jane along her breezy, inexorable way to 21st century world domination. Yet its relentless comedic spirit has been seen to hold it back, not least by Austen herself, who found it 'too light & bright & sparkling': 'it wants shade', she wrote to her sister, Cassandra.

The great critic Mary Lascelles went so far as to claim that *P&P's* 'playfulness' marks both its 'charm' and its 'limitations'. 'Limitations' is not an idea we tend to associate with great books, much less those written by Jane Austen – but this lecture explores that idea by considering *Pride and Prejudice* in relation to Austen's larger oeuvre and what she accomplished in her later work, as it moved to darker notes and more discordant emotional poignancies and satiric asperities. It draws out those moments in *Pride and Prejudice* that veer toward shade and that mark Austen's particular art of seeing in the dark beyond the light and bright and sparkling. It will consider, too, what was lost in that later work that can only be found in *Pride and Prejudice* and its re-reading.



[Clara Tuite](#) received her BA Honours degree from the Australian National University in 1988 and her PhD from the University of Sydney in 1996. She joined the University of Melbourne in 1997. In 2017 she was elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Tuite specializes in eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature and cultural history, with a focus on the historical, cultural and social contexts of Romantic literature. She has a particular interest and expertise in the work of Jane Austen and George Gordon, Lord Byron.

## Extra resources

[‘I never thought I could make it on my own’: Why you need to read Jane Austen before marriage](#), *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2022

Dr Ruth Wilson, author of the recently published *The Jane Austen Remedy*, reflects on how Austen's characters mirrored her own, and how the lessons they learned could help her too.

[The wicked wit of Jane Austen](#) by Iseult Gillespie (5 min)

A short and delightfully animated video about how English novelist Jane Austen's works explored the dependence of women on marriage in the Regency society.

[How to Misread Jane Austen](#), *The New Yorker*, 2020

Journalist and Harvard University Professor of English, Louis Menand, writes about the two different types of Austen readers: the leisure-focused and the social critic. Don't miss his comments on *30 Great Myths About Jane Austen*, co-authored by Claudia L. Johnson and your 10 Great Books presenter, Professor Clara Tuite!

[Austenland movie trailer](#), 2013

Directed by Jerusha Hess and based on Shannon Hale's 2007 novel of the same name. The film stars Keri Russell as a single young woman obsessed with *Pride and Prejudice*, who travels to a British resort where the Austen era is recreated.



She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me.

C. E. Brock illustration for the 1895 edition of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (Chapter 3) : "She is not handsome enough to tempt me".

## Discussion questions

### Are you a first-timer or Austen veteran?

As such a classic Great Book of both the literary canon and popular culture, *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel that many readers have encountered more than once, and often in different forms and media. If this is your experience—to be re-reading *Pride and Prejudice*—what has stood out for you on re-reading the novel for this occasion? And, if this is your first reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, what first impressions of the novel did you come away with from this experience?

### And they lived happily ever after...

*Pride and Prejudice* is often referred to as a fairy-tale. Do you think this is helpful to understanding what makes the novel tick? If so, what qualities of the novel seem to embody this fairy-tale quality? If not, what parts of the story of *Pride and Prejudice* does this idea leave out? In either case, what other tones and genres seem important in capturing what is distinctive and important about the novel's appeal? What more is there to say?

### Oh, the irony!

*Pride and Prejudice* is celebrated as a high-point of Austen's mastery of irony. What seem to you to be some of the key features of this irony? What different forms does it take? That is, how does this irony read and play differently for the modes of comedy, satire or indeed realism (and realistic portraits of character) that we find in the novel? What key examples of irony would you say embody this magisterial Austenian irony?

### Looking inwards

As well as a novel of social detail, *Pride and Prejudice* has been seen to offer new insights into interior life, psychology and emotion. What examples of this strike you most forcefully in your reading of the novel?



Act 1, *Pride and Prejudice*. The drawing-room at Longbourn.

Stage Design for *Pride and Prejudice* by Rex Whistler, 1936