

The careful manners and social distinctions of the British middle and upper classes have never been shown more clearly than in the novels of Jane Austen (1775–1817).

Austen viewed the manners of her own time with wit and gentle satire. In this

excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, confronts haughty Lady Catherine who hopes her own daughter, not middle-class Elizabeth,

will marry aristocratic Mr. Darcy. ♦ As you read, notice the differences in attitudes toward social class. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

From *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

"Hear me in silence [said Lady Catherine]. My daughter and my nephew [Darcy] are

formed for each other. They are descended on the maternal side, from the same noble line;

and, on the father's, from respectable, honourable, and ancient, though untitled, families. Their fortune on both sides is splendid.

They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses;

and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune. Is this to be

endured? But it must not, shall not be! If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have

been brought up."

"In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman;

I am a gentleman's daughter: so far we are equal [Elizabeth replied]."

"True. You are a gentleman's daughter. But who was your mother? Who are your

uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition."

"Whatever my connections may be," said Elizabeth, "if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you."

Questions to Think About

1. What criticisms does Lady Catherine make about Elizabeth's family?

2. Draw Inferences What can you conclude about Elizabeth's character from her response to Lady Catherine?

"Tell me once for all, are you engaged to him?"

Though Elizabeth would not, for the mere purpose of obliging Lady Catherine, have

answered this question; she could not but say, after a moment's deliberation,

"I am not."

Lady Catherine seemed pleased.

"And will you promise me, never to enter into such an engagement?"

"I will make no promise of the kind."

"Miss Bennet, I am shocked and astonished. I expected to find a

more reasonable young woman. But do not deceive yourself into a

belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till you have given me the assurance I require."

"And I certainly never shall give it. I am not to be intimidated into any thing so wholly unreasonable. . . .

You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. How far your nephew might

approve of your interference in his affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine."

Source: *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen (E.P. Dutton, 1976).



Jane Austen

3. Recognize Bias From Lady Catherine's remarks, what can you conclude about upper-class attitudes toward people in the middle class at this time?