

Pride and Prejudice Background Information #2

Money in Pride and Prejudice

Money plays a central role to the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. Because of the entail, the Bennet women will have a bleak financial future after Mr. Bennet dies. When readers recognize this, Mrs. Bennet's pursuit of husbands for her daughters takes on a sense of urgency that supersedes her foolish behavior. Translating the monetary realities that the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* face into modern equivalents helps readers to better understand the characters' motivations and the significance of their actions.

Austen describes people's financial situations throughout *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of actual monetary amounts. Darcy is not simply rich, he has 10,000 pounds a year. When Elizabeth's father dies, she will not only be poor, she will have a mere 40 pounds a year. But what do these figures mean in modern U.S. dollars? Critic Edward Copeland has calculated the value of one pound in Austen's day to be roughly equivalent to 80 dollars now. While he emphasizes that his estimate is not scientific and is probably conservative, such an equivalency helps to put the sums Austen scatters throughout the novel into perspective.

According to Austen, Mr. Bennet's annual income is 2,000 pounds, or 160,000 dollars. Compare that to Darcy's 10,000 pounds or 800,000 dollars. Additionally, the sums Austen gives are often discussed in terms of 4 or 5 percents. These percents refer to the fact that the income the landed gentry earned came from investing their money in secure government bonds. Therefore, Bingley is described as having "four or five thousand a year" because Mrs. Bennet is not sure of what his 100,000 pound inheritance is earning. Similarly, Mr. Collins assumes the lesser amount when he condescendingly informs Elizabeth that he will not reproach her for bringing only "one thousand pounds in the 4 per cents" to their marriage. In other words, Elizabeth will only have a 40 or 50 pound annual income to live off of after her father dies, which translates into 3,200 or 4,000 dollars.

This comparison of Austen's pound with the modern dollar not only clarifies characters' annual incomes, but also exposes the magnitude of certain financial transactions, such as Darcy's dealings with Wickham. First, Wickham inherited 1,000 pounds, or 80,000 dollars from Darcy's father. After dissolving his claim to the clergyman position, Wickham received 3,000 more pounds (240,000 dollars) from Darcy. Within three years, he was again asking Darcy for money, which Darcy refused to give him. Wickham then attempts to elope with Miss Darcy, whose inheritance totals 30,000 pounds (2.4 million dollars). Wickham then runs off with Lydia, whose portion equals Elizabeth's – 40 pounds a year, 1,000 pounds overall. He tells Darcy that he has no intention of marrying Lydia and still plans to marry an heiress. To persuade Wickham to marry Lydia, Darcy must then pay Wickham's debts, totaling 1,000 pounds, or 80,000 dollars in addition to buying his commission at about 450 pounds or 36,000 dollars. Mr. Bennet also conjectures that "Wickham's a fool if he takes her for less than ten thousand pounds," meaning that Darcy probably also paid Wickham an additional 800,000 dollars. Elizabeth's overwhelming gratitude toward Darcy and the debt of her family to him become much clearer in light of these figures in U.S. dollars.