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## Lesson 1

# Regency England: Prereading Activities

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### Objectives

- To define the time period of *Pride and Prejudice*
- To develop inquiry into background components through a Web-Quest

### Notes to the Teacher

In this beginning lesson, students examine a variety of topics to establish context and to build anticipation for reading *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel that is still relevant today even though published two centuries ago. Students conduct a WebQuest to understand the place, time, and social mores of the Georgian and Regency Eras when the book was written and later published. Note that the era most evident in the novel is that of the Regency Age. Assist students in answering the questions about the time period and the author so that they are able to envision such background details as transportation, dress, manners, class rank, and entertainment. The guiding questions for the WebQuest also lead to the themes explored in this unit: family dynamics and sibling rivalries; discovery of the truth about one's faults; and the quest for security in life and in relationships. These themes are emphasized throughout this unit since they are the most relevant to students today.

Another important strategy to immerse students in this book is the significant saying activity on the famous first sentence of the novel, which concludes this lesson. This type of analysis promotes interaction between students and the text, allowing for text-to-self connections. Examining this single sentence leads to later analysis of Jane Austen's uses of irony, humor, and satire.

### Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 1**. This activity works best when books are first given to students, before any reading assignments have been made. Discuss first impressions about the title, author, genre, and format of the novel.

### Suggested Responses

- *Title*—The title, *Pride and Prejudice*, suggests that the book centers on human attitudes and values. Are pride and prejudice necessarily negative attributes? Most covers of the book seem sentimental or romantic.
  - *Author*—Jane Austen lived from December 16, 1775, to July 18, 1817, which means she died at age forty-one. This was during the Georgian and Regency Eras. She lived in the countryside, for the most part near London, and she also spent time in Bath. She was the seventh of eight children born to a country vicar and his wife. She received little schooling, but she was raised in a household that treasured books. She wrote six complete novels and read many of her works out loud to her family, who served as her main critics.
  - *Genre/Format*—Depending on the edition being used, the novel may be divided into three volumes.
2. Distribute **Handout 2**. Give students time to fill in all four boxes completely. Direct students to use the Internet (and perhaps some print sources) to complete the sections.

### Suggested Responses

- *Description*—A complete description of the Regency Era should include the following points: In England, this time period includes the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. It was a time period of elegance and achievement in art and architecture. The aristocracy during this time were given to excess, as seen in the construction of the Brighton Pavilion ordered by the Prince Regent. Social rank was very rigid. This era preceded and led into the Victorian Age.
- *Reason for the Title*—The Regency Era officially began in 1811 when the Prince Regent (later George IV) took the power of the throne from his father, King George III, because the older king was declared mentally unfit to serve. (This is King George of the American Revolution.) The era ended in 1820 when the Prince Regent became George IV upon the death of his father. The dates of the Regency Era are often extended to include the time between 1795 and 1837, thus encompassing both the writing and the later publication of *Pride and Prejudice*. The Prince Regent was an avid reader of Austen's works.
- *Notable People*—Notable people in this era include Napoleon I, the British romantic poets, and Sir Walter Scott.
- *Illustration, Symbol, Logo*—Illustrations should include the dress of the era, which for women was influenced by the

recent excavations of Pompeii. This was called the neoclassical era in fashion. Other images could include soldiers in familiar red coats and the ornate architecture represented by the Brighton Pavilion.

3. Distribute **Handout 3**, and divide students into teams to complete the WebQuest on the handout.

### **Suggested Responses**

1. Austen was the seventh child of eight. She had six brothers and one older sister. She was born in the county of Hampshire in England, a farming community where her father, the Reverend George Austen, was the vicar of the Steventon rectory. When Reverend Austen retired in 1800, his daughters and his wife, Cassandra, went with him to Bath, England, where they lived until after his death in 1805. In 1809, after years of poverty and disruption for the women in the family, Mrs. Austen, Jane, and Cassandra moved into Chawton Cottage, Hampshire, on the estate of the brother Edward Austen-Knight, who had been adopted by wealthy distant relatives. Jane Austen lived in the Chawton Cottage until her final illness in 1817. She died in nearby Winchester, where she had been moved for medical reasons.
2. Young men in the time period were expected to take up their prescribed positions in society: the firstborn son inherited the land. Younger brothers could choose careers in the military, in law, or in the church, but being a tradesman was looked down upon. Their pursuits were those of noblemen: hunting, shooting, fishing, keeping horses and dogs for hunting, carriage driving, membership in exclusive clubs in London, dancing, card games like whist, and visiting friends for long periods of time.
3. Austen's brothers followed their allotted places in society: the oldest, James, went to Oxford University and later became a clergyman, taking the Steventon parish after his father's retirement. Little is said about George, who may have been mentally handicapped and was sent off to live with distant relatives. Edward, the third son, was adopted at the age of twelve by a rich, childless couple distantly related to the Austens. This was not an uncommon practice for a younger son. Edward led a life of privilege and inherited his adoptive parents' land and property in Hampshire and Kent. The next son, Henry, was probably Jane's favorite brother. He also was the least consistent in his careers: he studied at Oxford University, joined the army, tried his hand unsuccessfully in business, and eventually became a church minister. The





## Quotations from Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*

**Directions:** Read the following quotations from Dr. James Fordyce, and answer the questions. Pay particular attention to how the quotations are used ironically by Jane Austen.

### 1. On Masculinity in Women

Nature appears to have formed the [mental] faculties of your sex, for the most part, with less vigor than those of ours, observing the same distinction here as in the more delicate frame of your bodies. . . . But you yourselves, I think, will allow that war, commerce, politics, exercises of strength and dexterity, abstract philosophy, and all the abstruser sciences, are most properly the province of men. I am sure those masculine women, that would plead for your sharing any part of this province equally with us, do not understand your true interests. There is an influence, there is an empire which belongs to you, and which I wish you ever to possess: I mean that which has the heart for its object and is secured by meekness and modesty, by soft attraction and virtuous love.

Describe how Elizabeth seems to fulfill Fordyce's description of a masculine woman. Which character ironically seems to match the woman he described?