**Explain the significance of the title of *Pride and Prejudice***

The society of which Austen writes is concerned with reputation and appearance. Gossip also fuels nearly every social gathering we see, from the public Netherfield Ball to the private gatherings at home with the Bennets. The theme of judgement is one that runs throughout the novel, lying as it does at the centre of all events. Pre-judging people is a favourite pastime, illustrated by the opening sentence: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife’ (opening page). The two main characters are both guilty of pride and prejudice and must learn the errors of their ways before they can live ‘happily ever after’. Elizabeth Bennet, Austen’s heroine, believes herself to be a very shrewd judge of character, but her pride allows herself to fall victim to her own set of prejudices.

The novel can be divided into three parts, structured around Lizzy’s learning process. In the first part, Lizzy immediately shows her prejudice towards Darcy. This may be partly understandable due to his proud and haughty manner at the first ball, which is illustrated by his supercilious assessment of Elizabeth as ‘tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me’ (page 9).

She is further taken in, however, by Mr Wickham, whose lies further convince Lizzy of her soundness of judgement (chapter 18):

> ‘His guilt and his descent appear by your account to be the same,’ said Elizabeth angrily; ‘for I have heard you accuse him of nothing worse than of being the son of Mr Darcy’s steward, and of that, I can assure you, he informed me himself’ (page 66).

Lizzy is not the only character who displays prejudice against Mr Darcy. Society similarly makes their mind up about him (chapter 3):

> His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world and everybody hoped he that he would never come there again (page 8).

Unsurprisingly, Mrs Bennet also decides that Darcy is disagreeable:

> ‘I can assure you,’ she added, ‘that Lizzy does not lose much by not suitting his fancy; for he is a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing. So high and conceited there was no enduring him’ (page 10).
This is ironic, especially when we consider Mrs Bennet’s behaviour, both in public and private, which almost destroys Jane’s prospects with Mr Bingley. Mrs Bennet also rapidly changes her mind on hearing of Darcy’s proposal to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth must learn the truth, not only about Wickham and Darcy, but also about her own pride and prejudice. This is revealed after she has received Darcy’s letter in the pivotal chapter 35, which marks the beginning of her ‘re-education’:

‘Mr Wickham’s chief object was unquestionable my sister’s fortune . . . but I cannot help supposing that the hope of revenging himself on me was a strong inducement. This madam, is a faithful narrative of every event in which we have been concerned together’ (page 137).

Elizabeth isn’t the only character guilty of pride and just as she must learn about ‘herself’, so must Mr Darcy discover the effects of his snobbish, proud manner. He admits to Lizzy in chapter 58, after all misunderstandings have been cleared up between them, that his proud behaviour was ‘unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence’ (page 147).

Pride and prejudice almost prevents the two main characters from marrying, but the importance of the two themes informs almost every aspect of the novel. Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s pride prejudices her against the thought of Darcy ever marrying below his class:

‘Heaven and earth! – of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?’ ... ‘Do you not consider that a connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?’ (page 240).

Furthermore, Lydia’s thoughtless behaviour prejudices society against the possibility that her sisters will ever marry. This is articulated through the snobbish, gleefully patronising attitude of Mr Collins’ letter in chapter 48:

‘this false step in one daughter, will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others, for who, as Lady Catherine herself condescendingly says, will connect themselves with such a family’ (page 198).

Elizabeth and Darcy overcome both pride and prejudice, with the result that there is a happy ending for all. Lydia finds a kind of respectability, even if she is doomed to a lifetime of insecurity and unhappiness; while Darcy realises that his feelings for Elizabeth can overcome those toward her family. Each has learned the error of their reliance on first impressions.