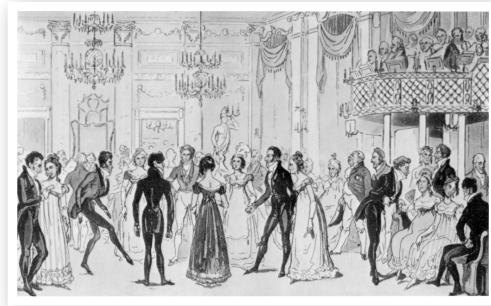




Pride and Prejudice The Regency Era

What was the Regency Era?

In 1811, due to his illness, King George III surrendered his rule to his son, who became known as the Prince Regent, kind of a king-in-waiting. As the Prince Regent was extravagant in his dress, was gluttonous with his food, indulged in garish parties, built extravagant public projects, and lavishly promoted the arts, he quickly became a symbol of excess and elitism. After his father died, the Prince reigned as King George IV for ten years until he was succeeded by his brother William IV.



Generally speaking, the Regency Era (1811–1820) was a time of cultural and artistic achievement, but it was also a time of extreme social stratification. While parts of London were famous for gambling, prostitution, squalor, and drinking, in the countryside, wealthy families built estates

with ornate ballrooms, manicured gardens, extravagant carriage houses, and countless servants. The era saw the invention of the steam printing press, which gave rise to wildly popular novels, mostly about the aristocrats and their exploits. The British defeated Napoleon at Waterloo but lost the War of 1812 to the United States. In the midst of this era, Jane Austen wrote all six of her novels. *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813.

Architecture and the Arts

Among the rich, the Regency Era saw a revival of Classical Greek forms—a period known as Neoclassicism—in architecture, painting, furniture, interior decoration, and even fashion. Details such as meticulous gardens, tall thin windows, delicate ironwork, balconies, triumphal arches, pilaster columns, detached villas, and terrace housing mark the period.



Decorative art, that is, art concerned with aesthetic design above utility, flourished. Ceramics, glassware, basketry, jewelry, metal ware, furniture, textiles, and clothing reached new levels of detail and design. Even in a household such as the Bennets', the walls were decorated, the dishware was artful, and the girls' ribbons were chosen to match their dresses, the occasion, and their moods.

Fashion

Women wore full, high-waisted gowns, usually made of muslin, and often with small puffed sleeves that barely capped their shoulders. Large bonnets and colorful ribbons were popular. If weather or travel demanded, women wore three-quarter length coats called *pelisses*, often trimmed with fur or satin.

Fashionable men, known as *dandies*, prided themselves on appearing refined and tailored. Coats were cutaway in front with tails behind, with tall standing collars and, often, gold buttons. Under the coats were white muslin shirts adorned with cotton neckties and wool or cotton trousers. The frills, lace, and wigs of previous eras were replaced by a tasteful elegance that created an appearance of relaxed nonchalance.



Manners and Class

The customs and etiquette of Jane Austen's time were dramatically different from our own. The upper and middle classes of people were governed by strict codes of conduct. For example, guests were received by men in their business room or library, but by women only in the morning room. Ladies were expected to retire to the withdrawing room after dinner, leaving the men to their port and talk. Laughter was moderated in polite company, especially among women. A bow or curtsy was made when meeting or speaking to someone of a higher social rank. There were a *lot* of rules.

There were layers of social classes, and movement among them was rare. The aristocracy were members of the royal family and high profile officers of the state. The next class included baronets, gentlemen, knights, and others with high incomes, such as Mr. Darcy. Next were doctors, bankers, clergymen, and merchants, such as Mr. Collins. Below them were teachers, lawyers, artists, and shopkeepers, like Mr. Bennet. Then there were craftsmen, agricultural laborers, and household servants. At the bottom of the social ladder were paupers, vagrants, and gypsies. Marriage was one way that women could improve their social status—in fact, it was the only way.