‘The Bennet sisters suffer from the limitations of their parents.’ In light of this comment, discuss the presentation of families in *Pride and Prejudice.*

Pride and Prejudice explores the roles and dynamics of families, particularly through the lens of the Bennet family which takes centre stage. As the novel reveals the various ways in which the Bennet sisters suffer because of their mother’s indelicacy and their father’s negligence, we discern that families are microcosms of society: they ought to provide children with the prudence and propriety needed in later life. By presenting families as potential sources of frustration and shame, Austen ultimately reveals the inseparability of individuals from their families: one’s family will always affect how one is judged by others, and by extension, one’s prospects in life.

First, families are presented as an important training ground for the individual: they have both the capacity and responsibility to mould the characters of children. Austen elucidates this insight most clearly through her principal example of bad parenting: the Bennets’ failure to instil a sense of propriety in their two youngest daughters contributes to their frivolity and recklessness. In Chapter 7, after listening to Lydia and Kitty’s “effusions” about soldiers, Mr Bennet “coolly observe[s]” that “from all he can collect by [their] manner of talking, [they] must be two of the silliest girls in the country”. The unrestrained, excessive quality of “effusions”, coupled with the frivolous subject matter of their conversation (officers), reveals the extreme superficiality of the girls which the family needs to rein in. Despite this serious lack of maturity, Mr Bennet remains wholly unconcerned: he remains emotionally detached (“coolly”), assuming the role of a passive “observe[r]” who is studying their manner of speech rather than correcting their behaviour as their parent. In fact, Mr Bennet uses superlatives (“silliest”) and hyperbole (“in the country”) to ridicule his daughters, focusing on his own sardonic amusement rather than his parental responsibility to educate them. By drawing attention to Mr Bennet’s negligence, Austen draws attention to the role that families play in developing the maturity of children. Mrs Bennet is even less responsible at nurturing her daughters’ character: she not only says that “they are all of them very clever”, but also claims that they “will not think about officers any more than [the Bennet parents] do” when they grow up. This moment is replete with irony: her emphatic use of the absolute “all” and intensifier “very” to affirm the intelligence of her girls stands in stark contrast to their actual foolishness, highlighting her ignorance of and inability to correct her daughters’ flaws as a parent should. Additionally, even though she maintains that her daughters will learn from her example and stop thinking about officers, she talks about Colonel Forster’s appearance in the very next sentence (“I thought Colonel Forster looked very becoming…”), revealing herself to be just as silly as the daughters

she ought to nurture. In this way, Mr and Mrs Bennet are respectively unwilling and unable to educate Lydia and Kitty, with Austen using their irresponsibility as parents to foreground the expectation that families shape children's character for the better. Ultimately, the importance of this familial role is revealed when Lydia suffers greatly as a result of her parents' failures: after she elopes with Wickham, her situation is described as "at best, [...] bad enough", since "neither rational happiness nor worldly prosperity" could be expected for her. Elizabeth expounds on the objective undesirability ("bad") of even the most favourable outcome for Lydia ("at best"), rejecting possibilities of contentment using the negative conjunctions "neither" and "nor" to emphasise her bleak prospects. As we recognise the grave consequences of the Bennets' failure to properly restrain Lydia's recklessness, Austen reminds us of the important role families ought to play: they are supposed to nurture children into sensible, responsible individuals.

Austen also presents families as sources of unhappiness and shame, particularly when one's family members lack the propriety and responsibility they ought to possess. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth and Jane suffer substantial distress because of Mrs Bennet's incivility in social settings. In Chapter 18, Mrs Bennet openly and presumptuously flaunts Jane and Bingley's likely marriage: she "enumerate[s] the advantages of the match", talking about how Bingley is "a charming young man, and so rich, and living but three miles from them…" The excessiveness of Mrs Bennet's boasting — underscored by her listing of his merits ("enumerated"), the polysyndeton and the meandering, run-on line — highlights her indiscreet and indecorous nature. This behaviour by a family member brings Elizabeth great shame: she "blushe[s] and blushe[s] again", with its frequency doubly underscored by the repetition of "blushed" and the adverb "again". In the Regency era where composure and restraint were greatly valued, the fact that Elizabeth could not help but reveal her feelings points to the great extent of her mortification. As such, Elizabeth's family is a source of chagrin for her. In Chapter 53, Elizabeth is rendered "miser[able]" once again by Mrs Bennet's "such unnecessary, such officious attention", so much so that "years of happiness… could not make amends" for it. Mrs Bennet's extreme indelicacy — emphasised by the repeated intensifier "such" — causes Elizabeth a correspondingly large amount of anguish, evinced by its hyperbolic comparison with "years of happiness". The shame that Mrs Bennet brings to her family is further made apparent through the foils of the Gardiners: instead of feeling disgrace, Elizabeth "gloried in every expression, every sentence of her uncle which marked his intelligence, his taste, or his good manners". By underscoring Mr Gardiner's remarkably cultured manners with the repeated absolutes ("every") and cumulative list, Austen emphasises the stark difference between the refined Mr Gardiner and Elizabeth's unbecoming immediate family, reminding us of the humiliation that one can experience on behalf of a family member. Mr Bennet's

indolence adds to these frustrations: his family knew him to be a “most negligent and dilatory correspondent”, and even after Lydia elopes, their “hopes” of receiving an update in Chapter 48 were crushed as there was not “a single line” from him. His complete idleness is not only reinforced by the superlative (“most”) and intensifier (“single”), but also revealed by the fact that the Bennets can only “*hope*” for a reply when an update would usually be *expected* given the gravity of the situation. Once again, the exasperating nature of Mr Bennet’s inaction is emphasised by his juxtaposition with Mr Gardiner, who is “certain” to provide “constant information”: by setting a benchmark of reliability, Mr Gardiner makes Mr Bennet’s negligence appears all the more infuriating for his family. Thus, the Bennet parents’ respective limitations give their daughters distress, and Austen highlights how family ties can often be uncomfortable and humiliating.

Finally, Austen reveals *why* individuals are ashamed by and frustrated with their family members: one’s social status and future prospects are inextricably tied to one’s family, since it will always affect how one is perceived. At various points in the novel, Jane and Elizabeth’s hopes of social advancement and matrimonial bliss appear to be dashed by the deficiencies of the other Bennets. In Chapter 35, Darcy reveals that he separated Bingley from Jane because of the “total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed” by Mrs Bennet in particular, which pointed to “certain evils” and a “most unhappy connection”. In Darcy’s view, the immense incivility of Mrs Bennet makes Jane unsuitable for Bingley to the same degree: his use of absolutes (“all”) and intensifiers (“total”, “so”) to describe Mrs Bennet’s indecorous behaviour mirrors his similar use of absolutes (“certain”), superlatives (“most unhappy”) and extreme diction (“evils”) to describe the bleak prospects of the union. Hence, Darcy’s evaluation of Jane is heavily based on her mother’s actions, with Austen revealing how one will always be judged vis-a-vis one’s family, fairly or otherwise. Families therefore greatly influence one’s future: Elizabeth laments that the “folly and indecorum” of the Bennets has “deprived” Jane of “a situation so desirable in every respect, so replete with advantage, so promising for happiness”. Elizabeth’s tricolon, coupled with her anaphoric repetition of the intensifier “so”, emphasises the pair’s perfect odds of conjugal felicity, which in turn shows us the preciousness of what Jane’s family had taken away from her. In this manner, Austen elucidates how one’s prospects in life unfortunately depend heavily on the respectability of one’s family. In Chapter 46, after Mr and Mrs Bennet’s poor parenting culminates in Lydia’s elopement, Elizabeth fears that her family’s dishonour will drive Darcy away: she declares that “all love must be in vain”, and “everything must sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace”. Elizabeth’s parallel clauses, which include an intensifier (“such”), superlative (“deepest”) and emphatic alliteration (“deepest disgrace”), clearly express the immense public shame that Lydia has brought onto her family.

In Regency England where respectability is paramount, this familial indignity could guarantee the complete destruction of Elizabeth's potential love, as her absolute diction ("all", "everything") and the modal "must" suggests. As such, Austen highlights how one's reputation is inextricable from the family to which one belongs. In fact, an individual is not only affected by their family's behaviour but also their family's social status. In Chapter 56, Lady Catherine objects to Elizabeth's potential marriage to Darcy based on her "connections", asking her: "Who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts?" In Lady Catherine's eyes, Mrs Bennet's birth to an attorney and the Gardiners' living by trade render them inferior in class compared to the landed gentry, a belief underscored by the supercilious tone of her rhetorical questions. In light of this, Austen foregrounds — and in some ways critiques — the way society superficially judges individuals based on their families, revealing the inseparable link that exists between one's future hopes and one's familial relations.

Ultimately, the novel examines the significant functions that families ought to fulfil, and the significant impacts that families have on its members. Lydia and Kitty — suffering from the indulgence and negligence of their parents — reveal the important duty of the family to inculcate in children a sense of propriety. On the other hand, Elizabeth and Jane — suffering from the unbecoming behaviour and socio-economic limitations of their parents — elucidate the capacity of one's family to frustrate one, humiliate one, and affect how one is seen by society at large.