

A Study of the Novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT

Pride and Prejudice is a novel by Jane Austen, first published in 1813. The story follows the main character Elizabeth Bennet as she deals with issues of manners, upbringing, morality, education and marriage in the society of the landed gentry of the early 19th century England. Elizabeth is the second of the five daughters of a country gentleman living near the fictional town of Meryton in Hertfordshire, near London. Though the story is set at the turn of the 19th century, it retains a fascination for modern readers, continuing near the top of lists of 'most loved books' such as *The Big Road*. It has become one of the most popular novels in English literature and receives considerable attention from literary scholars. Modern interest in the book has resulted in a number of dramatic adaptations and an abundance of novels and stories imitating Austen's memorable characters or themes. To date, the book has sold some 20 million copies worldwide. The plot of the novel is driven by a particular situation of the Bennet family: The Longbourn Estate where they reside entailed to one of Mr Bennet's collateral relatives- male only in this case- by the legal terms of fee tail. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have no sons, this means that if Mr. Bennet dies soon, his wife and five daughters will be left without home or income. Mrs. Bennet worries about this predicament and wishes to find husbands for her five daughters quickly. The father doesn't seem to be worried at all.

Key words: morality, marriage, education, manners, upbringing, society.

Introduction:

The narrative opens with Mr. Bingley, a wealthy young gentleman and a very eligible bachelor renting a country estate near the Bennets called Netherfield. He arrives accompanied by his fashionable sisters and his good friend Mr Darcy. Attending the local assembly (dance) Bingley is well received in the community while Darcy begins his acquaintance with snug condescension and 'proud' distaste for all the country locals. After Darcy's haughty rejection of her at the dance, Elizabeth resolves to match his coldness and pride, his prejudice against country people, with her own prideful anger- in biting wit and sometimes sarcastic remarks- directed towards him. (Elizabeth's disposition leads her into prejudices regarding Darcy and others such that she is unable to sketch their characters accurately.)

Soon, Bingley and Elizabeth's older sister begin to grow close. Elizabeth's best friend, Charlotte advises that Jane should show her

affection to Bingley more openly as he may not realize that she is indeed interested in him. Elizabeth flippantly dismisses the opinion- replying that Jane is shy and modest, and that if Bingley can't see how she feels, he is a simpleton- and she doesn't tell Jane of Charlotte's warning. Later Elizabeth begins friendship with Mr. Wickham, a militia officer of long, personal acquaintance with Darcy- they grew up together. Wickham tells her he has been seriously mistreated by the proud man. Elizabeth seizes on this news as further reason to dislike Darcy. Ironically, Darcy begins to find himself drawn to Elizabeth, unbeknownst to her. Jane pays a visit to Bingley mansion. On her journey to the house, she is caught in a downpour and catches ill, forcing her to stay at Netherfield for several days. In order to tend to Jane, Elizabeth hikes through muddy fields and arrives with a spattered dress, much to the disdain of snobbish Miss Bingley, Charles Bingley's sister. Miss Bingley's spite only

increases when she notices that Darcy, whom she is pursuing, pays quite a bit of attention to Elizabeth.

Mr. Collins, the male inherit to Longbourn makes an appearance and stays with Bennets. Recently ordained a clergyman, he is employed as parish rector by the wealthy and patronizing Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Kent. Mr Bennet and Elizabeth are amused by his self-important and pedantic behavior. Though his stated reason for visiting is to reconcile with the Bennets , Collins soon confides to Mrs Bennet that he wishes to find a wife from among the Bennets sisters. He first offers to pursue Jane however, Mrs. Bennet mentions that her eldest daughter is soon likely to be engaged and redirects his attention to Elizabeth. At a ball given by Bingley at Netherfield, Elizabeth intends to deepen her acquaintance with Mr Wickham who however, fails to appear. She is asked to dance by Mr. Darcy, here she raises Wickham's fate with him, causing their harmonious dance to fail into a 'testy' discussion. The ball proceeds as spectacle : the arriviste Sir William Lucas shocks Darcy, alluding to Jane and Bingley and 'a certain desirable event'. Mr Collins behaves fatuously, now Mrs Bennet talks loudly and indiscreetly of her expectation of marriage between Jane and Bingley, and in general, cousin Collins and the Bennet family-save Jane and Elizabeth- combine in a public display of poor manners and upbringing that clearly disgusts Darcy and embarrasses Elizabeth.

The next morning, Mr. Collins proposes marriage to Elizabeth, who refuses him , much to her mother's distress. Collins handily recovers and, within three days, proposes to Elizabeth's close friend Charlotte Lucas who immediately accepts. Once marriage arrangements are settled, Charlotte persuades Elizabeth to come for an extended visit to her new bridal home.

Though appearing at the point of proposing marriage to Jane, Mr. Bingley abruptly quits Netherfield and returns to London leaving the lady confused and upset. Elizabeth is

convinced that Darcy and Bingley's sister have conspired to separate Jane and Bingley.

In the spring, Elizabeth joins Charlotte and her cousin in Kent. The parsonage is adjacent to Rosings Park- the grand manor of Lady Catherine de Bourgh , Mr Darcy's Aunt - where Elizabeth and her hosts are frequently invited to socialize. After Mr Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam arrive to visit Lady Catherine, Elizabeth renews her project of teasing Darcy- while his admiration for her grows in spite of his intentions otherwise. Now Elizabeth learns from Fitzwilliam that Darcy prides himself on having separated Bingley from Jane, and with the poorest of timing, Darcy chooses this moment to admit his love for Elizabeth and he proposes to her. Incensed by his high handed and insulting manner, she abruptly refuses him. When he asks why-so uncivil her reply- Elizabeth confronts him with his sabotage of Jane and Bingley's budding relationship and with Wickham's account of Darcy's mistreatment of him, among other complaints.

Deeply shaken by Elizabeth's vehemence and accusations, Darcy writes her a letter which reveals the true history between Wickham and himself. Wickham had renounced his legacy- a 'clergyman's 'living'in Darcy's patronage- for a cash payment, only to return after gambling away the money to again claim the position. After Darcy refused, Wickham attempted to toe lope with Darcy's fifteen-year-old sister Georgiana and thereby secure her part of the Darcy family fortune. He was found out and stopped only a day before the intended elopement. Regarding Bingley and Jane, Darcy justifies his interference: he had observed in Jane no reciprocal interest for Bingley, thus he aimed to separate them to protect his friend from heartache.

In the letter Darcy admits his 'repugnance' for the 'total want of property' of her (Elizabeth's) family, especially her mother and three younger sisters. After reading the letter, Elizabeth begins to question both her family's behavior and Wickham's credibility. She also concludes: Wickham is not as trustworthy as his easy manners would

indicate, that he had lied to her previously; and that her impressions of Darcy's character might not have been accurate. Soon, Elizabeth returns home.

Some months later during 'northern tour', Elizabeth and her aunt and Uncle Gardiner visit Pemberley, Darcy's estate while he's away. The elderly housekeeper has known Darcy since childhood, and presents a flattering and benevolent impression of his character to Elizabeth and the Gardiners. As they tour the grounds, Darcy unexpectedly returns home. Though shocked-as is Elizabeth-he makes an obvious effort to be gracious and welcoming, and treats the Gardiners- whom before he would have dismissed as socially inferior-with remarkable politeness. Later he introduces Elizabeth to his sister, a high compliment to Elizabeth. Elizabeth is surprised and hopeful of a possible new beginning with Darcy.

Elizabeth and Darcy's renewed acquaintance is cut short by news that Lydia, her youngest (and most frivolous) sister, has run away with Wickham. Initially the family (wishfully) believes they have eloped, but they soon learn that Wickham has no plans to marry Lydia. Lydia's antics threaten her family-especially the remaining Bennet sisters-with social ruin. Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle hurriedly , leave for home, Elizabeth is anguished and convinced that Darcy will avoid her from now on.

Soon thanks, apparently to Elizabeth's Uncle , Lydia and Wickham are found and married. Afterwards, they visit Longbourn while bragging to Elizabeth, Lydia discloses that Darcy was present at the wedding . Surprised, Elizabeth sends an enquiry to her aunt from whom she learns that Darcy himself was responsible for both finding the couple and arranging their marriage, at great expense to himself.

Bringley returns to Longbourn and proposes marriage to Jane who immediately accepts. Now Lady Catherine surprisingly visits Longbourn. She sternly tells Elizabeth she has heard rumors of Darcy proposing to her, she came with 'determined' resolution to

confront Elizabeth and to demand that she never accept such a proposal because Darcy is supposed to marry her daughter. Elizabeth refuses to bow to Lady Catherine's demands. Furious, 'Lady C' charges off and tells Darcy of Elizabeth's obstinacy- which convinces him that Elizabeth's opinion of him may have changed. He now visits Longbourn, and once again proposes marriage. Elizabeth accepts and the two become engaged.

The novel's final chapters establish the futures of the characters: Elizabeth and Darcy settle at Pemberley, where Mr. Bennet visits often; Mrs. Bennet remains frivolous and silly-she often visits the new Mrs. Bingley and talks of the new Mrs. Darcy; Jane and Bingley eventually move to locate near the Darcys in Derbyshire. Elizabeth and Jane teach Kitty who had always been badly influenced by Lydia better social graces, and Mary who had been the most reclusive learns to mix more with the outside world at Meryton. Lydia and Wickham continue a life of frivolity which keeps them from accumulating any wealth and leads them to have to more often, leaving debts for Jane and Elizabeth to pay. At Pemberley, Elizabeth and Georgiana grow close, Georgiana is surprised by Elizabeth's playful treatment of Darcy, and she grows more comfortable with her brother. Lady Catherine holds out, indignant and abusive, over her nephew's marriage, but eventually Darcy is prevailed upon to reconcile with her sufficiently that she condescends to visit. Elizabeth and Darcy remain close to her Uncle and Aunt Gardiner- the agents of their reconciling and uniting.

Conclusion:

An individual often finds himself in a conflict with the rules of society. Often, rebelling is the path to happiness. However, the real path to happiness maybe through compromise. This is the case in the early nineteenth century England setting of *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. The novel *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen gives us the reader a very good idea of how she views marriage, as well as society. The theme of marriage is set in the very opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is a truth universally

acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. By having Darcy and Elizabeth end the novel engaged in an ideal marriage is a significant detail. Jane Austen, in doing this is suggesting that society would be better if it followed Elizabeth and Darcy's example. By controlling pride and prejudice, and by learning that compromise is sometimes the best way to happiness, society can hope to improve itself. Marriage in the end is the perfect ending, since it is both an affirmation of the values of society as well as a personal fulfillment which it is for both Elizabeth and Darcy since they improve themselves by being together.

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