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Jane Austen
Pride and Prejudice

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Pride and Prejudice is the most popular of Jane Austen's novels and probably the most popular classic novel in the English language. The reasons for this are not difficult to see. In Mrs Bennet and Mr Collins it possesses tow of the supremely comic fools of English literature; in the clash between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth Bennet, in chapter 56, one of the supreme comic confrontations; in chapter 15, one of the supreme moments of comic absurdity, in the instant when Mr Collins so effortlessly transfers his affections from Jane Bennet to Elizabeth – 'and it was soon done – done while Mrs Bennet was stirring the fire'. With Pride and Prejudice in front of us, it is not surprising to hear Jane Austen hailed as a 'prose Shakespeare'. The vivid humour and humanity is Shakespearian too in the portrait of the heroine, in Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy, above all in their taunting, testing, challenging exchanges – those duels in which they sharpen their wits an one another, discover themselves, at first, to be fit opponents and, eventually, fit partners in marriage. Pride and Prejudice is a story of love. But it is less love revealed than love arrived at and it is love reached along an unexpected route: not the path of romantic attachment but the more difficult and unpredictable path of self-discovery involving complex human personalities. It is a remarkable story of love, too, in being set so tightly in a structure of irony and social satire, where the tone is so often detached, amused and analytical, and where so much of the lovers' communication, their 'making love', is carried on through their mutual enquiry into each other's thoughts and feelings. Jane Austen shows Elizabeth and Darcy attracted to one another emotionally and sexually. But their closest contact is the contact of minds. For Elizabeth, the discovery of joy is an act of knowledge: she 'rather knew that she was happy, than felt herself to be so'. Elisabeth is given a consciousness, an awareness of herself, a rational, experiencing mind; and the comedy of the story and the irony of its telling, attending such a heroine, together create the unique flavour of Pride and Prejudice as a human comedy of wit, a comedy whose humanity draws us in and involves us, yet whose irony, as a counter-force, frames the story and holds it up for our inspection, our amusement and our admiration.

The word admiration is especially appropriate to Pride and Prejudice. Not only does it possess the wittiest and most brilliant of all Jane Austen's heroines, it is also remarkable among the six novels for the wit and brilliance of its style. Just after it was published, Jane Austen wrote to her sister, in January 1813, that she feared that the novel was 'rather too light, and bright, and sparling' and needed the weight and contrast 'here and there' of 'a long chapter of sense' or something equally serious to 'bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness

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and epigrammatism of the general style'. Of course, we have to take this with a grain of salt. About her own work, Jane Austen was always self-deprecating; and she was used to joking with Cassandra in this way. We also have to remember that at this time she was far advanced with the writing of Mansfield Park , a novel to which she had attached the formidable theme of 'ordination' and in which there were many long chapters of 'sense'. It has been suggested that this period of her life found Jane Austen in a more religious and reflective phase; and it may be that Mansfield Park represents a deliberate step away from the brilliance and 'playfulness' of the earlier novel. Whatever the truth of these biographical circumstances, the fact remains that Pride and Prejudice is the most decisively 'light', 'bright' and 'sparkling' of all her works – in its diction and phrasing, in the theatricalism of its scenes, in the clarity and definition of the characters, most of all in the figure of its heroine. Jane Austen's reference to 'the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style' points directly to qualities that we can isolate on the surface of the writing. But it also touches upon larger aspects of the novel's design and structure – in the way, for example, that the early chapters start the story off so briskly and wittily, and introduce the characters with such sharpness and rapidity; it points too to the qualities of its comedy and to the 'playfulness' of Elizabeth Bennet.

This congruence of style and character is what give Pride and Prejudice its distinctive energy and definition. The heroine, like her creator, is herself a satirist, 'a studier of character'. As she tells Darcy, there is no disadvantage in being stuck in 'a country neighbourhood' since 'people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever'. It is upon this very assumption, of course, that the novels are based; and we can hear Jane Austen's voice again in Elizabeth's protest to Darcy that she is not a mere joker: ' I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can'. Here, the 'playfulness' of style and character are at one.

The opening chapters of Pride and Prejudice establish two perspectives for the reader. One is the perspective of involvement, the perspective that leads us imaginatively into the world of the novel and opens us to the vividness of its dramatic life. This is the quality of convincing, persuasive realism that inspired Clerihew Bentley's two lines of doggerel; 'The novels of Jane Austen/are the ones to get lost in'. Yet Jane Austen also maintains a counter-perspective of detachment, a perspective that reminds us intermittently (as the perspective of involvement is broken or modified) that the world of Pride and Prejudice is not a reality (or, as we may experience it if it so grips our imagination, a super-reality – its figures larger than life, more interesting and more entertaining) but a work of fiction, a creation out of language, elegant, balanced and delicately complicated in its structure and organization. Of all the novels, Pride and Prejudice is the most self-assertively a work of art.

Both these perspectives are clearly established in the first chapter; and the perspective of artistic, ironic detachment in the opening lines – that first, explosive aphorism, a gem of worldly wisdom, followed by a second aphorism, more relaxed and extended, easing us into the continuity and forward momentum of the book. The wit of the opening lines is sophisticated and literary; it belongs to the tradition of Augustan verse-satire and its mode is the mock-heroic. The pompous formality of the phrasing – 'It is a truth universally acknowledged' – evoking some great epic work, is immediately deflated. The 'truth' turns out to be a universal truth; indeed, but hardly an epic truth and certainly not one to be trumpeted around. It is one of those truths that one doesn't talk about, that we certainly don't parade as a working maxim. It is, in fact, one of those grubby, mundane, all too worldly truths whose force we admit to , but whose

existence we don't – unless, as Jane Austen signals unmistakably, we are in a mood of searching, ironic, self-aware revelation, which is precisely the mood of Pride and Prejudice.

The large social abstractions of the two opening sentences are at once delivered in the mode of dramatic realism in the conversation of the Bennets, so striking in its economy of language and in the richness of its characterization – Mrs Bennet's stupid, marriage-mongering single -mindedness; Mr Bennet's cruel, exhausted, sardonic humour, the taunting barbs of a man whose marriage has gone dead, who has heard it all before, so often. This sharp little scene is framed, like a dramatic miniature, a living vignette presented for our inspection. Preceded by the two aphorisms, it is followed by a short, beautifully succinct and balanced paragraph in which Jane Austen pin-points the character and predicament of the couple and alerts us to the husband-hunting comedy to come. Thus chapter 1 stands poised and displayed at the head of the novel, a small work of art in itself. The chapters immediately following move more firmly into the perspective of involvement, as we learn more about the Bennet family and the neighbourhood and about Bingley and Darcy, the rich young men whose arrival has activated the dynamics of money and marriage announced so memorably in those opening lines. The individual characters are clearly portrayed and differentiated. The relationships are drawn graphically: within the Bennet household, in the differences between husband and wife and amongst the daughters; and at the Meryton ball, in the differences between Bingley and Darcy, both between their individual personalities and in the contrasting responses they awaken in other people. The method of realism that Jane Austen employs her is not a naturalistic accumulation of massive detail but a very spare and selective high-lighting which focuses upon a snatch of conversation, a single glance or gesture and conveys to us the essential detail which we are able to fill in imaginatively and complete for ourselves in picturing the novel's internal world.

As the story progresses, we can trace the development of the twin perspectives of involvement and detachment. Their common point is in the focus of realism: the dramatic realism of the characters and action; and the moral realism of understanding that Jane Austen brings to bear on this created world. While she stands by the artistic feat of her dramatic realism, she does not enforce a single interpretation of its moral truth. There are important acts of interpretation and judgement left for us to resolve, some of them ambiguities with both a comic and a bitter face. A good example begins in chapter 43, when Elizabeth sees Darcy's country-house for the first time, admiring the building and its setting: 'at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!'. Elizabeth refers to this moment when (in chapter 59) she is trying to explain to Jane when it was that her love for Darcy began: 'It had been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley'. Elizabeth says this half-jokingly. She seems to be laughing it off. But if we accept Jane Austen at her word in chapter 59, as some critics have, the joke takes a wider and more interesting dimension. Perhaps Elizabeth's heart really was warmed by the appeal of Darcy's property. Perhaps the principled and high-minded Elizabeth Bennet, who was so angry and upset that poor Charlotte Luas should marry Mr Collins for the sake of a home, is deep down a victim to the same temptation, even if it comes in a more insidiously acceptable disguise.

The answer to this question can only come after the novel has been read and thought about. It is one of several large and open questions which involve our interpretation of Jane Austen's purpose in the novel as a whole. It involves, for example, the suggestion that Elizabeth's choice of Darcy is not simply the acceptance of a husband but the acceptance of a way of life which is remote – socially and culturally, as well as geographically – from her home

at Lambourne and its neighbourhood of husband-hunting, scandalizing and gossip. In becoming 'mistress of Pemberley', Elizabeth is translated to another world, is liberated from the pressures and pettinesses of her home and enters a realm of freedom, spaciousness and tradition, whose single dragon, Lady Catherine, she has triumphed over and tamed, just as she has triumphed over and tamed its mock-demon, Darcy in his days of snobbery. This is not the meaning of the Pemberley episode but one of its possibilities of meaning; and the strength of Jane Austen's moral realism could be said to reside in its delicacy, its indirection, its subtle and graceful holding back. Jane Austen leaves us at liberty to make our own interpretation.

Nonetheless, interpretation should also pay some attention to what we can identify as Jane Austen's purposes in writing the novel, particularly to those purposes which are in some degree local and historical. The question arises in her unsentimental view of love and marriage, a topic which is dramatically analysed, and almost systematically so, in the pattern of marriage displayed in the novel. At one extreme, we have Mr and Mrs Bennet tormenting each other endlessly in their mutual hell; and Wickham and Lydia, 'only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue'. At the other, there is the near-romantic love-match of Jane and Bingley. Jane Austen blesses it, through Elizabeth's crowning judgement that it is a match 'rationally founded', the 'happiest, wisest, most reasonable end!' In the centre, we see the predicament of Charlotte Lucas, at twenty-seven, on the verge of being left on the shelf, an old maid. To her choice of Mr Collins, Jane Austen attaches a pitying yet sardonic generalization about marriage as the solution to a human, economic problem: 'the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however certain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want'. We recognize this kind of ironic unsentimentality as a clear-eyed moral realism, a determined truth to the uncomfortable facts of life. Indeed, romantic love is rare; marriages are made for security and convenience; Mr and Mrs Bennet are still around, tied together in resentment and bitterness. These unsentimental facts are as true today in the twentieth century, in many different countries and at different levels of society, as they were true for Jane Austen's world nearly two hundred years ago, at the turn of the eighteenth century, among the smaller landed-gentry of Southern England. This, then, is the novel's timeless unsentimentality. But Pride and Prejudice is also anti-sentimental in a technical literary sense, since it was partly designed by Jane Austen as a satire on 'sentimental' fiction, a popular form of romantic novel which flourished during the later part of the eighteenth century. Specifically, Pride and Prejudice satirizes the concept of 'first impressions', one of the key terms in sentimental fiction, referring primarily to the idea of love at first sight, and more generally to the principle of a willing surrender to the force and guidance of one's immediate, spontaneous feelings. The importance to Jane Austen of this satirical purpose is indicated in the fact that the novel's original title was 'First Impressions'.

Jane Austen plays with 'first impressions', turns them upside-down and inside-out. They are prominent but unsentimental. Elizabeth has powerful first impressions of Darcy at the Meryton ball. But her reactions are negative, critical and offended. Her feelings work against, not for him, which would be the direction of the conventional sentimental response. The argument of the novel is for knowledge won in time and depth, against the impressionism of first sight. Elizabeth's qualities of gaiety, wit and intelligence are altogether unsentimental, and Darcy, in turn, is altogether unsentimental and unromantic in his early moods of snobbish pride and rudeness. They have to learn to understand one another, to penetrate beneath the surface at which first impressions operate. Elizabeth discovers that just as she can misjudge Darcy and misunderstand him intellectually, so she can also fall a victim to emotional first impressions, as she does with Wickham (and, in this respect, shows herself to be as charmed by military

glamour as her younger sisters are). But Jane Austen does not let the joke run away with itself. First impressions can be rich and fruitful and a true guide, as they are in Elizabeth's momentous first sight of Pemberley.

A second literary-historical purpose is signalled to us in the title of Pride and Prejudice. Jane Austen had employed a similar style of title, pairing two slightly contrasted 'ethical' terms, for her previous novel, Sense and Sensibility (1811), which had originally been called 'Elinor and Marianne'. In both cases, Jane Austen made a significant change, since this style of 'ethical 'title was commonly associated with 'conduct' fiction, books which were designed to illustrate in their stories and commentary the correct way for young women to behave in the situations they were likely to encounter in polite middleclass society – how, for example, a young lady should comport herself at a dance; how she should deal politely yet firmly with a young man who is pestering her; how she should deal with a man who insults her; how she should refuse an offer of marriage; how she should behave towards an older woman of superior rank. These are some of the situations that Elizabeth Bennet has to cope with in Pride and Prejudice and obviously the question of her 'conduct' on these occasions is paramount. But there is no 'how' in Jane Austen, no directive about the right and wrong ways to behave. Our judgements about Elizabeth do not arise from rules of propriety but from her behaviour as a unique individual in circumstances which are particular to her – exactly as anyone would want to be judged themselves. Jane Austen shows up the shallowness and inhumanity of 'conduct' judgement, in the sniping criticisms that the Bingley sisters pass about Elizabeth for having walked the three miles from Longbourn to Netherfield. According to their standards, this is not something that a young lady, sensitive to the social proprieties, should do, even to be with a sister who is ill; they see in it 'an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum'.

Against the morality of conduct fiction, Jane Austen sets her own individual mode of anti-conduct fiction. In Mary Bennet, the satire is direct. Her priggish, sententious lectures on 'pride' and 'vanity' are a straight parody of conduct moralizing. In the novel as a whole, the anti-conduct element is contained within the exploration of the term's 'pride' and 'prejudice'. Sometimes the terms are discussed and analysed directly, as they are when Elizabeth and Darcy examine themselves and scrutinize their past feelings and behaviour. More generally, the force of the terms is illustrated dramatically in the scheme of characterization, which extends outwards from the hero and heroine, showing the depth and complexity of human nature that can stand behind terms so deceptively simple. In Darcy, 'pride' is both positive and negative, both a proper, justified pride in the history of his family and an offensive, wounding pride of snobbery that renders him so violently prejudiced against the lowly connexions' of the Bennets. Similarly, Elizabeth's 'prejudice' is the negative aspect of something positive, her high-spirits and high intelligence. She confesses this to her sister Jane in chapter 40: 'And yet I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one's genius, such an opening for wit to have dislike of that kind. One may be continually abusive without saying any thing just; but one cannot be always laughing at a man without now and then stumbling on something witty'. Her 'prejudice' was originally fired by her hurt 'pride' at the Meryton ball, by Darcy's insulting proposal of marriage, and by the slanders spread by Wickham. There are other equally complex varieties of pride and prejudice. In Mr Collins is displayed the sanctimonious pride of a man who relishes in delivering a savage 'Christian' judgement and who enjoys a toadying, obsequious existence in the reflected glory of his patroness. In Charlotte Lucas, we watch the sinking of self-pride for the sake of marriage to a man whose own self-pride is lost. In Mr Bennet we see self-pride embittered, turned to malice,

erected into a tower of isolation and affected indifference. The 'pride' and 'prejudice' analysis can be carried out rewardingly on all the characters. But it is a narrow and static line of analysis and Jane Austen's statement through the novel is that characters of human complexity cannot be understood or explained by this kind of labelling. In effect, the novel rejects such fixed terms of classification and judgement and requires us to adopt instead the flexible and dynamic values of judgement formed in the novel's structure of dramatic irony. Within that context, the terms 'pride' and 'prejudice' have a place, but not the leading role that they are assigned, ironically, in the novel's title.

One way of describing Jane Austen's achievement in Pride and Prejudice is to identify its various levels and modes of meaning – as a comedy of manners, a comedy of character, an anti-conduct novel, an anti-sentimental novel, a novel of displayed stylishness and art – and to recognize their successful and harmonious combination. There may be moments when the novel slows or lacks something of its fullest verve and wit. Such a comment could be passed on the later part of the story treating the elopement of Wickham and Lydia. But that would be fault-finding to excess; and our experience of the novel stems much more powerfully from the vitality and independence of its heroine, the joy of her triumphs over convention, and the new realm of freedom she enters into at Pemberley. Her relationship with Darcy is highly charged and holds promise for the future. At the beginning of chapter 60, Jane Austen tells us that her 'spirits' soon rose 'to playfulness again'; and it is with a similar freedom-seeking playfulness that Jane Austen settles the fate of the characters in the final chapter of this, her supremely 'playful' novel.

'Playful' should stay within inverted commas. The playfulness' of irony is not a trivializer. The 'playfulness' of Pride and Prejudice does not diminish the claustrophobic rancour of the Bennet household; nor does it lighten the dark prospect for Charlotte Collins, when the 'Charms' of 'her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry', begin to fade and she faces the grim prospect of life with Mr Collins ; nor does it blunt the ruthless, relentless edge of his avenging Christianity, his Biblical-worded call to Mr Bennet that he 'throw off' his 'unworthy child from your affection for ever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence'. And only one step away from Elizabeth's own 'playfulness' is her father's sardonic fatalism: 'For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?'. The 'playfulness' of this novel is not dismissive, not a laughing-off, but the quality of style and feeling that accompany Jane Austen's swing towards the conviction the 'life is a tragedy to those who feel', is not ignored in Pride and Prejudice. But this, unmistakably, is Jane Austen's 'thinking' novel, with a 'thinking' heroine, and readers, too, compelled by her strategies of style, respond to it in a 'thinking' mood.

Reading List

Text

Pride and Prejudice: A novel, 3 vols (1813) – the first edition.

For a first reading, any edition of the Novels will serve; but later the ancillary mater provided in the Clarendon Press edition, edited by R. W. Chapman (1923) and often reprinted), will be found helpful. Editions in print in 1975 include those published by Blackie, Chatto & Windus (Zodiac Press), Collins, Dent (Everyman series), Pan Books, Penguin Books and University of London Press.

Biography and Criticism

Austen-Leigh, James E. *A Memoir of Jane Austen.* London, 1870; edited by R. W. Chapman, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1926.

Austen-Leigh, W. and R. A. *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters, A Family Record.* Smith, Elder & Co: London, 1913. – the authoritative biography. An indispensable record based on family papers.

Lascelles, Mary M. *Jane Austen and her Art.* Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1939; OUP paperbacks, No 61, 1963. – the first systematic study of Jane Austen's achievement. An indispensable introductory essay.

'The Controlling Hand: Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice',* by R. Brower, *Scrutiny,* XIII, 1945. – an outstanding essay. Reprinted in R. Brower's *Fields of Light,* OUP, New York, 1951 and in Ian Watt's *Jane Austen: A collection of Critical Essays* (see below).

Warner, Sylvia Townsend. *Jane Austen*. Longman for the British Council, 1951; new ed. 1970. (Writers and their Work, No 17)

Van Ghent, Dorothy. *The English Novel: Form and Function,* Rinehart & Co: New York, 1953 – includes an illuminating chapter on *Pride and Prejudice*.

'Pride Unprejudiced', by Mark Schorer, *Kenyon Review,* XVIII, 1956.

Watt, Ian. *Jane Austen: A collection of Critical Essays.* Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1963.

Southam, B.C. ed. *Critical essays on Jane Austen,* Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1968.

Southam, B.C. ed. *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage.* Routledge & Kegan Paul: London 1968.

Southam. B.C. *Jane Austen,* Longman for the British Council, 1975. (Writers and their Work, No 241). – bibliography, pp. 49-57.

Tapes

A British Council tape recorded critical talk by|Laurence Lerner on Jane Austen (Tape No 882) is available on request from local British Council offices.