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Source: *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Jun., 1968), pp. 64-73

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2932317>

Accessed: 21-06-2018 05:24 UTC

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Pride and Prejudice in *Pride and Prejudice*

EVERETT ZIMMERMAN

APPROACHING JANE AUSTEN'S WORK chronologically, one is struck by her analogous methods of entitling *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, her preceding novel. The title *Sense and Sensibility* defines what is clearly the central moral conflict of that novel, but the simple and repeated opposition of the titular qualities is one of the marks of Jane Austen's artistic immaturity. The relationship between the title *Pride and Prejudice* and the conflicts in that novel is not so immediately apparent as in *Sense and Sensibility*, but the skill shown in using the titular qualities to keep the moral framework of the novel clear while presenting a novelistic world of great complexity is one of the triumphs of Jane Austen's developing technique.

Although the meaning of the title has attracted considerable comment, the qualities of pride and prejudice have been interpreted so narrowly that the full significance of the title has been obscured. Indeed, R. C. Fox, who regards the title as, primarily, Jane Austen's concession to the popularity of alliterative and antithetical titles, has warned us not to be "misled by investing the title with more significance than is warranted."¹ The usual interpretation is that the title is a reference to Darcy's pride, which causes him to reject Elizabeth and her family, and Elizabeth's resulting prejudice, which is reinforced by Wickham's false story about Darcy.² But Fox suggests that the morally significant conflict is between pride and vanity, not between pride and prejudice. This distinction between pride and vanity is, however, based on

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¹ Robert C. Fox in "Elizabeth Bennet: Prejudice or Vanity?" *NCF*, XVII (September, 1962), 185.

² For example, see Mark Schorer's introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956), pp. xii-xiii.

the words of Mary Bennet, a character who is satirized, as D. J. Dooley notes, for making imperceptive comments.³ And Dooley also shows that the usual meanings of pride and prejudice do explain a substantial number of the failings of Elizabeth and Darcy. Nevertheless, despite his demonstration of the weaknesses of Fox's arguments, Dooley does not entirely dispel all uneasiness about the title. Should it not, in the context of the novel, acquire richer and more pertinent meanings than the merely literal ones that critics ordinarily suggest? Even in the less complex *Sense and Sensibility*, the terms of the title, although already having complicated meanings in Jane Austen's time, are developed and modified so that they take on distinctive meanings relevant to the moral evaluations of the novel. B. C. Southam correctly suggests a parallel between the novels:

In the revision of *Elinor and Marianne* the contraries sense and sensibility may have been extended to find expression throughout the book; so too in the re-working of *First Impressions* the pride of Darcy and the prejudice of Elizabeth may have been more subtly presented, as weaknesses common to both, and framed in a schematic relationship among the other characters.⁴

When we follow Southam's hint and examine the schematic arrangement of the characters, we see that in their exhibitions of pride and prejudice these characters modify our understanding of the titular qualities in such a way as to show us clearly the relationship of pride and prejudice to the moral issues of the novel.⁵

The meanings that "pride" and "prejudice" acquire are related to the central theme of all of Jane Austen's novels—the limitations of human vision. As developed in the book, the qualities of pride and prejudice contain both an opposition and an affinity. Pride is a detachment from other human beings in which the self is not seen as involved with others but as superior to them, as unconcerned. However, characters in Jane Austen's works cannot

³ D. J. Dooley in "Pride, Prejudice, and Vanity in Elizabeth Bennet," *NCF*, XX (September, 1965), 187.

⁴ *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts* (New York, 1964), p. 60.

⁵ A. Walton Litz in *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York, 1965), p. 105, implies that pride and prejudice are organizing factors in the novel, and Mark Schorer in his introduction, p. xvii, notes groupings of characters according to the categories of pride and prejudice. Neither of these critics, however, explains precisely how in these categories the entire moral framework of the novel is suggested.

remain aloof: with or without intention they are drawn into the the affairs of others. Failure to recognize this involvement is a form of moral and intellectual obtuseness, and a constant resistance to this involvement results in a renunciation of responsibility or happiness. Prejudice is the opposite of pride: the self is completely involved with others, and everything is interpreted as it affects the self. Although the inevitable involvement between others and the self is acknowledged, judgment is entirely distorted. Both qualities, pride and prejudice, result in a severe limitation of human vision and are essentially selfish in that they start from an egoistic attitude; one either severs oneself from others or limits one's concern for them to narrow self-interest.

Pride and Prejudice opens with a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, two characters who consistently emphasize the salient qualities of the failings implied by the title; Mr. Bennet exhibits the detachment of pride and Mrs. Bennet the total involvement of prejudice. Mr. Bennet's characteristic speech is ironic, and the pervasiveness of the irony reflects his refusal to commit himself to any action. His credo, as he formulates it, is, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn."⁶ Mrs. Bennet's speech, in contrast to Mr. Bennet's, is totally devoid of irony and humor. She is entirely committed to getting her daughters married and interprets everything in the light of that over-riding concern, not being "backward to credit what was for the advantage of her family . . ." (378).

These two characters in their brilliant opening scene establish themselves as moral poles around which many of the minor characters cluster. Mr. Collins and Mary Bennet provide amusement for Mr. Bennet, but in their unsympathizing detachment from others' feelings they resemble him. Lydia, as Marvin Mudrick notes, is a younger Mrs. Bennet,⁷ and Jane Bennet allows her judgment to be distorted by her involvements and desires, just as Lydia and Mrs. Bennet do. Finding it painful to see evil in the world, Jane simply refuses to see it. And Lady Catherine treats human beings merely as projections of her own desires. All of

⁶ *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (New York, 1932), p. 364. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁷ *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, 1952), p. 99.

these characters reinforce that opposition of qualities already established by Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.

As these characters illustrate, pride and prejudice are qualities which thwart any moral perspective on events. Mr. Bennet uses human beings for amusement. Mary and Mr. Collins, even while moralizing on human behavior, are unconcerned about morality: human actions are for them only materials for making platitudes designed to reveal their own superiority. Mrs. Bennet's and Lydia's interest in marriage has displaced any other perspective they might have, including a moral one. Jane Bennet's continual emotional involvement with others makes her blunt all moral distinctions, and Lady Catherine regards nothing but her own wishes. These static characters provide the background for the maneuverings of the central characters, Elizabeth and Darcy, who, although touched by pride and prejudice, overcome the limitations imposed by these qualities and become equal to the moral challenges presented to them.

An examination of the novel's narration and dialogue reveals clearly the function of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and the related minor characters.⁸ Because any accurate judgment of the actions of Darcy and Elizabeth is made quite difficult in the earlier parts of the book, these minor characters are needed to alert the reader to the moral issues.

The character from whose point of view much of the action is seen is Elizabeth. But authorial verification of Elizabeth's judgments, even on occasions when she is not obviously misled, has an ambiguous quality in the earlier parts of the book. For example, although Elizabeth's judgments of Bingley's sister start out as personal opinions, they are finally presented as authoritative and not limited by Elizabeth's point of view. However, the support of Elizabeth's judgment rests on the comment that she had "a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself" (15) to be misled, a qualification which suggests that her astuteness is temporary.

⁸ Reuben Brower in "Light and Bright and Sparkling: Irony and Fiction in *Pride and Prejudice*," in *The Fields of Light* (New York, 1951), pp. 164-181, comments astutely on Jane Austen's technique and notes that she uses some of the characters as "fools" against whom the "intricate characters" are measured. He argues, however, that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's detachment from the developing action is an artistic failing; I argue that their position outside the central action is an important rhetorical device for establishing the moral framework of the novel.

At times even the commentary presented by the narrator is so abundantly ironical that the authority of any point of view is cancelled, as when Wickham's false story of Darcy is spread:

... every body was pleased to think how much they had always disliked Mr. Darcy before they had known anything of the matter.

Miss Bennet was the only creature who could suppose there might be any extenuating circumstances in the case, unknown to the society in Hertfordshire; her mild and steady candour always pleaded for allowances, and urged the possibility of mistakes—but by everybody else Mr. Darcy was condemned as the worst of men (138).

Those who judge Darcy are treated ironically: they are *pleased* to censure him. The only person who supports him is Jane Bennet, but although she is right, she has already been presented as unable to think evil of anyone, no matter what the circumstances. The authorial voice here leads the reader to a position from which judgment is impossible; only amused spectatorship is possible. Nevertheless, on occasions like this one, the reader is not entirely deprived of a moral perspective. Although he is shown the unresolvable complexities of the situation, he is constantly made aware of the crucial moral problems by the characters of pride and prejudice.

In the earlier parts of the book, whenever any pressure is built up leading to a direct clash or a serious moral choice or judgment, it tends to be dissipated in action, dialogue, or commentary. For example, Darcy's unwilling attraction to Elizabeth and Elizabeth's fascinated but clear dislike of Darcy seem inevitably to be leading toward a confrontation out of which will come a resolution. For a time we get clearer than usual insight into Darcy with the suggestion of an approaching climax, and when, on a walk, Darcy and Miss Bingley suddenly meet Elizabeth and Mrs. Hurst, Darcy behaves with a politeness revelatory of changing feelings. Elizabeth, however, immediately declines walking with them and runs "gaily off" (53). This incident is characteristic of much of the early action. Forces do not meet and resolve. They constantly shift and dissipate rather than clash.

A conversation between Darcy and Elizabeth shortly before Elizabeth leaves Netherfield illustrates these shifting qualities in the early dialogues (57–58). The reader can never accept any attitude or formulation as definitive. As he has no vantage point

from which to evaluate what is occurring, he must constantly skip from attitude to attitude just as the participants do. Elizabeth asserts her detached attitude, her love of laughing at others. Darcy responds seriously and morally, pointing out deficiencies in Elizabeth's attitude: "The wisest and best of men, nay, the wisest and best of their actions, may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke" (57). Elizabeth picks up the moral tone to justify herself, but immediately twists it to an ironic comment on Darcy's good opinion of himself:

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.—But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without.

When Darcy continues in his moral tone, Elizabeth attacks more directly. Then in response, Darcy becomes more and more pompously proud of his own deficiencies: "My temper would perhaps be called resentful.—My good opinion once lost is lost for ever" (58). Elizabeth at this point becomes serious, almost indignant: "*That* is a failing indeed!" But soon she changes attitude, and her exaggerated charge returns the tone to the earlier witty one, but without reducing her opposition to him: "And *your* defect is a propensity to hate every body." Darcy, suddenly taking all rancor out of the opposition, smilingly replies to her, "And yours . . . is wilfully to misunderstand them." In Elizabeth's tone there are the rapid changes from ironic, to serious, to bantering, and in Darcy's from the seriously moral, to the pompous, to startling good humor. It is attitude that is significant, and the reader who rests on any one attitude will distort. In fact, one of the examples of Elizabeth's own prejudiced distortions is the version of this conversation which she later gives to Wickham: "I *do* remember his boasting one day, at Netherfield, of the implacability of his resentments, of his having an unforgiving temper. His disposition must be dreadful" (80). But the entire conversation at Netherfield does not bear Elizabeth out. What she has done is to fix on one of the attitudes of the conversation; she simplifies the action, the flux, to a single, understandable attitude. Elizabeth's propensities to subtle distortion are, of course, made more visible by their magnification in the conduct of the minor characters.

As the plot develops, avoiding clashes, judgments, and resolutions becomes more and more difficult. Near the end of Book II the theme of the Netherfield conversation reappears, but the movement of the conversation is quite changed. There is a discernible direction to it, and it leads to a formulation (225–226). Elizabeth is telling Jane of her changed opinions of Wickham and Darcy. She comments ironically on Jane's characteristic attempts to excuse both, and on her own treatment of Darcy:

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 a dislike of that kind. One may be continually abusive without saying anything just; but one cannot be always laughing at a man without now and then stumbling on something witty (226).

She recognizes here that she has laughed at what is good, despite what she had previously said to Darcy; however, the recognition is detached, shorn of any visible feeling. But when Jane asks specifically about her feelings when she received Darcy's letter, Elizabeth replies, "I was uncomfortable enough. I was very uncomfortable" (226). And instead of retreating from the moral evaluation toward which the conversation tends, she states it directly: "But the misfortune of speaking with bitterness, is a most natural consequence of the prejudices I had been encouraging" (226). The conversation probes for and finds an attitude; it does not, like the earlier ones, kaleidoscopically shift all attitudes.

Jane Austen's technique is functional: it suggests both the complexity of Elizabeth's world and her inner moral development. The reductions of pride and prejudice always cause grief, and Elizabeth learns to recognize and overcome the limitations of human vision which threaten her happiness. Early in the book her attitude is frequently the ironic one characteristic of her father. She shares his appreciation of Mr. Collins' absurdity; Sir William Lucas's servile behavior to Lady Catherine is "high diversion" to her (159); and her division of characters into simple and complex ones⁹ reveals a detached attitude toward human beings and an avoidance of any moral judgment. In her reactions toward Darcy, she resembles her mother. Darcy's harsh, although justified, comments on the Bennet family inflame Elizabeth's preju-

⁹ See Mudrick's analysis of this division, pp. 94–95.

dices in favor of her family and against Darcy. Eventually, however, she learns to judge accurately while deeply involved; she learns to avoid the limitations imposed by pride and prejudice. The narrative techniques not only mirror the world of the novel, but also involve the responsive reader in that world, forcing him to adopt, while reading, that degree of flexibility, that withholding of judgment when evidence is lacking, which Elizabeth must adopt.

However, while the rapidly shifting point of view and attitude, and the perplexing narration characteristic of the earlier parts of the book are describing, creating, and, in a sense, miming Elizabeth's difficulties in that part of the book, the reader is not abandoned to her point of view. The obvious moral failings of those static characters who surround Elizabeth and Darcy alert the reader to Elizabeth's failings. Although frequently the reader's vision cannot extend beyond Elizabeth's, and he cannot resolve the difficulties of her situation, he can recognize the distortions which occur when Elizabeth attempts to resolve these difficulties by adopting the limited point of view characteristic of pride and prejudice.¹⁰

Later in the book as Elizabeth's irresponsible attitudes break down, dialogue becomes less frequent but more decisive; authorial summary becomes more frequent and reliable; the shifting of tonal qualities becomes less rapid; and Elizabeth's moral attitude emerges with clarity. This emerging attitude, however, is one that is based on a recognition of the complexity and deceptiveness of the world.

Elizabeth's attachment to Darcy results from the clarification of her vision, not from the modification of her values; consequently, the view that the novel suggests a blending of two contrasting value systems, two extremes searching for a middle, must be rejected.¹¹ Early in the book Elizabeth is characterized as a woman of sensibility (in the late eighteenth-century sense) and

¹⁰ As is implied throughout this discussion, the early dialogues of the novel do not appear to me to be so decisive as Howard Babb's meticulous analysis in *Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue* (Columbus, Ohio, 1962), pp. 113–114, suggests they are. The ambiguity early in the book is purposive; it reveals the complexity of Elizabeth's world.

¹¹ For example, Samuel Klinger's "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the Eighteenth-Century Mode," *UTQ*, XVI (July, 1947), 357–370, deals with Darcy and Elizabeth as exemplifying the opposition of art and nature. As I suggest below, however, this antithesis is only apparent—Darcy and Elizabeth share the same value system. Elizabeth's opposition to Darcy is based on her misunderstanding of him.

nothing, including her marriage to Darcy, indicates that her values have been modified. On her visit to Netherfield during Jane's illness, the narrative continually points out the contrast between Elizabeth's values and those of Bingley's sisters. They continually criticize Elizabeth's breaches of decorum, which are committed out of feeling for Jane, and Elizabeth dislikes them for their coldness (35–36). She is pleased to think of the marriage of Jane and Bingley because it is a marriage of "true affection" (98) and is disgusted by Bingley's sisters' attempts to have him marry for reasons of "money, great connections, and pride" (137). She herself refuses to marry Mr. Collins because her "feelings in every respect forbid it" (109).

The crucial episode in the transition of Elizabeth's feelings for Darcy from respect to love is her visit to Pemberley; she "had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste" (245). The entire description implies that there is, as in the novels of sensibility, a close relationship between taste and character; and Pemberley by exemplifying the natural picturesque (a picturesque which interferes as little as possible with nature) reveals a Darcy far different from the one Elizabeth thought she knew. In Walton Litz's words:

Every evidence of sound aesthetic judgment is converted by Elizabeth into evidence of Darcy's natural amiability, and joined with the enthusiastic testimony of the housekeeper, until Pemberley becomes an image of his true nature.¹²

But Elizabeth does not at once reach this conclusion with full consciousness. The immediate effect of Pemberley is to reduce her feelings and thoughts to a muddle (265–266). Her oversimplified view of Darcy's character is disrupted, and she must reorient herself to a new view of past events, a view undistorted by pride and prejudice.

Pemberley unmistakably reveals a man whom a woman of sensibility can love, and consequently Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy, after she has sorted out her feelings, is not a rejection of her values but a fulfillment of them. Her development is in her rejecting both the pride and prejudice which caused her moral blindness and made her deal irresponsibly and unjustly with others, not in

¹² *Jane Austen*, p. 104.

her moving closer to the pride which Darcy acknowledges to be the cause of his failures (369).

The characters limited by pride and prejudice cannot understand Elizabeth's marriage. Even her staunchest supporters, Mr. Bennet and Jane, are not convinced initially that there is any deep feeling involved. But the relationship is one that escapes both the irresponsibility and superficiality of Lydia and Wickham, and the lovelessness of Mr. Collins and Charlotte. It is not just a lesser degree of the qualities of both marriages, but something entirely different.

The techniques of *Pride and Prejudice* allow Elizabeth's subjective inner world to be presented with intensity, while at the same time her responses are being evaluated by the rubric of the novel, pride and prejudice. The moral concerns of this novel are, it must be admitted, narrower than those of the later novels, but this very limitation leads to the happy resolution which tempts critics of *Pride and Prejudice* to compare it to a Mozart composition. Because of the precise focus on the moral issues, the resolution is tidier than in Jane Austen's more somber (although perhaps more profound) later novels, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. And in the earlier novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, the resolutions seem less convincing than in *Pride and Prejudice* because the inner worlds of the heroines are not presented so complexly and intensely. *Pride and Prejudice* is the only one of Jane Austen's novels to present convincingly a central character who surmounts the limitations of human vision in all of the areas that the novel has made us care about.