



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.2331(UIF)

VOLUME - 7 | ISSUE - 6 | MARCH - 2018



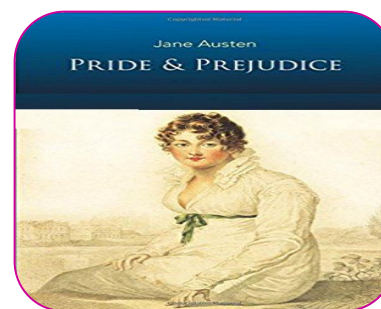
AUSTEN'S NOVEL 'PRIDE AND PREJUDICE': A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's novels portray the picture of the society of her time. The novel 'Pride and Prejudice' is Jane Austen's great masterpiece. This novel deals with family life and some moral issues of that time. It also shows a young woman's progress from immaturity and inexperience to a better understanding of herself and her world. The novelist herself commented that the novel seemed to her 'too light and bright and sparkling', concern with moral issues and the inner workings of human personality.



KEY WORDS: Rigid- hard and strict to follow, amusing- funny, prejudice- thinking without knowing, admiration-praise, consequence-result.

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's novel 'Pride and Prejudice' was set in the 19th century. At that time people's behaviour was largely governed by the social class they were born into. Class distinction in Jane Austen's time was in fact very rigid. There was a lot of difference between the social status of men and women. Women were expected to stay at home, reproduce, bringing up children, cook and clean. They were also expected to sew, sing, dance, read and play musical instruments well. Most houses had maids and reputation was everything to families. Men were evaluated on their wealth and they were all looking for wives. Women were expected to just marry any man as long as they were safe and secure with money and a comfortable home. The original title of this novel was "First Impressions". The novel begins:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

This paper is an attempt to analyze Jane Austen's novel 'Pride and Prejudice'. Elizabeth, the heroine, has a high opinion of her own ability to read the characters and motives of other people; she confidently declares, when questioned on the subject, 'Yes; but intricate characters are the most amusing.' The comedy of errors in which she is soon involved proves her weakness and fallibility, and teaches her that real life does not permit a stance of detached observation. For Elizabeth, unlike her father, is no disillusioned cynic. On all important matters she thinks and feels deeply, to a few chosen people she is closely and affectionately bound. In spite of herself, Elizabeth will be drawn into conflicts in which she cannot remain an observer, and will find herself fighting to defend the right to self-respect and high principles that constitute the moral basis of a heroine's life

'His pride', said Miss Lucas 'does not offend me so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a right to be proud.' 'That is very true, replied Elizabeth, 'and I could easily forgive his pride if he had not mortified mine.'

Elizabeth, prejudiced against Darcy by the earlier incident, believes every word of these accusations, and her dislike of Darcy is increased when she discovers that he has actively intervened to separate Bingley from her sister Jane. These circumstances combine with her early pique to pitch Elizabeth into a state of active hostility towards Darcy. The balance of her judgment seems permanently lost-for she does not wish to think well of him- and it is at this inauspicious period in their acquaintance that Darcy unexpectedly proposes marriage to her, and is, predictably, refused.

While Elizabeth has been moving from dislike to hatred in her feelings towards Darcy, he has found his original indifference to her beauty changing to admiration. Her wit and her liveliness attract him, and he learns to respect her individuality and finally to love her, in spite of his disgust at the vulgarity of her mother and her younger sisters, and at her father's irresponsibility. He is unaware that her polite manners mask deep dislike and resentment, and believes that Elizabeth, like every other woman of his acquaintance, would be glad to accept his affection, and the wealth and rank that must accompany it. Darcy does not expect a refusal: He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority- of its being a degradation- of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit...

Darcy's proposal and Elizabeth's refusal of it provide the climax towards which the pride and the prejudice they have in common has been leading. The rest of the novel pieces together the stages by which Darcy comes to a humbler way of thinking and Elizabeth, stripped of her prejudices by a better knowledge of his character and her own, grants him her respect, her gratitude, and finally, her affection. Darcy's progress towards good sense is not detailed like Elizabeth's, from within; until the novel's end, as Elizabeth tours Derbyshire with her relations, the Gardiners, and meets Darcy again while visiting Pemberley, when Lydia Bennet elopes with Wickham. Lady Catherine de Bourgh undertakes a journey from Hunsford to Longbourn in order to scotch a rumour that her nephew Darcy is to marry Elizabeth, and as Bingley returns to Netherfield and renews his attention to Jane, the reader guesses with Elizabeth until it is revealed that Darcy has been responsible for arranging Lydia's marriage, buying Wickham his army commission, and bringing his friend back to Netherfield.

Besides providing the novel's plot with its climax, Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy's proposal of marriage substantiates her claim to self respect, proves the sincerity of her passionately held personal code, and illustrates that independence of spirit we have seen asserted on previous occasions, in her indifference to the sneers of Bingley's sister and in her refusal of Mr Collins's proposal of marriage. Elizabeth's refusal emphasizes the gap between Charlotte's attitude to marriage and her own, and demonstrates her spiritual independence on this point of the social attitudes and opinions that bind Charlotte. Elizabeth's personality generates the special atmosphere of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is she who is in perpetual opposition to such universally 'acknowledged' facts of life as the view that 'a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in need of a wife'; her views on marriage, on society and of feminine diffidence that society expects to see – and that she presents for its inspection.

We see that Elizabeth can deliberately set decorum aside when her good sense and affections tell her that she should, and that a few discriminating people admire and love her for doing so. But we perceive at the same time that the majority do not think in this way; they are only too ready to condemn affection when it defies decorum and convention. Elizabeth is often forced to deceive. Disappointed by Charlotte Lucas's recent marriage to Mr Collins, and disillusioned by Wickham's defection to Miss King, Elizabeth hides her sense of isolation and betrayal beneath a cynicism that resembles her father's but that she does not feel:

'Pray, my dear aunt, what is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive? Where does discretion end and avarice begin?

Jane Austen's picture of Elizabeth's distress at the idea of Charlotte's marriage to Collins is an excellent instance of her habit of gazing through the social intermingling of the community to the moral standards they fulfil, or deny and betray. When her friend surrenders to the temptations of 'worldly

advantage', Elizabeth experiences a sense of betrayal. Her surprise at Charlotte's engagement and her later acknowledgment that Charlotte seems perfectly content as the wife of Mr Collins do not alter Elizabeth's own attitude to marriage, nor make it approximate more to Charlotte's. She has learned that her own ability to judge character and predict the actions and feelings of her acquaintances is far from perfect; and this is an important step on the way to self-knowledge, her recognition at last of the extent of her own misjudging, and her penitent admission: 'Till this moment, I never knew myself.' She is unimpressed by the rumours of Darcy's wealth, by his property, least of all by his rank. Her polite indifference, which is maintained outwardly even when she has begun actively to dislike him, makes her intriguing to a man accustomed to the flattery of every woman he meets.

Jane Austen illustrates and explores several important themes: that vanity, equally with pride, distorts a balanced judgment; that mutual respect and affection constitute the best and safest basis for marriage; and that the individual has a right to self-respect and self-expression within the rules of convention and social decorum. The second of these is fully explored through vivid characterization that makes the fullest possible use of dialogue and a brilliant satiric exposure of marriage in the society of the age. Mr and Mrs Bennet, Charlotte Lucas and Mr Collins, Bingley and Jane, Lydia and Wickham, Mr and Mrs Gardiner, are all brought under the critical gaze of Elizabeth, who in any case relishes her role as a 'studier of character', but to whom they represent useful signposts to the sloughs of despond and the delectable mountains she may meet in her own progress towards the ideal marriage relationship. At the same time, these characters help to define Elizabeth's personality. Contrasted with her sister Elizabeth proves to be the more intelligent. Bingley's marriage to Jane, although a happy one, will unite less intelligent minds and much less interesting personalities than Elizabeth's to Darcy.

Similarly, Elizabeth's conversations with Charlotte Lucas on the subject of marriage reveal her finer moral fibre. Despite Charlotte's good sense, and the fact that the reader sympathizes with her situation, her action in accepting Mr Collins reveals the coarse insensitivity that lay unperceived all the while beneath her practical, wittily non-romantic approach to life. For Mr Collins is a joke, comic in his claims to respectability, and in his filial devotion to his quarrelsome father's disputes, comic in his unique blend of servility and pompous self-consequence. It is Charlotte's blunted sensibility that permits her to contemplate marriage with him, and to find contentment as his wife.

Lydia Bennet presents an interesting example of Jane Austen's developing skill in drawing character. Lydia's elopement with Wickham typifies the marriage relationship wherein physical desires have outrun reason and good sense, repeats her parents' folly in the second generation, and contrasts with the gradual recognition by Elizabeth and Darcy of each other's true worth through a reappraisal of their own weakness. But besides her part in the larger pattern of the novel, Lydia is vividly realized in speech and action, as an exuberant, vigorous girl with a mature body and an undeveloped mind, self-centred, inconsiderate, wishing only to be noticed and admired:

'And in the first place, let us hear what has happened to you all, since you went away. Have you seen any pleasant men? Have you had any flirting? I was in great hopes that one of you would have got a husband before you came back. Jane will be quite an old maid soon, I declare...'

To sum up, Jane Austen's novels portray the picture of the society of that time. *Pride and Prejudice* is Jane Austen's great masterpiece. She herself commented that the novel seemed to her 'too light and bright and sparkling', a remark that suggests a deepening concern with moral issues and the inner workings of human personality. This novel is a major work of art in its own right. It also shows a young woman's progress from immaturity and inexperience to a better understanding of herself and her world. The world depicted in the novel is a world in which men hold virtually all the power and women were required to negotiate fields of social status. In short, in this novel Jane Austen presents vivid and realistic pictures of the social life of her time.

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