

Pride and prejudice: class consciousness essay sample

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Originally written in the late 1700s, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* satirically depicts the universal ideals in Regency England, primarily regarding social class. Austen follows the development of an outspoken, middle-class British woman, Elizabeth Bennet, as she encounters and overcomes the many social barriers that separate her from her aristocratic neighbors. Throughout the novel, Lizzie must face society's class-consciousness, particularly with her family's growing relationship with the wellborn Bingleys and their friend, Mr. Darcy. The author's objective of writing *Pride and Prejudice* is to provide an examination of English society's emphasis on the social class structure, which seems to parallel our own modern day society.

Our present-day social class system is more flexible than it was in the 1700's, despite this, we can assume that people from the elite class, such as celebrities, will tend to marry other upper-class citizens. Similarly, a marriage between Mr. Darcy and his cousin, daughter of the distinguished Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is expected because both parties are of equally notable lineage and hail from the same prestigious family. The union between the two aristocrats was planned " ' while in their cradles' " , (McKey 23) according to Lady de Bourgh, who makes a trip to Longbourn to see Elizabeth after hearing that she is engaged to Anne's " future husband". Lady Catherine is appalled that the anticipated matrimony between Darcy and her daughter may " ' be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family' " and makes every effort to prevent any chance of an engagement between Elizabeth and Darcy (McKey 56). During this confrontation, Lady de Bourgh's behavior

towards Elizabeth is quite comical and can be compared to Mrs. Bennet's often-

embarrassing behavior; had Lady de Bourgh not had such stately ancestry, she may have lowered her social status with her ridiculous conduct. Lady Catherine's ludicrous demeanor is presumably derived from her lofty ego, which society has helped create by exalting the upper class. A mere connection with Lady Catherine, whom Mr. Collins considers a model, allows the fanatical clergyman to believe he has the notoriety to advance his own social class.

Indirect connections with distinction are just as praiseworthy as direct ties, at least in the mind of the nonsensical Mr. Collins, who works for the esteemed Lady Catherine de Bourgh. It is evident throughout *Pride and Prejudice* that Mr. Collins deems himself imperial compared to the rest of Derbyshire. The author characterizes him as being a "mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility" (Austen 15). He believes that his connection to Lady Catherine places him in the upper crust of society; however, this speculation is humorous, as Mr. Collins is simply an ostentatious churchman who will inherit the estate of a middle class family.

He is convinced that he is doing Elizabeth a favor by proposing to her. Mr. Collins cites three specific reasons for his proposal, one reason being " ' that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom [he has] the honor of calling patroness' " (Park 1). Because of this connection to Lady Catherine, he expects Lizzie's acceptance of his proposal and therefore, is dumbfounded when she refuses him; he insists that she is

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playing with his mind, as most women do with men. He emphasizes that his " ' situation in life, his connections with the family of de Bourgh, and his relationship to the Bennets

are circumstances highly in its favor; and that Lizzie should take it into farther consideration that in spite of her manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made to her' " (Park 1). His bewilderment about Elizabeth's rejection is amusing. The author uses his application of his relationship to Catherine de Bourgh to satire the overemphasis of class-consciousness found in Regency England. It is almost expected by society that a celebrity and his family be treated with utmost respect and dignity, merely because they are of higher social status. Likewise, Mr. Darcy expects that his original proposal to Elizabeth be accepted simply because he has never really been exposed to rejection and knows no other way.

Fitzwilliam Darcy is an unfortunately shy man who has always been isolated in a dome of high society; therefore, he knows no other way of life other than the life of an aristocrat and expects to be treated as such. His over-emphasis of class differences is a laughable matter. When he is faced with Lizzie's rejection, Mr. Darcy must struggle " for the appearance of composure" in order to question her unfavorable response (Lachappelle 1). Austen points out that " His astonishment was obvious; as he looked at her with an expression of mingled incredulity and mortification" (Lachappelle 1). Again, because society has exalted the upper class, Darcy has been brought up to expect his social inferiors to please and serve him, which explains his

surprise at Lizzie's unsubtle refusal. Mr. Darcy's situation could be paralleled to our own society, for example if a celebrity had been turned down in a marriage proposal by a commoner. In its entirety, Fitzwilliam Darcy's sheltered life mocks the lives of Regency England's nobility.

At length, Jane Austen makes it indisputable that her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, satirizes the social class system in England during the late 1700s. By creating characters who place themselves on pedestals according to their class, Austen is able to make light of the often derogatory class consciousness common to Regency England. On the other hand, this British novelist also shows that love and happiness can overcome all class boundaries. Toward the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzie Bennet crosses a bridge onto the Pemberly property, Darcy's estate. This bridge is one of the few symbols in the novel, and represents the bridge between Darcy's higher class and Lizzie's lower class. Not long after, Lizzie acknowledges her affection for Darcy and accepts his second, less arrogant proposal. Nonetheless, *Pride and Prejudice* focuses on the entertainment value found in the over emphasis of class-consciousness.

Lady Catherine acts completely imbecilic and gets away with her preposterous behavior; Mr. Collins' puzzlement lies in the "enormous" hole separating his upper class and Elizabeth Bennet's lower class; and Mr. Darcy lives his sheltered life expecting his social inferiors to behave subserviently. These three characters are victims of a caricature of class-consciousness and are mocked and parodied throughout this famous piece of British literature. Austen successfully portrays, and exaggerates the social class system that

existed during the 1700's, she manages to invites and entertains the reader while maintaining a degree of significance. (Cliffs 1)

Society has already predisposed women to be ignorant, and submissive, the role of women assumes a significant function in this novel. During the 1700's, women were expected to engage in only one major activity, this was, of course, to find a wealthy and supportive husband. Any women who stepped out of this norm of society, was vulnerable and open to ostracism. While that is their main task, they must always follow a certain code that depicts exactly what they must do in society. When Elizabeth Bennet walks into the Bingley residence with muddy boots, this shocks the reputation-conscious Bingley sisters. Mrs. Bennet also gives Lizzie a bad reputation by behaving ill-mannered and ridiculous as she often did towards Mr. Darcy, this is out of the societal norms and thus, Mrs. Bennet builds up a bad reputation. Later in the novel, when Lydia elopes with Wickham and lives with him out of wed-lock, their family is then further disgraced by this flagrant violation of society's "code". It seems unfair to condemn the other sisters because of her own acts, but that was the viewpoint people used to judge by.