The parenting's influence on sisters bennet's upbringing

Literature, Novel

Featuring a wide assortment of colorful personalities, Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice contains both emotionally deep, interesting characters as well as hilarious caricatures of the bumpkins who make up the rural social scene of 18th-century England. Both types of characters are present in the Bennet family, where the two eldest daughters, Jane and Elizabeth, are by far more intelligent and well-mannered than either their mother or their three younger sisters. In the middle of this dichotomy is their father, Mr. Bennet. He is, at first glance, a likeable fellow, whose clever jokes at the expense of his obnoxious wife and humorously dry attitude toward his family’s sometimes ludicrous behavior initially lead the reader to admire him for his intelligence and wit. But ultimately he is a disappointing, unappealing figure because these traits reveal his failings both as a father and husband: his constant mockery of his spouse begins to seem cruel and creates an unhealthy marital environment for his children to grow up in, while his preference to insult his younger daughters’ behavior instead of correcting it rings of tremendous negligence. It is this complete disinterest in the affairs of his family that gives his youngest children the boorish manners he detests so much about them — they are raised in a vacuum and are deprived of any competent parenting that could rectify their problems.

Out of all of the characters in the book, no one is a greater target for Mr. Bennet’s scorn and derision than his very own wife. As a young man, he made the mistake of marrying for “ youth, beauty, and the appearance of good humor” instead of for intellectual or emotional compatibility, and as a result ended up being stuck with Mrs. Bennet, a woman with a “ weak understanding and an illiberal mind” for whom all of his “ respect, esteem,

and confidence had vanished for ever” (228). To make this unhappy arrangement more tolerable, he gleans a large amount of his pleasure from aggravating and mocking his spouse, with the narrator noting that “ her ignorance and folly contributed to his amusement” (228). He vexes her by making her believe that he is ardently opposed to calling on Mr. Bingley, only to reveal he had already visited the gentleman and just wanted to hear her complain about the family’s lack of social connections (9); while earlier he slyly pokes fun at her fading beauty by sarcastically mentioning that Mr. Bingley might find her more attractive than any of their daughters (6). Although the reader is meant to find humor in his putting down of his wife, a boorish woman whose continual scheming to marry off her daughters is matched only by her complete lack of tact and social grace, there is also the underlying sentiment that these practical jokes are cruel and inappropriate for a married person to play on his spouse. Elizabeth, in particular, struggles to reconcile her father’s affectionate treatment of herself with this “ continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum” that has him “ exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children,” as she feels he does not realize the effect such an unhappy marital environment has on the upbringing of the girls (228). She wishes he would, for the sake of his family, turn his energies away from ridiculing Mrs. Bennet, that he would become “ fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which rightly used, might at least preserve the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife” (229). In her opinion, it is not enough for him to simply crack jokes in order to make the best of a situation he clearly does not enjoy; he must also honor the

responsibilities of the marriage contract by honoring and respecting his wife, both for her sake as well as to give all of their daughters a proper upbringing from parents who love each other as much they do the rest of their family.

In a similar vein, Mr. Bennet thinks very little of Kitty and Lydia, the two youngest girls, who also happen to be most like their mother in that they share her penchants for vapid conversation and immature obsessions with marrying all of the men they encounter. He openly insults them for their flightiness, telling them that “ you must be two of the silliest girls in the country,” and then later ordering Kitty that she is not to be allowed outside of the house “ till you can prove that you have spent ten minutes of every day in a rational manner” (30, 284). However, as troubling as it to have a father openly mocking and denigrating his own children, what makes Mr. Bennet’s relationship to his younger daughters even more upsetting is that his own negligent parenting is responsible for their obnoxious conduct. He simply does not care enough about his duties as a father to enforce any sort of rules or standards; instead, all he desires is to have a private room where he can escape his familial obligations: it is mentioned that “ in his library he had been always sure of leisure and tranquility; and though prepared, as he told Elizabeth, to meet with folly and conceit in every other room in the house, he was used to be free from there there” (70). That he actually is willing to allow his daughters to act with conceit and folly provided they don’t explicitly bother him is at the heart of Mr. Bennet’s parental failings. All he is willing to do is acknowledge their poor behavior, telling his wife “ if my children are silly I must hope to be always sensible of it,” yet he is not willing

to try and change them (30). Even Elizabeth is aware of her father’s lackadaisical approach to parenting, so she confronts him to express her own concerns regarding Lydia and her upcoming trip to Brighton in the hopes that he will listen, warning that:

Mr. Bennet’s own arguments for permitting the trip to go forward are incredibly self-interested and insulting to his youngest: that “ Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or another,” “ we shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton,” and that being there “ may teach her her own insignificance” (222-24). He would rather avoid dealing with a whiny and disappointed child — while secretly hoping that this trip will give her the lessons about proper conduct that he neglected to pass on himself — than put his foot down on refusing his most immature daughter permission to visit a distant town teeming with opportunistic and single men. Ultimately, it is this reluctance to take a stand and enforce discipline on Lydia that is responsible for her elopement with Mr. Wickham and the embarrassing, expensive (although paid for by Mr. Darcy), and drama-filled ordeal that the entire family, including himself, must undergo to get her back. Apathy and lack of interest in raising his daughters the right way makes him an even worse parent than Mrs. Bennet because, unlike his incompetent wife, he actually possesses the intelligence and values needed to instruct his children but doesn’t even bother to employ them.

Even when it comes to his two eldest daughters, whom he admires and appreciates for their more refined dispositions and the intellectual

stimulation they provide, Mr. Bennet is still not much of an active father and is still selfishly focused on what they can do for him instead of vice versa. Although he does love them (as he privately would admit about his other daughters as well), he really only values the improvement they make to his own well-being, with the narrator noting that he was happy to have them returned from Longbourn for the sake of the quality of the conversation at the dinner table, “ which had lost much of its animation, and most of its sense” by their absence (59). Admittedly he does stand up for Elizabeth when she is faced with the unpalatable idea of marrying Mr. Collins, but he only interferes with the matter when it is directly presented to him by his wife in a manner he can’t avoid. That is the extent to which Mr. Bennet will go for even his most beloved children: he only assists them when the situation is deposited in his lap and he has no choice but to get involved. When issues arise where he is compelled to become involved, he is either ineffective or incredibly passive and acquiescent. Mr. Darcy’s proposal for marriage is accepted in part because “ he [Darcy] is the kind of man, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse anything,” while his powerlessness once called into action is emphasized by his trip to London to search for Lydia. There it is Messrs. Darcy and Gardiner who are responsible for finding and paying off Wickham in order to ensure a respectable marriage — Mr. Bennet had nothing to do with this effort, having already returned to Longbourn in defeat. It is a sad indictment of his uselessness as a father figure that the greatest way in which Mr. Bennet can help his daughters — particularly Jane and Elizabeth — is to use his situation as an example of why they should

avoid marrying for beauty instead of love. As anything other than a cautionary tale, he is surprisingly self-centered and ineffective.

Although his quick wit and humorous put-downs of the obviously more unlikeable characters are initially meant to endear him to the reader, further analysis of Mr. Bennet’s personality and actions only reveal him to be a tremendous failure, both as a husband and father. He makes it obvious that he has absolutely no respect for his wife, and that he is even unwilling to sacrifice the only source of pleasure he gets from her company — his continued harassment of her — so that his children can have a healthier, more respectful marital environment to grow up in. Such a streak of disinterest is also present in his relationship with his daughters, especially the younger ones, whom he prefers to insult for their poor behavior rather than actually teaching them lessons that would improve their manners. Even the older ones, whom he holds in much higher esteem, receive very little direct support or instruction from him and are instead left to their own devices. This negligence, toward both his spouse and his children, is as much responsible for their inappropriate behavior as their own failings because Mr. Bennet possesses the power to help improve them but does not use it.

Works Cited:

Austen, Jane. Pride and Prejudice. Penguin Classics Edition. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.