

Morality play pattern in pride and prejudice

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Austen is particularly unusual among virtue ethicists past and present in according amiability so much importance, even though it is so obviously central to most people's lives working, if not living, in close confinement with others with whom one must and should get along. Austen presents these virtues as not merely a necessary accommodation to difficult circumstances, but as superior to the invidious vanity and pride of the rich and titled, which she often mocks.

So, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet rejects Darcy's haughty condescension out of hand; the happy ending must wait until Darcy comes to see beyond her lowly connections and unaristocratic manners and fully recognise her true (bourgeois) virtue. That is a moral happy ending even more than it is a romantic one. Like any good virtue ethicist, Austen proceeds by giving illustrative examples. This is why her characters are moral rather than psychological constructs.

Austen's purpose is not to explore their inner lives, but to expose particular moral pathologies to the attention of the reader. Don't act like this: Don't cut off your relatives without a penny after promising your father you would look after them and justify it with self-serving casuistic rationalisations (as John Dashwood does in *Sense and Sensibility*). Don't be like this: Morally incontinent like Mrs Bennet; or struck through with a single huge flaw, like Mr Bennet's selfish wish to live a private life while being the head of a family (*Pride and Prejudice*).

But as well as excoriating such obvious though conventional moral failings of human nature, Austen attends carefully, and with a fine brush, to illustrating the fine detail, and fine-tuning, that true virtue requires. To show us what

<https://assignbuster.com/morality-play-pattern-in-pride-and-prejudice/>

true amiability should be, she shows us what it isn't quite. Fanny Price, the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, is so excessively amiable as to put her own dignity and interests at risk, so self-effacing that her true love almost doesn't notice her (until events intervene).

Mr Bingley's amiability in *Pride and Prejudice* is pitch perfect, but fails to discriminate between the deserving and undeserving. Emma, meanwhile, is very discriminating, but she is a snob about it: she is rather too conscious of her social status and does not actually respect others as she should (which, of course, gets her into trouble). Then there are the illustrations of what virtuous conduct looks like. Here one sees why the plot is so firmly in the author's hands, not the characters'.

Austen is primarily concerned with setting up particular scenes - moral trials - in which we can see how virtuous characters behave in testing circumstances. These moral lessons to the reader are the parts she gave the most exacting attention to; where her words are perfectly chosen and sparkling with intelligence and deep moral insight. These are the parts that she actually cared about; the rest - the rituals of the romantic comedy genre and "social realism" - is just background.

We see Austen's characters navigating the unpleasant attentions and comments of bores, fools and cads with decorum and dignity: "Indeed, brother, your anxiety for our welfare and prosperity carries you too far," Elinor chastises John Dashwood, ever so politely in *Sense and Sensibility*. In every novel we see Austen's central characters working through moral problems of all kinds, weighing up and considering what propriety requires by talking it through to themselves or trusted friends.

<https://assignbuster.com/morality-play-pattern-in-pride-and-prejudice/>

We see them learning from their mistakes, as Elizabeth and Darcy both learn from their early mistakes about his character (Pride and Prejudice). We even see them engaging in explicit, almost technical, moralphilosophyanalysis, such as debating to what extent Frank Churchill should be considered morally responsible for hisfailureto visit Highbury (Emma), to the evident boredom of the less morally developed characters stuck in the same room as them.

Austen carries out her mission of moraleducationwith flair and brilliance, while charitably respecting the interests and capacities of her readers (which is why she is so much more readable than most moral theorists who, like Kant, seem often to write as if understanding is the reader's problem). Yet there is one further striking feature that sets Austen's novels apart: her moral gaze. The omniscient author of her books sees right through people to their moral character and exposes and dissects their follies, flaws and self-deceptions.

I cannot read one of her novels without thinking - with a shiver - about what that penetrating moral gaze would reveal if directed at myself. This is virtue ethics at a different level - about moral vision, not just moral content. Austen shows us how to look at ourselves and analyse and identify our own moral character, to meet Socrates's challenge to " Know thyself. " We have all the information we need to look at ourselves this way, to see ourselves as we really are - we have an author's omniscient access to the details of our own lives - but we generally prefer not to open that box.

Indeed, academicmoral philosophers since the enlightenment have collaborated with this natural aversion by collectively turning their attention

<https://assignbuster.com/morality-play-pattern-in-pride-and-prejudice/>

away from uncomfortable self-examination and towards elaborating coherent systems of rules that any agent should follow. Yet reading Austen shows the ultimate ineffectiveness of this strategy. I do not believe that all the sophisticated Kantian and utilitarian theory in the world could shield you for long from Austen's moral gaze.

We should read Austen today because she is wise as well as clever, and because she teaches us how to live well not just how to love well. We should read beyond the delicious rituals of her romantic comedy plots to her deeper interests and purposes in creating her morally complex characters and setting them on display for us. We should read beyond her undisputed literary genius, and her place in the history of literary innovations and influences, to her unrecognised philosophical genius in elaborating and advancing a moral philosophy for our bourgeois times.