

The concordia's philosophy in pride and prejudice

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“ Opposites attract” may be a modern adage, but the concept has been present in many incarnations throughout history. In Chinese philosophy, the yin and yang are presented as opposing dynamics. To understand one, it is requisite to know the other. One of the most eloquent renderings is the philosophy of “ concordia discors,” or discordant harmony. According to this philosophy, the universe consists of opposing entities. The universe, in seeking a balance, must thus couple the opposing entities to create equilibrium. In her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen weaves this philosophy into a social commentary in which an entire society suffers a fixation on coupling. In her four most prominent characters, Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Bennet, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and Charles Bingley there exist greatly opposing temperaments. However, in observing the interactions between these characters, Austen reveals an underlying harmony in their relationships.

At first, Austen emphasizes the differences between sisters Jane and Elizabeth through comparisons of temperament. These differences are made quite clear when both characters remark on the same occurrence, as their opinions and personalities present startlingly different dynamics. Having both attended a ball, Jane and Elizabeth compare impressions of the guests, among which are Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley. Immediately, a disparity between the two appears. Jane, who “ never see[s] a fault in anyone,” is surprised at having been paid the compliment of being asked to dance twice by Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth, however, was not surprised. “ Compliments always take you by surprise, but never me,” (11) she remarks. This is due partly to Elizabeth’s “ quickness,” (2), as her father puts it. The dynamic put forth by

Elizabeth is of an analytical nature, while that of Jane is more receptive and open. "I would wish not to be hasty in censuring anyone, but I always speak what I think," (11) says Jane. Yet Elizabeth accuses Jane of "affectation of candor" (11). Elizabeth is quick to notice the "follies and nonsense of others" (11). Elizabeth's personality may seem probing and critical. Austen observes that this characteristic is not balanced by "attention to herself" (11). Austen understands that a friendship is greater than a sum of its parts. Her characters work best when in the presence of someone who possesses what individually they lack themselves. Elizabeth thus compensates for Jane's lack of perceptiveness. Jane compensates for Elizabeth's overtly analytical mindset.

Austen illustrates a parallel relationship in that of Darcy and Bingley. The friendship is a strong one "in spite of a great opposition of character," (12) just like that between Jane and Elizabeth. Bingley's temperament presents "openness" and "ductility of temper" (12). Shortly upon arriving at the ball, "Bingley had made himself acquainted with all the principle people, danced every dance, was angry that the ball closed so early" (7) and was contemplating residence in the town. "No disposition could offer a greater contrast" (12) to Darcy's, observes Austen. Although "clever," Darcy is "haughty, reserved, and fastidious." Unlike his friend, he refuses to dance and resigns himself to being a wallflower. When asked to dance with Elizabeth, he dismisses her as "not handsome enough" (8). This further illustrates the divide. Darcy commits the very opposite of the compliment Bingley pays Jane. Bingley is presented as a social butterfly, who is "sure of being liked everywhere he went" (12), while it is the opposite case with Darcy. Austen

has thus created another friendship greater than the sum of its parts.

Harmony exists between Bingley and Darcy in that Darcy lacks Bingley's social graces, and Bingley lacks Darcy's discerning eye.

The similarities between Elizabeth and Jane are revealed when Elizabeth couples with Darcy and Jane with Bingley. Austen observes that they have more in common than is apparent at first. While Bingley and Jane share an open-mindedness, Jane presents a less socially adept front. Elizabeth's friend Charlotte Lucas observes the lacks of understanding between these two. While both share feelings for each other, Bingley "may never do more than like her if she does not help him" (17). Jane appears aloof to Bingley's advances, and does not show any marked interest in pursuing a relationship. Bingley, on the other hand, is drawn to her and makes this apparent whenever they chance to meet. Eventually, his sisters and Darcy are able to convince him that Jane does not share these feelings simply by alluding to her aloof appearance. Elizabeth was presented as less socially endowed than her sister in the former relationship, but Jane is now the less socially cognizant dynamic in the relationship. Bingley is presented as the more adept participant, whereas in his relationship with Darcy, the opposite is true.

Austen further emphasizes the similarities when she describes the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy. Darcy initially insults Elizabeth, yet it is his continued arrogance that draws her to resent him. Upon his unexpected proposal, Darcy is unable to rise above his feeling of superiority. Elizabeth, alas is "decidedly below [his]self" (165) and he would marry her

in spite of his own convictions and those of his family. It is no surprise that Elizabeth refuses, considering he admits to separating Jane and Bingley (which Elizabeth cannot forgive). Her decision was further tainted by a conversation with the son of a family friend of Darcy's, Mr. Wickham, by whose account Darcy has committed a great wrong. Yet Elizabeth is unaware of the rationale behind either of these events. In a letter, Darcy reveals the true circumstances of both. These circumstances absolve Darcy of any blame, which Elizabeth might have held against him. Elizabeth is at first distraught, and unable to believe herself to have judged Darcy unfairly. Darcy, for his part, removes his haughty façade to reveal a much more tender and socially-aware personality. This hidden personality is markedly similar to that of his friend Bingley. He is sociable and courteous to Elizabeth and her family. Elizabeth reveals a lack of insight as to the behavior of Mr. Wickham (who on later inspection seems a much more sordid character) and Darcy's motives for separating Jane and Mr. Bingley. This lack of acumen reveals she is very much like Jane. These similarities create the harmony of the "concordia discors."

Austen's novel presents a society very much fascinated by couples. Her characters are shrewdly developed and differentiated. This can be seen as a master-class in good writing technique. None of her characters are perfect - if that had been the case, we would be in for a rather dull novel. In fact, her characters are given to reverting to extremes of temperament. Had Austen not presented a foil for each of her characters, the novel itself would not have been balanced. Too much analysis, like that of Elizabeth and Darcy, leads to a sour experience. However, too little insight, like that of Bingley

and Jane, makes one blind to the true nature of things. Austen reveals a Zen of sorts that develops within the context of societal relations. The greatest relationship is one in which each person understands what they lack themselves, and is aware of what the other has to offer.