

The power of seventeen letters

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Jane Austen is one of the most revered female writers in the history of literature. Her accomplishments with her novel *Pride and Prejudice* are still recognized to this day. This satire has withstood the test of time largely because of the narrative techniques Austen uses throughout the novel. One method in particular is the epistolary technique, or the telling of a story through corresponding letters between the characters. Jane Austen uses the epistolary technique with seventeen letters to help reveal the characters of the story. The personas of Mr. Darcy, Mr. Collins, Jane, Lydia, and Mr. Bennet are greatly embellished by the existence of the letters. Mr. Darcy's character is embellished and revealed using the epistolary technique. His entire image during the first half of the book is of a pompous and arrogant nature, but this is entirely altered when he writes his letter to Elizabeth after his proposal. Before the letter, Elizabeth has a firm dislike for Darcy. She blames him for keeping her sister Jane away from Bingley, and for cheating Mr. Wickham out of his rightful money. But Darcy's letter reveals to her the true reasons for his actions. He separated Jane and Bingley because he was looking out for his friend. He thought that Jane was "indifferent" (170), towards his friend and did not truly love him. This clearly reveals that Darcy is in fact a very caring and a loyal friend. If he were as self-centered and rude as everyone at first thought him to be, he might not have separated Jane and Bingley for the same reasons. The letter also shows that Darcy is very loyal, and not greedy. This is revealed when Darcy describes his conflicts with Mr. Wickham. Elizabeth believes that Darcy was just being greedy and keeping the money from Wickham, when in fact he is being loyal to his father and honoring his wishes. "In town I believe he chiefly lived, but his studying the law was a

mere pretence, and being not free from all restraint, his life was a life of idleness and dissipation... as he well assured that I had no other person to provide for, and I could not have forgotten my revered father's intentions. You will hardly blame me for refusing to comply with this entreat, or resisting every repetition of it" (173). Darcy also shows his loyalty to his family when breaking up the marriage between Wickham and his little sister. It was obvious to Darcy that Wickham wanted to marry his little sister only because she had a "fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds" (174) to her name. In Darcy and Elizabeth's situation, it was better to have a letter to convey Darcy's feelings than to have a normal conversation, because Elizabeth most likely would not have listened to what Darcy had to say due to her anger towards him. So, after the letter, Darcy's character seems to have become something very different than what it was in the beginning of the story. Mr. Collins, in fact, almost entirely reveals his interesting character through his letters to Mr. Bennet. Collins first writes to Mr. Bennet to say that he will try to be as hospitable as possible to the unfortunate family as he is going to inherit the entire estate when Mr. Bennet dies. He does not ask permission to stay, simply states that he is coming "without any inconvenience" (54). He almost immediately mentions his patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and begins to ramble about how great and powerful she is. He means well, it seems, but is extremely arrogant. He says that, "...as a clergyman, moreover, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence..." (47). He seems to think that he is being charitable by blessing them with his presence. His second letter further reveals his pompous state of being. This letter is in response to

Lydia's unfortunate situation with Mr. Wickham. Mr. Collins seems to be attempting to console the family on their unfortunate situation, but his stupidity makes it difficult for him to do so. He basically says that Lydia has been spoiled and let run wild and that there is no saving her now. He states that, "The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this..." (220), says that none of the other girls will ever be married now, and ends with how grateful he is that he did not marry into the family. Mr. Collins' final letter comes when he hears of Jane and Mr. Bingley's engagement and the supposed engagement of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. He has enough self-worth to caution Elizabeth because, "...Lady Catherine de Bourgh, does not look on the match with a friendly eye," (272). Collins reveals in his letters that he thinks of himself sitting on a pedestal when really, the reader knows, he is a babbling idiot. By using letters, the reader knows the opinion of other characters that are not present at the time. Jane Bennet's letters to her sister are some of the only times that she actually speaks and therefore reveals more character. She believes everyone to be good and have honorable intentions. In her letter to Elizabeth from London, she finally admits that Caroline Bingley is not her very best friend. Jane has come to realize that Miss Bingley does not want her brother to marry her and she believes that she wants him to wed Miss Darcy. She is still forgiving of the Miss Bingley and says that, "...I pity her, because she must feel that she has been acting wrong, and because I am very sure that anxiety for her brother is the cause of it," (111). Jane does not realize that the reason Miss Bingley wants her brother to marry Miss Darcy is to provide her with a greater connection to Mr. Darcy. In reality, Miss Bingley doesn't care at all

about her brother's happiness, but Jane is innocent enough to not see that. In her later letters to Elizabeth in Derbyshire regarding Lydia, Jane's modest character shows itself once more. Lydia's situation is extremely serious and could mean tragedy for the family and yet Jane does not write in a panic for Elizabeth and the Gardiners to come immediately. Instead, she outlines the situation in a somewhat subdued manner and becomes modestly distressed near the end of her second letter. Instead of demanding that they come at once she says, "...I long for your return...I am not so selfish, however, as to press for it, if inconvenient..." (203). During this era, letters were the only communication device to report news. Austen utilizes this setback to further the notion of Jane's modesty and selfless nature. Lydia Bennet's two short letters further the sense the reader gets of her materialistic, shallow, and oblivious nature. When she recklessly runs off with Wickham, she writes to her friend in Brighton, Mrs. Forster. She exclaims, "What a good joke it will be," (216) when her family finds out about her elopement. She has no clue that she is causing an enormous uproar at Longbourn. She cares about herself and has no notion for anybody else. This is demonstrated further when she writes to Elizabeth after she has married Mr. Darcy. She says, "It is a great comfort to have you so rich...I hope you will think of us," (290). Lydia shows that she is completely self-absorbed and simple-minded by her letters. By using this technique, Austen can emphasize Lydia's flaws without affecting the plot. Mr. Bennet's character and sense of humor is brilliantly demonstrated in his letter to Mr. Collins regarding Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. His hatred for Mr. Collins manifests itself in a funny and joking manner in this letter, although he is quite serious. He advises Mr. Collins to, "Console Lady

Catherine as well as you can. But, if I were you, I would stand by the nephew. He has more to give," (287). Mr. Bennet's entire character is demonstrated by this. It is direct; it is sarcastic; it is humorously insulting; it, in essence, is just like Mr. Bennet. The epistolary narrative technique is used by Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* to further highlight all of the main characters. This technique is one of many that provide the binding force of the novel. It was because of these letters that the reader is able to understand characters such as Mr. Darcy, Mr. Collins, Jane, Lydia, and Mr. Bennet. When analyzed, there are so many literary techniques to take notice of, but when one is simply reading, the mind is overtaken by the story that all those little parts serve to create.