

The problem of perspective: director's interpretation of the novel

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The Prejudice of Perspective

For many years, film makers have strived to capture the essence of Jane Austen in their films. While not all have been able to accomplish this task, all have been successful in positing unique readings of the novel. Even the BBC Austen Series, which offers some of the most faithful film renditions of the Austen novels, betrays a particular judgment of the characters and plot. The 1995 BBC rendition of *Pride and Prejudice* subtly departs from the Austen novel through Colin Firth's interpretation of his character and through the director's enhanced representation of Mr. Darcy.

The actors' ownership of the characters is significant insofar as the audience interprets it. Colin Firth's characterization of Mr. Darcy yields a first impression markedly different from that proffered by the novel. The narrator of Austen's book declares Mr. Darcy to be proud and "above being pleased" (Austen, 8) only a few lines after introducing his name. In this manner, the narrator imposes his/her judgment of Mr. Darcy's character upon the readers. This is one of the key stylistic methods of the novel; as the reader is unable to witness the events first-hand, he/she is forced to trust or adopt the opinions and perspectives of the narrators and the characters in those scenes. In BBC's *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrator's prejudice of Mr. Darcy is incarnated in the character of Elizabeth. This, however, does not necessarily move the audience to disliking the character because the audience can analyze the situation firsthand and create an opinion about Mr. Darcy completely independent from that of the other characters in the film. While this might seem the safest way to experience Jane Austen without the

danger of being misled by the narrator, the audience unknowingly falls prey to the judgments of two new types of narrators: the director and the actors.

While it can be argued that being influenced by the choices of a third party, such as the director and actors, is more dangerous than being deceived by the authoress herself, in the case of this BBC version of *Pride & Prejudice*, the director's and actor's portrayal of Mr. Darcy offers a more accurate reading of his goodness of character — qualities which do not become apparent until the second half of the novel. From Mr. Darcy's introduction at the ball, Colin Firth's countenance is not one of pride and snobbery, but rather of conservatism and shyness. This Mr. Darcy seems uncomfortable to be in such lively company and looks as though he wished to go unnoticed by the party. However, his elegance, income and incredible good looks betray him, and he unwillingly becomes the center of attention and the core of everyone's conversation. In this scene, everyone stares and whispers to one another, and at some points even laughs or snubs Mr. Darcy — which, in the film, serves to justify his finding the entire company so disagreeable. Had the narrator of the novel described the party the way the director portrayed it in the film, the reader may have been more persuaded to sympathize with Mr. Darcy from the beginning of the novel.

At this party there are two primary offenders to Mr. Darcy: Mrs. Bennet and Elizabeth. An interesting instance which occurs in this film and not in the novel is Mrs. Bennet's loud speech about how disagreeable Mr. Darcy is. The speech is very similar to the one she later yells out at a different ball, as both are incredibly insulting and made loudly enough for Mr. Darcy to hear.

Elizabeth, for her part, is too careless to hide her feelings about Mr. Darcy and makes fun of him to Charlotte within a short pace from where he is standing. All this time Firth's Mr. Darcy keeps to himself, sad and awkward, like a child being made fun of at the playground. He is a victim: portrayed intentionally so by both Colin Firth and director, Simon Langton. Langton and Firth manipulate the audience to feel sorry for Mr. Darcy despite his slighting of Elizabeth, or in the very least, persuade the audience that there has been some misunderstanding of Mr. Darcy's character by the entire party. This, while incredibly helpful to the audience of the film, takes away from the surprise experienced by the readers of the novel after realizing that the prejudice held against Mr. Darcy was unjust. It destroys the supposed intention of the narrator, which was to shame the audience alongside Elizabeth for a hasty and criminal judgment of a man of such honorable character. Furthermore, Colin Firth depicts Mr. Darcy without any inconsistency of character throughout the entire film. This further implements that very particular reading of the novel which suggests that Mr. Darcy did not change or evolve into a better man, but that Elizabeth's perception of Mr. Darcy was the one to transform.

Apart from persuading the audience to side with Mr. Darcy from the beginning of the film, Langton beckons the audience to be seduced by Mr. Darcy by portraying him not only as a sensitive man, but as a sexually appealing one as well. The film offers a sequence of scenes, not part of the original Jane Austen novel, in which Mr. Darcy's many virtues are exemplified. There is a particular scene in the fifth episode in which Mr.

Darcy emerges from a dark room in the middle of the night unable to sleep. The implication here is that he is troubled by his love for Elizabeth. Mr. Darcy, now in the drawing room, stares at the empty pinafore where Elizabeth sat hours before and the film cuts to a flashback of Elizabeth playing the pinafore. The flashback means to represent Mr. Darcy's thoughts and convince the audience of the depth and scope of his love for Elizabeth. Later, in another scene not in the novel, Langton follows Darcy after his rejection and focuses on his reaction. (In the novel, all we get is a quick reference to Darcy's expression of "mingled incredulity and mortification" [Austen, 141], then a prolonged examination of Elizabeth's own feelings and anxieties.) Colin Firth's expression is heartbreaking; the deep pain which he experiences overtakes his handsome features and he seems to struggle to hold back tears. If Firth and Langton do not extract pity from their audience, they certainly extract tears. This choice to include Mr. Darcy's reaction not only secures the audience's sympathy and establishes Mr. Darcy as a sensitive character, but also acknowledges him as a protagonist at least equal in consequence to Elizabeth.

The director's elevation of Colin Firth's character is emphasized to the audience before they have an opportunity to take the DVD out of the case. While there are several versions of the movie cover, they all contain a large picture of Colin Firth's face with a very small picture of Jennifer Ehle and sometimes Susannah Harker in the bottom left hand corner. This decision not only insinuates that the character of Mr. Darcy is prominent over that of Elizabeth's, but also introduces a sexualization of Mr. Darcy within the film.

Langton creates several scenes to secure the sex-appeal of Mr. Darcy for a female audience, the first of which is the fencing scene. While this episode does not contribute anything to the plot, it establishes Mr. Darcy as a strong and athletic man potentially capable of facing dangerous thieves and foes. Darcy cannot only be gorgeous and generous; he must also be strong and daring. The sexualization of Mr. Darcy culminates in the scene in which Elizabeth visits Pemberly and Darcy sporadically decides to take his clothes off and go for a swim in his front yard. This, of course, is not part of the original Austen text, as Austen's writing dotes on men based on their moral worth and overall charm, not their sex-appeal. This difference can be attributed to the difference in the intended audience of novel and film. While Austen writes for a conservative 17th century audience, Langton faces the sexually liberal audience of the 21st century and must accommodate for the time difference by making Mr. Darcy as desirable to a modern audience as he would have been in Austen's time.

By creating his own scenes and enhancing those which can be found in the novel, the director of the BBC film challenges the narrator of the novel by insinuating that the manner in which he/she portrays certain scenes is either unreliable or incomplete. This also insinuates a certain superiority of the director over the narrator, as the director was able to inform the audience of what the narrator did not see or failed to make note of. As the audience, all we have left is to enjoy the various points of views and attempt to create our own judgment of what has really happened.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Modern Library, 2000.

Pride & Prejudice. Dir. Simon Langton. Perf. Colin Firth, Jennifer Ehle and Susannah Harker. BBC. 1995.