

Jane Austens pride and prejudice english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



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Course Title: The 19th c. British Novel Instructor's Name: Dr. Anna

Koustinoudi Student's Name: Eleni Peletidou Assignment: Essay Topic: Discuss
plot, point of view, character, setting, time and style in Jane Austen's Pride

and Prejudice, and show how these are constitute the 'living organism' of

her novel. Submission Date: January 29, 2013 Pride and Prejudice by Jane

Austen is one of the most popular novels in English literature. It continues to
remain as popular today as it was upon its release in the United Kingdom in

1813. At a time when women novelists were beginning to take tentative

steps for acceptance and recognition, the quality of Pride and Prejudice

made a statement on behalf of all women novelists of the time. Set at the

turn of the 19th century, the novel is quintessentially British, as it constructs

a family drama around the personal manners and social norms of pre-

Victorian England. At the centre of Pride and Prejudice are a few recurrent

themes – social status, money and marriage. Since women had little

individual rights at the turn of the 19th century, their happiness and identify

largely depended on whom they married. Women of Austen's era were either

dependant on their fathers or their husbands for economic livelihood. Hence

the wealth and social status of suitors were of paramount importance for a

young lady to assent to marriage. This is a very materialistic and superficial

way of looking at marriage, yet it is true in Austen's time as it is now.

Perhaps the criteria might have shifted slightly with women's emancipation

and relative economic independence achieved over the last two centuries.

Hence, the novel is constructed upon the centrality of marriage and its

consequences to a young lady's future prospects. The criteria for selecting the groom might have gotten modified over the years, but still the game of courtship plays out in all its intrigue and passion across eras. Being a 'novel of manners' that it is the work " evokes the courtesy and restraint of socially proscribed courtship among 19th century English gentry." (Berggren, 2003, p. 19) This element contributes to the 'living organism' of the novel and also explains why *Pride and Prejudice* is still read by so many contemporary readers. That it is more popular among women than men gives away the authorial personal perspective. It is fair to say that *Pride and Prejudice* showcases courtship in two opposing dimensions – the thrill of romance and love, the convenience and comfort of social status. One can also see nascent feminist thought in Austen's narrative, as the norms of courtship of her time reflect inequality between the sexes. This thread of feminism also contributes to the 'living organism' in the novel. For example, Austen's subtext is " class and gender injustice characteristic of her time. Women with no family wealth or social connection to offer a prospective suitor often backed into a corner of reluctant consent to a semi-arranged age that least promised a home to keep and social status as somebody's wife. Whether or not she cared for the man or found him attractive--or even knew him well--could be irrelevant; men and women alike felt the personal unhappiness of such loveless if socially convenient relationships. A widow and her unmarried daughters could be turned out of their home if the husband died and the property was entailed to the closest male relative as was the common practice." (Berggren, 2003, p. 19)The development of the relationship between Elizabeth Bennett and Fitzwilliam Darcy gives us insights into the

psychology of courtship as well as the irrationality associated with romantic love. Their first few social encounters are rather cold, bordering between mutual dislike and indifference. Indeed, the characteristics making the title - pride and prejudice - are both so ingrained in Elizabeth's mind that she misunderstands Mr Darcy's dignified and civilized advances towards her. At halfway in the novel Elizabeth receives a letter from Mr Darcy, which she misreads the first time. It is only upon reading it again in a calmer frame of mind that she was able to " arrive at a closer estimation of the meaning of its words and the intention of its author. This letter functions not only as a turning point in the progress of events but as the focal point of a theme that is devoted only in part to the ways of courtship and marriage and-for it is important to note the incident Austen picks as her image-far more to the reading of texts." (Bonaparte, 2005)It would be easy to presume that *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel limited to interpretations of manners, mores, customs and interpersonal relationships. In other words, the question of what constitutes the ' living organism' of the novel can only be given a satisfactory answer by reading the novel in unconventional ways, through academic disciplines erstwhile thought of as unrelated to its content. Austen was not previously thought of as a novelist concerned with philosophical questions. Even critics like Gilbert Ryle, " who takes her to be a serious moralist and to be interested in the theory as well as the practical end of morality, begins his analysis of her views by stating that she is not a " philosopher"." (Bonaparte, 2005) But recent research has challenged this ' prejudice' of older scholars and has attempted to set it right. For example, read with scrutiny, the work lends itself to philosophic and epistemological

analysis. The epistolary nature of the narrative, where most of the communication between characters happens via the letters they write to each other, is an apt choice for Austen to present her philosophic point of view. Based on the discrepancies between what the characters actually write and what they actually mean, the novel offers scope for linguistic and psychological inquiry. Likewise the discrepancies between what receivers of letters read and what they actually understand is content for this line of inquiry. All these special qualities of the work constitute the 'living organism'. Further, "Austen is highly philosophical, alert both to ideas in general and to the currents of her time. What is deceptive is that rarely does she present these theoretically. Mostly her conceptual world is so fully dramatized in her characters and her plots that it can only be inferred from the nature of the action and the language of the narrative. But once in a while we do, in fact, find a moment so abstract as to convince us beyond doubt that Austen's purpose is philosophical." (Alavi, 2006, P. 27) The dominant point of view in the novel is that of women in general, although not necessarily that of Austen's. The memorable first line from the novel serves as evidence for this assertion: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife". There is an element of wishful thinking in this line, as if women of the era wanted it to be true. It also carries an air of presumption in that it thinks on behalf of men what they would want. Claiming it to be a universal truth is again a little pretentious. But this is not to say that this famous line is an indication of the author's own mistaken preconceptions - either born of pride of her gender or out of ignorance. To the contrary, Austen seems to be using it as a ploy to

invoke critical thinking on the part of the reader. The scrupulous reader will ask himself/herself the question, ' Does she sincerely expect her readers to adhere to such a declaration in a gesture of passive acceptance'? The answer is firmly in the negative, as " implicit in this initial pronouncement is an invitation to the reader to disagree with the narrative point of view, to dismiss the authorial voice, on this occasion, as a stuffy advocate of bourgeois morality. Austen frequently " reverts to the first person in her fictions" as a way of tendering " an invitation to regard the narrator as a character with opinions of her own". In proffering such an observation at the outset, Austen assumes that her reader is familiar with the tradition of the novel, in particular with the eighteenth-century ideology that frames the genre as a vehicle of moral improvement." (Mathews, 2007)Moving on to the socio-cultural aspects of the novel, it is fair to claim that class equations are an integral part of its living organism. The complex series of social rules and conventions that the characters follow amply bring to life the quality and atmosphere of the novel's setting. All members of the Bennett family illustrate this quality through their numerous interactions with the outside world. For example, the sisters never fail to address members of their social circle through the titles they've earned - either through inheritance or through individual accomplishment. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is one such member, who also typifies another idiosyncrasy of her aristocratic status, namely, snobbishness. These complex social rules and conventions are also employed for the sake of politeness and civility. For example, " To be civil involves praxis of response, in which each participant is expected, by a set of unspoken rules, to act in a certain manner. Such reactions are not, however,

simply mechanical, but are expected to reflect the deeper force of one's beliefs... The truly polite or civil set of expectations thus contains not only a duty to perform a particular act, but also the implicit possibility of refusing that invitation. Austen thus examines the frequent tension between a desire "universally acknowledged" as being in one's interest, and the adjustment of one's actual desire in relation to that supposed universality." (Mathews, 2007) Another enduring feature of *Pride and Prejudice* which has kept the novel's critical discourse alive even today is its engagement with time-related anxieties. Securing a well-to-do husband is in effect securing a safe and steady future for the girl concerned. Irrespective of the fact that securing the future is never fully possible in life, the Bennett sisters go about achieving this through calculated manipulations of people and circumstances. The obvious superficiality and crassness of such manoeuvrings is a failure in terms of its philosophy. Thus, Austen's philosophy "fails to open itself truly to the random possibilities of the future. A turn towards the future is not enough, in and of itself, to guarantee the authenticity of action. The turn to the future must be made in an ethical way, in a manner that seeks to acknowledge and preserve the freedom of the beloved instead of serving as an act of appropriation." (Mathews, 2007) In Austen's defence one can claim that the actions of the characters are not to be taken as the author's personal didacticism. To the contrary, they merely showcase how people think and act in the real world of pre-Victorian England. To this extent, *Pride and Prejudice* is a success and it accounts for why the novel is part of critical discourse even today.