

Pride and prejudice: when first impression is crucial

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In the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, previously titled “*First Impressions*,” the dynamics of first impressions between characters play a major role throughout the story. Elizabeth Bennet’s first encounters with both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham immediately stick and create her lasting impression about each of the men. Unfortunately though, her stubbornness and obliviousness prevents her from seeing their true colors throughout most of the book. That is until a letter arrives, and Elizabeth breaks through the barrier keeping her from perceiving their characters in a different light. Austen constructs multiple situations surrounding mistaken first impressions to relay a crucial theme of the book which is to not judge a book by its cover, and to instead look a little deeper.

From very early on in the story is the primary impression of the novel between Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam Darcy; a successful, wealthy, and single man. Darcy is introduced at the ball in Meryton to all the neighbors, including the Bennets, and the narrator describes Darcy’s presence as “A fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which tuned the tide of his popularity; for he as discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased,” (Austen, 11). He then proceeds to refuse to dance with Elizabeth describing her as, “tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me,” (Austen, 9) of course greatly offending her, leaving her, along with the rest of the guests, to decide that from then on he is profoundly disliked due to his arrogance and selfishness. While reviewing the evening the entire Bennet family agrees he is “such a disagreeable man that it would be quite a misfortune to be

liked by him,” (Austen, 14) and that his cockiness is quite unattractive.

Elizabeth chimes in exclaiming, “ I may safely promise you never to dance with him!” (Austen, 15). For the majority of time following the ball, Elizabeth refuses to see anything but the Darcy that acted so rude at the ball the first time they met.

The character of Mr. Wickham enters the story at dinner one night, and the first impression of him is that “ His appearance was greatly in his favor; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and a very pleasing address,” (Austen, 62) as he charmed all of the ladies. Again, he flattered at Mrs. Phillips party where he “ was the happy man towards whom almost every female eye was turned,” (Austen, 65) including Elizabeth’s. Although, at another ball, Miss Bingley frantically warns Elizabeth about Wickham recommending her to, “ not to give implicit confidence to all his assertions,” (Austen, 82). Yet another warning came from none other than Elizabeth’s sister, Jane, as she says Mr. Bingley told her that Wickham, “ is by no means a respectable man,” (Austen, 83). Elizabeth ignores these remarks until Wickham leaves Elizabeth for another girl, but only slightly wounded by his choice, she casually dismisses this betrayal, still holding onto that first impression of him.

Unexpectedly, Elizabeth receives a letter from Mr. Darcy about midway through the story revealing the truth about Darcy and Wickham’s long history together since childhood. This entails the incident in which Wickham made an attempt to elope with Darcy’s sister, but Mr. Darcy claims his “ chief object was unquestionably my sister’s fortune,” (Austen, 174). After

learning this information concerning Wickham, Elizabeth “ overthrows every cherished opinion of his worth” (Austen, 175), and completely changes her mindset regarding Wickham exclaiming, “ How different did everything now appear in which he was concerned!” (Austen, 178). She also looks back and replays their time spent together realizing that in actuality, “ She could remember no more substantial good than the general approbation of the neighbourhood, and the regard which his social powers had gained him in the mess” (Austen, 177) meaning that she didn’t ever see the real Wickham, just his fake flattery and looks that tricked her into liking him. Elizabeth was acting blind and confesses that when she cries, “ On the very beginning of our acquaintance I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away” (Austen, 179) . As for Darcy, Elizabeth’s emotions change as well, “ A change so sudden and so important” (Austen, 180), and she begins to develop feelings for him along with finally accepting his love. After this revelation, Elizabeth notices that “ Neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd” (Austen, 178) and comes to terms with the fact that the two men are not how she first thought them to be.

These two faulty impressions specifically tie into one of the novels main themes which proves to be to not rely on first impressions, but to get to know someone before making assumptions. Elizabeth clearly does this in the cases of meeting Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham early on. It wasn’t until much later did she become aware of her misinterpretations, and see the real people that Darcy and Wickham are. This occurrence of first impressions is

repeated throughout Pride and Prejudice to make point of one of the great themes in the book.