

Satire in jane austen's pride in prejudice

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Jane Austen's Satirical Writing: Analyzing the Satire of Social Class

Within *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* delves into the issue of why social standing in a society based solely on class should not be the most important thing when evaluating the worth of a person. Through several different literary techniques - such as letters and abundant focalizers - Austen conveys important information about key issues she has with the significance placed on social standing.

The theme of class and social standing is echoed constantly throughout Austen's novel in numerous ways, highlighting several aspects of the gentry that she distrusts. The entirety of the novel focuses mainly on the distances placed between characters due to their social standing in a class based society. Regardless of how fit a person may be in either mind or capabilities, if a high sum of money is not contained within their personhood (or their estate), they are considered menial. Jane Austen uses the social relationships between her characters to satirize the importance placed on the hierarchy of class in society.

Austen wrote the novel in order to define and satirize the problems that she saw in the hierarchy of class in the society of her time. Throughout the entire novel "there isn't a character...who's introduced without his income being mentioned in the next sentence" (Selznick 92). The ridiculousness of the value placed upon money - of which the middle class has very little - is evident as Austen progresses the story and the relationships between her characters - namely between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth.

The fact that, in Austen's time, the society revolved around the gentry - whose entire idea of class and power involved money - makes it easier for the audience reading *Pride and Prejudice* to understand why she has satirized this issue. She does this quite flawlessly throughout the novel, relying on her knowledge of the increasing adamancy of the middle class to gain social status and power through more than just land, money and relations. The significance of social standing and the desire of the characters to aspire to it can be seen in different instances throughout the novel.

However, there are a few characters for which the idea of wealth and power mean very little, who strive to better themselves through their own wit and charm, rather than through the advantages of money. Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of the novel, is one such character. It is difficult for her to adjust to the sense of reality in which the novel exists due to the fact that the society has been permanently established and there is very little she can do to earn the credit she deserves.

Yet it is due to Elizabeth's unique personality that the audience is able to understand why her interest for the things at Pemberley and the positive change in heart she has for Mr. Darcy's character show the dual nature of how Austen thought of the personal attainment of identity and morality balanced with her begrudged acknowledgement of a limited and restrained society (Hamilton). There are several other characters that believe the importance placed on monetary gain to be superfluous and still others that also come to realize this.

It is through both the understanding and ignorance of these characters that it becomes evident just how deeply Austen distrusted the idea of an individual requiring social power in order to be recognized as an accomplished individual. Austen paid especially close attention to economic and social standing when it came to her characters for the express purpose of satirizing why their superior class was not necessarily more agreeable or accomplished than those in the lower classes.

She wrote her novels with the idea that "the quality of humanity is to be judged by moral and human standards...not by social status; but like her own temporary snobs...she pays full attention to their social status first" (Copeland 121). As seen with Austen's character Mr. Darcy, she concentrates fully on his attachments to his reputation before she delves into who he becomes and how much better off he is when he realizes the error in his way of thinking.

In assessing the weight that social standing has on the progression of the story in *Pride and Prejudice*, one can attain a great bit of insight into why specific characters act the way they do throughout the novel. The infamous Bingley sisters, for instance, are so attached to the idea of material wealth that they fail to realize when their comments are unacceptable. Ms. Bingley herself, who is so attached to the idea that she is superior to Elizabeth in every way, cannot understand why Mr.

Darcy could possibly find Elizabeth attractive in any sort of manner. It is her status-hungry and conceited personality that allows the audience to see the sheer difference between her and her brother, Mr. Charles Bingley. Unlike his

sisters, he is not trying to climb up the social hierarchy to gain status and power; instead, he shows a gentler, more levelheaded side to the gentry as he falls in love with Elizabeth's older sister, Jane. It is characters with personalities and ideals like Mr.

Bingley's that Austen revered and trusted above all others. Curiously enough, however, the hardheaded Mr. Darcy, who is very aware of his social standing, is the one character in the novel who goes through the most drastic personality change. Though Elizabeth Bennet had the positive, clever and levelheaded personality that Austen herself may have had when dealing with the social mobility of her time, it is instead the incredible change of heart that Mr.

Darcy undergoes that shows how someone who is socially superior can realize the importance of wit, charm and beauty of those around him instead of being concerned only with their social status. This is how Austen is able to satirize these problems so efficiently that a modern audience does not realize that she is poking fun at the societal importance of class in her time and instead sees nothing but a charming romance. Yet Austen was doing much more than writing a simple love story.

The novel was written in a transitional period when people's way of thinking was shifting from a romantic look at life to a more enlightened view of living. The ideals of the eighteenth century - where people saw society as organized and divinely structured - were quickly lost to the thinkers of the more modernistic views of society in the nineteenth century, in which there was a significant loss of faith in any spiritualistic based society. Instead,

nineteenth century thought turned towards the idea of the individual as the only path towards order.

This new idea of placing emphasis on the self was especially important to Austen, yet she realized that the tendency of an organized and structured society was to value a person by their material wealth, rather than who the individual really was. She was able to take both ideas and mold them into her ideal situation, which can be seen in the last few lines of the novel when Elizabeth is at last accepted into Pemberley and its heritage. It is here that the individual “remains exactly where Austen would have it, in the center of a stable eighteenth-century world” (Hamilton 36).

Class and social standing is a very evident and important issue for Austen and she satirizes it with the utmost diligence throughout the novel using intricate, yet simplistic designs for her characters' relationships. For instance, instead of being forced to marry Mr. Collins for the express purpose of making a new connection on their own, Elizabeth refuses to be controlled by society's standards and defies Mrs. Bennet's wishes in order to “demonstrate that it is still possible for individuals to make new connections in defiance of society” (Austen 395).

Tony Tanner, a British literary critic, who wrote the original introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* conveyed that Austen wrote about “a society which stresses social control over individual ecstasy, formality over informality, sartorial neatness over bodily abandon, and alert consciousnesses over the more Romantic states of reverie and trance” and yet it is also “a society in

which the individual can experience freedom as well as commitment” (Austen 395).

The unfathomable amount of thought that Jane Austen put into writing *Pride and Prejudice* show how deeply she cared for the freedom of the individual and the ability to stand proudly in a society that overlooked individual assets for material ones. Tanner also credited Austen with the ability to create a character around the central idea of attempting to prove their individual worth within a society bound entirely by the ordinance of class.

He is able to demonstrate the importance Austen placed on her characters – especially Elizabeth and Jane Bennet – finding themselves in a gentry-based society by drawing on William Blake's *In the Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Tanner argues – with Blake's ideals in mind – that Austen takes two completely different aspects of life, energy and reason, and instead of reconciling these opposite attractions, there is a mutual coming together of complementary characteristics.

He puts it plainly when he states that “ she makes it seem as if it is possible for playfulness and regulation – energy and boundaries – to be united in fruitful harmony, without the one being sacrificed to the other” (Austen 106). This ability to take two unlike ideas and mesh them together without either losing its significance is exactly how Austen takes society's emphasis on social standing and class and reverses it into something that now benefits a character where before it could only hinder (i. e. Elizabeth's transformation from a meager middle-class girl, to the Mistress of Pemberley).

However, not all critics have been kind to the way in which Austen portrays this transformational miracle of a young girl suddenly coming into great sums of money, merely by the tact and wit she shows in the way she lives. These critics find Austen's dealing with social standing and class to be abhorrent. In fact, one such critic happens to be a famous authoress who, in writing a letter to G. H. Lewes in 1848, stated that she disliked the novel due to its frivolous dealings with the common life of both the upper and the middle-class.

In her writing to the British literary and theatre critic, the authoress stated that she “ should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses” (Austen 368). It was, in fact, Currer Bell – more widely known as Charlotte Brontë – who wrote this letter, in which the reader can clearly sense the contempt she had for Austen's writing and the way she portrayed her characters. Though perhaps more of a criticism towards the way Austen wrote in general, Brontë was still very serious with her concern about the way in which Austen depicted her characters and their lives.

She had, in Brontë's view, “ no sense of the outward world – either scenery or personal appearance” (Mazzeno 558). It is obvious that Austen's portrayal of social standing, class, romance, money, marriage and many other themes throughout *Pride and Prejudice* were not held in high regard with Brontë. Though the majority of critical analyses both praising and condemning the way in which Austen depicts social standing in her novel have been done by literary thinkers, there have been other mediums through which the novel

has been adapted, such that even criticism of someone as famous as Charlotte Brontë is outshined.

For example, in their book *Authority, State and National Character*, professors Kuzmics of the University of Graz and Axtmann of the University of Wales, when addressing the problems that both Britain and Austria have seen in relation to social class when examining the issues that arose in several literary novels and dramas of the time, state that when they first studied *Pride and Prejudice*, they thought it had very little to do with such issues. They believed that “the fate of the Bennet sisters in rural gentry-based England just after the turn of the century revolved around such harmless matters as a ball at Netherfield” (Kuzmics 223).

It is apparent that both professors believe – at least upon their first reading of it – that Austen's novel had very little to do with the very real problems that are satirized throughout the story. Their criticism of the novel, however, in relation to how both Austrian and English society has evolved during the civilizing process is perhaps accurate without an in depth reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, as it seems to merely have a “relaxed air of cheerfulness and ironic, detached art of people watching” (Kuzmics 223).

Conversely, after one looks past all the pleasantries that the story has to offer, one realizes that, as the professors correctly stated, it only appears to have nothing to do with issues of class. This is why the novel must be read carefully, to push past the obvious romance of the story and dig into the satirical tone in which Austen addresses such important matters. As the professors continue their research into the heart of the novel, they revealed

very important aspects of Austen's writing about social class and how it is a perfect example of English society, even to this day.

She defined so clearly how England was a “face-to-face” or “shame society” in which “the opposite of social respectability is social disgrace” which was “to be avoided at all costs” (Kuzmics 227). This meant that for those families that were unable to depend on an inheritance or their relations in order to live comfortably in society, they could only rely upon prospective marriage partners for a comfortable life. It is because of this importance placed upon society's standards of what makes a family valuable that “the social value and respectability of the potential future spouse is ascertained and made visible” (Southam 113).

This, in turn, makes it difficult for someone such as Elizabeth – who is very accomplished in her wit and charm – unable to stoop so low as to accept a marriage proposal from someone she has no tender feelings toward. The idea of marrying only for money, power or social stability is part of the reason why Elizabeth Bennet is thought of as impertinent by other characters in the novel such as Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine, and at times even her own mother.

Yet it is because of Elizabeth's character and the audacity she is capable of showing to such renowned individuals that proves Austen meant her novel to be much more than a romantic story between two characters. She wanted a stab at the problems of the gentry, to affirm her belief that basing the worth of an individual merely by their material wealth was hardly the best way of assessing someone's value (Wilhelm). She was able to do a fantastic job of

satirizing the gentry throughout her novel by using several different aspects of what made a renowned person so important: money, connections and property.

In the general notes of the Penguin Classic version of *Pride and Prejudice*, David Spring, author of *Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World*, used historian Alan Everitt's coined term 'pseudo-gentry' to describe a group of individuals that were comprised mostly of those involved with the trade, who aspired to attain the lifestyle of the landed gentry. It is because of this idea that in order to be worth something, a person must own land, that several of the characters from Austen's novel seek 'land-based wealth,' which is an obvious sign of "a class intensely interested in income as means to, and a sign of, status" (Austen 413).

This shows that Austen's novel is written from a point of view that sees upward mobility as a bleak, corrupt hierarchy and is much more interested in the professional middle class – the class which, in *Pride and Prejudice* is represented quite adeptly by the Gardiners. This idea of attempting to identify oneself in a strict society based on social class has taken on numerous different forms: books, critical essays, movies and television series. Innumerable amounts of professional critics have delved deeply into Austen's novel's representation of class, manners and even the social status of women in British society.

In the incredibly faithful six hour long A&E/BBC adaptation of the book, Sue Britwistle – the program's producer – wanted to include "many clear illustrations of the way that class and gender are governed by proper British

manners...and highlight the importance of economic status in Regency England” (Selznick 92). The fact that women could only gain social standing through marriage is very apparent through all of Austen’s writing, not just *Pride and Prejudice*. It is incredible to think that a woman was worth nothing unless she had a substantial inheritance, as seen with Georgiana and Mr.

Wickham. He cared nothing for her abilities, her looks, her personality – the only thing he desired was the hefty sum of money she would receive through inheritance. The type of relationship is seen numerous times throughout the novel and only contravened when Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy marry the two Bennet sisters. It is, as professors Kuzmics and Axtmann so rightly called it, a marriage market. The worth of an individual could only be seen through the instance of marriage, when a person’s monetary value was ascertained and brought into light.

There are several different instances throughout the novel in which social standing and class are satirized, though none so much as the motif of carriages. Austen placed importance upon how many and of what kind carriage a person owned; it signaled wealth, status and power – which, to Austen, was not a feasible way to judge the worth of a person. The aspect of carriages even flows into the marriage market, where the prospective bride (because the groom always seemed to be worthy regardless) is critiqued and either approved or denied.

Part of this process is inquiry into how many and what kind of carriages the bride owns – if any. Their chances of finding a suitable match dwindle if they do not own an acceptable carriage (Walder). This is seen when Lady

Catherine tracks down Elizabeth at Longbourn, wondering how her nephew could have possibly proposed to one such as her - someone who walks places without the aid of a carriage to take her anywhere. One of the most noteworthy characters that Austen uses to satirize social standing in her novel is Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Austen utilizes Lady Catherine for the primary function of criticizing the aristocratic society in which she places her character, as Lady Catherine is one of the most prideful and overbearing personalities in the novel. Jane Austen mercilessly ridicules the hierarchical society she was raised in by using Catherine as a means to convey how prominent figures (who were only important because of their wealth) thought themselves to be experts on almost every topic, even if they had no prior knowledge of the subject of which they were speaking on.

For example, when Elizabeth visits Lady Catherine at Rosings, she is not only terribly inquisitive about how the girl had been raised, but when she asks Elizabeth if she plays the piano, Catherine admits that she herself could not. Though, as she states soon afterward, if she had practiced, there was no doubt that she would have been incredible. Ironically enough, it is due to Lady Catherine's sudden visitation with Elizabeth near the end of the novel that Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth are married. By telling her nephew of the interview that she had with Elizabeth, Catherine allows the seed of hope to appear in Mr.

Darcy. Lady Catherine's attempt at interference between her nephew and Elizabeth is ultimately the reason that the two marry - not to mention that it

is a means by which Austen can convey the strong personality she bequeathed upon Elizabeth to show that one's social station should not limit her, but help her to hold her own in what most people saw as polite-society. Through many instances of dark humor, tragedy and even comedic aspects, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* takes a critical look at the issue of social standing in society and severely reprimands its ideals.

Austen distrusted several aspects of the society in which she lived and tried to right its wrongs by satirizing the importance that the gentry placed on social standing and class. Though this may not have worked quite as well as she would have hoped – as most people view *Pride and Prejudice* as a mere romance story – with her cut and dry, black and white views of what a person should be judged by, Austen clearly wanted her society to realize that a person could only be considered accomplished if they truly had the talents to be – not whether or not they could afford to buy their name.

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