

Chinonso Oguh

Dr. Price McMurray

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First Impressions in *Pride and Prejudice*

Pride and Prejudice is first and foremost a romance centering around the characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy. However, when the two characters meet, they do not have the highest opinion of the other. Elizabeth finds Mr. Darcy pompous and arrogant, while he is initially uninterested in her based-on physical appearance. Neither want much to do with the other, and it is only because they're often forced together do they begin to see each other in a different way. It is impossible to truly know what someone is like and whether or not people could be friends, or even lovers, after only one meeting. Although Elizabeth firsts thinks of Mr. Darcy as prideful and terrible, to be around once she gets a chance to look under the surface, she is able to find something to fall in love with.

Elizabeth first meets Darcy at the ball in Meryton where, like everyone else, she initially thinks he is handsome, but that opinion is quickly overshadowed by another one. She notices how he only sticks to himself and his group, jumping to the conclusion that he's full of himself and thinks he is better than anyone else there. Things escalate when Bingley suggests Darcy dance with Elizabeth who rejects the idea stating she is "not handsome enough to tempt me" and he doesn't want to dance with a girl whom others have rejected (Austen 13). Clearly Elizabeth's first impression on Darcy was nothing spectacular or he wouldn't have said that. His comments deepen the growing rift between them that "influences a near destruction" of anything resembling a friendly acquaintanceship (Ong). They spend more time around each other because

of the courtship of Jane and Bingley, but Elizabeth doesn't allow herself to Darcy in any other way than this first impression. After this, and for much of the novel, Elizabeth doesn't hold any "cordial feelings" toward Darcy (Austen 14). She will not give him the time of day because of how he treated her, and she constantly looks for the tiniest flaw to complain about his behavior toward herself and others.

Despite Darcy's first impression of Elizabeth being judgmental, he very quickly becomes captivated by her as they spend time together. Even as he "looked at [Elizabeth] only to criticize" in order to back up his original impressions, Darcy soon realizes the impressions were not accurate (Austen 24). He starts noticing things he had been dismissive about before, such as her easy playfulness, nice figure, and expressive, intelligent eyes (Austen 24). Darcy even directly points out one detail to Caroline showing how much he's started paying attention to Elizabeth. Attention Elizabeth misconstrues as judgement because of her own negative feelings toward him. As Vincent Hanley points out, the audience is also taken by this negative assessment of Darcy because prejudice colors Elizabeth's reflection of events (Hanley). Despite information from the narrator, the audience wishes to side with Elizabeth as she is the focus and therefore her opinions seem more valid. Darcy, however, is growing in his assessment of Elizabeth even as he struggles with his prideful analysis of the Bennet family. He is not just the pompous or arrogant jerk he is deemed by many characters, but rather a person who is able to change. This ability to change will allow Darcy to develop over the course of the novel and become a person that Elizabeth can look at again and see how she may have been in the wrong with her early judgments.

The appearance of Mr. Wickham complicates things for the pair, pushing them in opposite directions. Elizabeth immediately develops a "visceral sexual interest" in Wickham as they spend more time together (Bander). Her attraction to Wickman makes it easy for her to

believe every bad thing he tells her about Darcy. To Elizabeth, Wickham is trustworthy and charming, so there is no reason for her to look past Darcy's faults when he lays them out to her. Wickham enamors Elizabeth, and the audience gets to look into the mind of an infatuated young woman. At this point, it is impossible to believe Elizabeth could see Darcy as more than an "object of derision" (Bander). A wall is being built up between the pair, it started at the Meryton Ball and grows every time Elizabeth finds another detail to hold against Darcy. It will take work to tear it down, but with Wickham's charming presence Elizabeth will continue to latch onto his lies and build her animosity toward Darcy despite what others say.

Elizabeth has crafted a very firm opinion of Darcy for herself and will not let anyone else change for the first half of the novel. There are several moments where Darcy is paying special attention to her that the audience knows is because he like her, but Elizabeth is oblivious. While Elizabeth is staying with the Collins, Darcy visits her when she is alone which Charlotte finds shocking in its familiarity and claims "he must be in love with you" which Elizabeth dismisses (Austen 175). Charlotte's observation is soon proven true when Darcy suddenly proposes to Elizabeth not long after. This proposal is a shock as she has been completely unable to notice Darcy's change in feelings toward her. However, his "bluntness" and outright "judgement" do little to sway Elizabeth's feelings in this moment (Ray). It both seems to prove her previous impression on his contempt toward her and forces her to realize that there was more going on than she realized. This is the first time Elizabeth realizes she might not be "as sharp a reader of character" as she believed herself to be (Hanley). She got lost in her pride and let her first impression dictate her response to Darcy rather than looking under the surface.

After receiving the letter from Darcy, explaining his previous actions, Elizabeth is able to look back on all the things that have happened in and the novel and realizes that maybe Darcy

isn't as big of a jerk as she thought. Analyzing the letter Elizabeth realizes how mistaken she was on the characters of both Darcy and Wickham. Although she'd often accused Darcy of being prideful, she realizes she falls victim to it as well as she had "believed herself to be superior to others" and refused to admit she could be wrong (Hanley). After she has been able to reflect on her actions, Elizabeth acknowledges she has been "repeatedly rude" to Darcy (Ray). Her previous actions had been influenced by preconceived notions on who Elizabeth believed Darcy to be. She is able to look at his actions before and after the letter and realizes that he liked her all along when she was dismissive of him and continues to help her and her family. Her changed opinion on Darcy after receiving the letter allows her to be more open to who Darcy really is and not the construction she's created in her mind. It is only then that Elizabeth is able to look at Darcy as a potential love interest for herself rather than someone she keeps being forced into social situations with.

Elizabeth doesn't immediately jump to love after reading Darcy's letter. She is suddenly bombarded with the truth she let her feelings toward Wickham "overcome her critical judgment" (Bander). With those blinders off, Elizabeth is rather embarrassed to deal with Darcy and his acquaintances such as when she visits Pemberley. She must examine that despite Darcy's issues, social awkwardness and a prideful demeanor, he is not nearly as awful as she'd led herself to believe. The staff at Pemberley claim Darcy is "sweetest-tempered" and "generous-hearted" which Elizabeth finds shocking at first, but will eventually see has always been true (Austen 238). He is supremely helpful to her family, partially because he is in love with her, by getting Jane and Bingley back together and secretly providing aid for Lydia during the Wickham scandal. Darcy doesn't rub his helpful actions in Elizabeth's face, but rather does them without even asking for reward. This is far from the judgmental and prideful person Elizabeth believed

him to be for much of the novel. These events allow Elizabeth to see a new side to Darcy that she never would have allowed herself to entertain at the beginning of the novel. Once she is able to see how much she misjudged him, and that he isn't who she'd thought, then Elizabeth is able to fall for Darcy.

Considering that *Pride and Prejudice* is supposed to be a love story, it might seem strange that Jane Austen would set the main love interests at odds from each other. In the beginning Elizabeth cannot stand Darcy, but somehow, she is able to still fall in love with and marry him by the end of the novel. Every person is different and it is impossible to everything about some one on the first meeting, yet Elizabeth lets her early feelings toward Darcy drive much of their interactions. As Ong points out, it is because the brain won't "re-evaluate something if there is no reason to" and since Elizabeth believes strongly in her view point a re-evaluation early on means nothing (Ong). Unfortunately, for Elizabeth this means that she loses months of her life hating someone for initially very superficial reasons as she clings to her prejudiced attitude. In many ways, this judgment appears justified with Wickham's lies and her protective feelings toward Jane making Darcy's flaws appear deeper. When everything is exposed to Elizabeth, she is forced to go through a change of heart and only through a "long process of revision and self-examination" can she begin to reflect on her true feelings toward Darcy (Bander). This doesn't negate the hostile feelings she had toward him in the beginning, but instead allows her to grow and develop.

Elizabeth learns more about Darcy, but also herself, as digs deeper into knowing and understanding him. Austen wanted to show how knowing others wasn't something that could be done by meeting someone once and sticking to that idea of a person. In the end it would only be an idea rather than a fully fleshed out human being. Darcy and Elizabeth do not initially think

highly of each other, and don't want to spend time with each other. However, once they're forced to spend time around each other, then they are able to see what they had not in their first interaction. Although their minds wanted to trap them in that first impression, they were able to push past it and discover something more. Their love story could not be told without the challenge of realizing that just because there is a bad first impression doesn't mean that a person cannot be an important part of someone else's life.

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