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The Importance of Social Status in Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”

Social status is something that has always been valued in society. Whether it’s by comparing income, education, or occupation, people are drawn to determining where they are in relation to others. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, social status is a pivotal aspect that defines a person’s intrinsic worth, as well as their importance and influence in society. Jane Austen uses irony repeatedly in *Pride and Prejudice* to expose the ridiculousness of the social circumstances at the time. Characters such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Miss Bingly who strictly follow the rules of society are ridiculed and left for the reader to detest for their snobby and overbearing nature. However, characters of higher social status, such as Lady Catherine, receive respect from others and manage to get their way purely because of their breeding. People born into a lower social status are left at a significant disadvantage in life, and must make up for their lack of status to progress in society. The Bennet’s social status and poor connections constrains their family’s prospects in life, and Elizabeth must overcome this by escaping the prejudice held against her social status, enduring the selfishness of her family, and reevaluating how she perceives the world.

The society in *Pride and Prejudice* is divided into classes, but the social boundaries do not seem to be clearly defined. Darcy, Bingly, and Lady Catherine are not financial equals but they still share social equality. Bingly earns roughly half the amount that Darcy does per year and he is not even from the landed gentry. The landed gentry is considered to be part of the upper class, and since Bingley’s wealth came from trade and he doesn’t own an estate, him and his sisters are considered to be part of the middle class. The Bingley’s are treated as if they are part of a lower class than Darcy, Bingly, and Lady Catherine. This could be partially because Mrs. Bennet was part of the middle class before she was married. But Mr. Bennet, who is from the landed gentry, is considered to be from the upper class and is still said unworthy of becoming a relative through marriage due to the connections he has. Given that the husband determines the class of the family, the Bennet’s should be treated as equals. Ironically, Bingley’s sisters spend most of the novel making “snide remarks about Mrs. Bennet’s middle[-]class connections, when their own family came from the same class” (“Social Class and the Bennet Family”). Although the Bennets are the wealthiest family in their community with an income of two thousand pounds a year, they are not able to save much for their daughters, requiring them to marry a man with a modest income to support their financial failings. Having a low income as a woman does not seem to be too significant, because Wickham still accepts Darcy’s offer to induce him to marry Lydia for “less than 3,500 pounds” (Renee) knowing that both of them have very little income. Near the end of the story when Lady Catherine asks about Darcy’s proposal to Elizabeth, Lady Catherine threatens Elizabeth by saying that “[y]ou will be censured, slighted, and despised, by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us.” (Austen 437). Elizabeth stands up to Lady Catherine and says “[h]e is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal” (Austen 439). Lady Catherine agrees with this statement, but counters by asking “who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition.” (Austen 439). From this we can tell that connections are valued as much, if not higher, than class in this society. Unlike Lady Catherine, Elizabeth does not value class and connections highly, and she states that “[she is] only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in [her] own opinion, constitute [her] happiness, without reference to [Lady Catherine], or to any person so wholly unconnected with [her]” (Austen 441). By refusing to act in a manner considered suitable based on a person’s class or connections, she is able to improve her perception of the world and escape the expectations others place on her. Lady Catherine’s resentment eventually “gave way, either to her affection for him, or her curiosity to see how his wife conducted herself” (Austen 478). Through marrying Darcy, she is able to take on his name and be free of the prejudice she endured as a Bennet.

Elizabeth’s family is considered to be of a lower social ranking, and she feels that she is weighed down by her family. Her mother often embarrasses Elizabeth because of her lack of social graces, and her behaviour is selfish and predictable. As a flat character, Mrs. Bennet seems to be only interested in her children getting married, and she ends up withdrawing her cold behaviour towards both Darcy and Bingley only once they unexpectedly become marriage prospects for her daughters. She belongs to the middle class while the majority of the other characters belong to the upper class. Mrs. Bennet has little to no redeemable characteristics, and her shallowness prevents her from ever growing as a character. Elizabeth fears telling her mother that she is engaged to Darcy because she knows how much she detests him, but Mrs. Bennet’s reaction upon telling her changes to excitement about how “how rich and how great” (Austen 466) Elizabeth will be. Her younger sisters are also fairly reckless and lack the manners of the upper class. Elizabeth’s youngest sister Lydia Bennet planned on eloping with Wickham even though he obviously had no intention on marrying her, and risked damaging her whole family’s reputation, including her own. This causes Elizabeth to feel guilty about keeping her knowledge of the true nature of Darcy and Wickham hidden from the rest of her family, although it’s unlikely that Lydia’s opinion of him would change if given the truth. Darcy ends up saving their family from disgrace with only Elizabeth knowing the truth, and it pains her to hear her family continue to speak poorly of Darcy. Upon this reflection, she realizes the mistakes of her family’s prejudice towards others and their lack of manners towards others. Furthermore, she reflects on her own mistakes in her judgement of Darcy:

She was humbled, she was grieved; she repented, though she hardly knew of what. She became jealous of his esteem, when she could no longer hope to be benefited by it. . . .

What a triumph for him, as she often thought, could he know that the proposals which she had proudly spurned only four months ago, would now have been most gladly and gratefully received! . . .

It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (Austen 383)

Her repentance for her mistakes in judgement help her realize how well they are suited for each other. Her ease and liveliness would help improve Darcy, but his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world would be of greater importance in improving Elizabeth. Through their marriage, Elizabeth is able to escape from her family’s selfishness and improve her judgment of others.

When creating this story, Jane Austen “wrote behind a door that creaked when visitors approached; this warning allowed her to hide manuscripts before anyone could enter” (Sparknotes Editors). This allowed her to “preserve her privacy at a time when English society associated a female’s entrance into the public sphere with a reprehensible loss of femininity” (Sparknotes Editors). This background reflects in many ways how Elizabeth is in the story. Even though she goes against many of societies expectations of woman at the time, she still has good manners and converses well with everyone. When Jane is sick and she can’t take a carriage to visit her, Elizabeth walks there “alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise” (Austen 39). She arrives at the house dirty, and although she understands that Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley probably hold her in contempt for it, she still seems to be only concerned with her sister’s well-being. Many characters in the story, such as Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine, overvalue class and social ranking, and these characters are portrayed as being narrowminded. Even though these characters are older and more mature than Elizabeth, their lack of judgement and lack of self-reflection causes their perception of the world to stagnate. Throughout the story, the characters that change the most are Darcy and Elizabeth. They both go through a gradual transformation of their opinion of each other. Elizabeth is described from Darcy as being “tolerable” (Austen 13) to “a pretty woman” (Austen 33) and finally to “one of the handsomest woman of [his] acquaintance” (Austen 334). When the ladies first see Darcy, he is described as being “much handsomer than Mr. Bingley” (Austen 12) and having around double the fortune, but is found to have too much pride that these features cannot save him. From the first time Elizabeth meets Darcy, she does not like him because he appears arrogant and obnoxious in his manners and actions. He refuses to dance with Elizabeth, saying “she is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt ME” and Elizabeth goes back and tells the story to her friends “with great spirit” (Austen 13). This reveals that she doesn’t take serious offense to what he has said, and allows her to make a fair observation of his character. Although this judgement does seem to be valid, Elizabeth fails to determine Darcy’s true character because of his prejudice against people of lower social status. Had she had put more thought into her judgement of Darcy, she might have thought that he can’t always be that disagreeable if Bingley was friends with him, but her opinion of him was only based off of the very little encounters she had. Elizabeth reevaluates her opinion of Darcy only after she gets the letter from him. It’s only at this point that she questions her own ability of discernment, and in Darcy’s absence she becomes more mindful of trying to understand his character. This is demonstrated when they awkwardly meet at Pemberly for the first time after receiving the letter, and after Darcy leaves Elizabeth becomes insensible to her surroundings:

[A]nd, though she . . . seemed to direct her eyes to such objects as they pointed out, she distinguished no part of the scene. Her thoughts were all fixed on that one spot of Pemberley House, whichever it might be, where Mr. Darcy then was. She longed to know what at the moment was passing in his mind—in what manner he thought of her, and whether, in defiance of everything, she was still dear to him. . . .

At length, however, the remarks of her companions on her absence of mind aroused her, and she felt the necessity of appearing more like herself. (Austen 311)

She is aware that her eyes are not a reliable source for drawing conclusions in the world, and fixates on what Darcy is thinking about. The opening makes it clear that most of her neighbours believe that they can understand the material world, and their delusions cause them to be trapped in a society that judges others based on class and manners. At first Darcy dismisses Elizabeth due to her lower social status, but he eventually manages to look past her social status and connections due to her charm to ask her to marry him. When Elizabeth refuses him with reason, he reevaluates his behaviour and manages to better understand Elizabeth’s thoughts and improve his manners towards others. Although Darcy does not change as much as Elizabeth, he does learn to not immediately dismiss people he does not find agreeable, revealed later that “[i]f he did shrug his shoulders, it was not till Sir William was out of sight” (Austen 473). Elizabeth manages to understand that her own perception is flawed and that she can’t understand a person from observation alone.

Elizabeth endures a lot of hardships from members of different social statuses. She suffers through the prejudice against Darcy from her own family and even gets threatened by Lady Catherine when she finds out Darcy proposed to her. She has good manners, is quick-witted, and is clever enough to belong to the upper class. Elizabeth even repents for her own mistakes in her judgment of Darcy and realizes how beneficial their marriage would be for them both. She is eventually able to rectify her mistakes in judgment and get on better terms with those who were prejudiced against her. By constantly reevaluating herself and others, she is able to escape the constraints of her family’s social status and connections and find happiness through her improved perception of the world.

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