

SESSION 5

ACTIVITY FOR ANSWERING A KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

Text: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

Knowledge Question: In interpreting a work of literature, how do we know what attitude the artist wishes us to have toward certain characters?

**Note that this question can be broadened even further into a general question about the arts: How do we know what attitude the artist expects the audience to have toward the work?*

Background information for those not familiar with this novel: Elizabeth Bennet is one of five unmarried daughters in a family with no sons. The family is reasonably wealthy; however, the estate is entailed on Mr. Collins, so that when Mr. Bennet dies, Mr. Collins will inherit the entire estate and could, if he wishes, turn the mother and five daughters out without a penny. For Elizabeth to turn down a marriage proposal—especially from Mr. Collins—is a quite shocking act. Jane Austen would have been quite familiar with this situation; she and her sister were unmarried, and when her father died, he left them and their mother quite poorly off. They did receive some financial assistance from their brothers, but they were much reduced in circumstances from their position during their father's lifetime.

- Elizabeth would not oppose such an injunction—and a moment's consideration making her also sensible that it would be wisest to get it over as soon and as quietly as possible, she sat down again and tried to conceal, by incessant employment the feelings which were divided between distress and diversion. Mrs. Bennet and Kitty walked off, and as soon as they were gone, Mr.
- 5 Collins began.
- “Believe me, my dear Miss Elizabeth, that your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections. You would have been less amiable in my eyes had there *not* been this little unwillingness; but allow me to assure you, that I have your respected mother's permission for this address. You can hardly doubt the purport of my discourse,
- 10 however your natural delicacy may lead you to dissemble; my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken. Almost as soon as I entered the house, I singled you out as the companion of my future life. But before I am run away with by my feelings on this subject, perhaps it would be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying—and, moreover, for coming into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife, as I certainly did.”
- 15 The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth so near laughing, that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him further, and he continued:
- “My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I am convinced that it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject; and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford—between our pools at quadrille, while Mrs. Jenkinson was arranging Miss de
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25 Bourgh's footstool, that she said, 'Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry. Choose properly, choose a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way. This is my advice. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her.' Allow me, by the way, to observe, my fair cousin, that I do not reckon the notice and kindness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh as among the least of the advantages in my power to offer. You will
30 find her manners beyond anything I can describe; and your wit and vivacity, I think, must be acceptable to her, especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite. Thus much for my general intention in favour of matrimony; it remains to be told why my views were directed towards Longbourn instead of my own neighbourhood, where I can assure you there are many amiable young women. But the fact is, that being, as I am, to
35 inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father (who, however, may live many years longer), I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place—which, however, as I have already said, may not be for several years. This has been my motive, my fair cousin, and I flatter myself it will not sink me in your esteem. And now nothing remains
40 for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the four per cents, which will not be yours till after your mother's decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to. On that head, therefore, I shall be uniformly silent; and you may assure yourself that no
45 ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married."

Answering the knowledge question?

1. What attitude do you have toward Elizabeth after reading this passage?
2. What attitude do you have toward Mr. Collins after reading this passage?
3. What literary strategies did Austen use which lead you to develop those attitudes?
4. Why do we assume that the author shares our attitudes toward these characters?

Finally:

5. Based on this example, in interpreting a work of literature, how do we know what attitude the artist wishes us to have toward certain characters?

Source:

Austen, Jane. "Pride and Prejudice." *Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen*, Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org/files/1342/1342-h/1342-h.htm. Accessed 28 February 2019.