

P & P

Pride and Prejudice Book Review

By Ramsey Alsheikh

Pride and Prejudice is by and large a happy book. I hate happy books.

I want dark drama, emotion, conflict, the works. If I am taking the time to sit down and read a book, I want it to mimic life, with all of its pain and suffering. Of what serious literary merit is the phrase, ‘and they lived happily ever after’? If literature is meant to give me a new perspective on my nonfictional life, why should I entertain fictional delusions like perfect happy endings and Prince Charmings? Wouldn’t it be better to see the dirty underbelly of society, the scoundrels, runts, cowards, and villains? Let life lead literature, not the other way around.

So I thought when I picked up this novel at the behest of my English teacher. Notice the past tense: thought.

The truth is, there’s a certain value to light-heartedness that I had been overlooking. It is true that life is not all fun and games, and that we all suffer from time to time. But for every counted displeasure that we include in our list of grievances, there is almost always an uncounted blessing that we are overlooking. For every early morning spent trying to stay awake, there’s a night out with friends on the town. For every chore we have to do, there’s a television show we’ve been meaning to watch. For every minute on the treadmill, there’s a potato chip to be savored. So on and so forth. It is the purpose of light-hearted literature to explore life (good and bad) through the lens of the good, as it is the purpose of tragedy to explore life (good and bad)

through the lens of the bad. Life in its sum total is neither exclusively, but an analysis of both is still necessary to understand it.

Anyways, *Pride and Prejudice*: I liked it. A lot more than I thought I would.

Light-hearted, happy, high-society, Jane Austen type novels had not been very high at the top of my list of esteemed literature. But I was wrong. *Pride and Prejudice* is a ‘novel of manners’ - that means it's focused on the values and customs of society. These types of novels explore what politeness and niceties (manners) really mean for the condition of a high-society. Thus, from the onset, our *Pride and Prejudice* is essentially a social thought experiment. It is not concerned with life and death struggle, violence, or even physical pain at all. It is concerned with the viewpoints of its characters, and how they perceive others. It is meant to delve deep into all the superficialities and vanities (the nobilities and humilities, too) of the human psyche. This unique mode of writing a novel lends itself to well-developed characterization at the expense of a traditional action-oriented plot, which is exactly what we see in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The characterizations in *Pride and Prejudice* are on point: I feel the spirits of the P&P crew come alive as they interact and judge each other. Each cast member has a well-defined ‘spin’ or archetype - Lydia is the stupid flirt, Jane is the well-meaning naif, Elizabeth is the rational main character, Bingley is the trusting affablite¹, and so on and so forth. It's not hard to get the one-sentence gimmick of a character from a surface reading while reading P&P; yet, they are still complex and deep characters. A less talented author would have written this cast of characters as mere caricatures of their respective archetypes, especially given the lack of a traditional action-oriented plot to move the story. This is not the case in P&P. Lydia shares numerous character traits with her mother, who, in contrast to Lydia, is a more-or-less respectable woman, even if ill-mannered - this makes me wonder what Austen is saying about

¹ I just made up this word. It means “a person who is affable”. Cite me if you want to use it.

the degeneracy of moral value across generation if moral value is only superficially held by the antecedents (in this case Mama Bennet). Jane reveals herself to be capable of gloomy sadness in the chapters dealing with Bingley's 'rejection' of her; she shows a more stubborn and proud side when she tries to be cold and civil to Bingley towards the end of the novel - these are darker character traits that make her appear much more human than the typical happy sidekick. Elizabeth, of course, undergoes enormous character growth that makes her arc interesting to read; whereas in the beginning of the novel she gives off the aura of someone aloof and cold, by the end she is head-over-heels in love. Bingley is over-trusting, to the point of gullibility, which meshes well with Jane's personality and highlights the similarity between them. Each character in the novel shows a hidden depth to their character in some way that reminds us as readers that things are not as they seem.

Which brings us to the overall theme of the novel, which, in a word, I would describe as 'don't judge a book by its cover'. If I wasn't trying to be trite, I would enumerate it as follows: manners and outward appearances, while important, are superficial; they lead to undue pride and undue prejudice; actions and character are to be the only metrics by which to esteem or demean individuals.² Obviously the arc of Elizabeth realizing that her initial impression of Darcy was flawed is the main support for this message, but there are other, often-overlooked sub-plots that support this theme.

The incident of Bingley running off to London to avoid Jane is one of them. It functions three-fold. First, Jane's initial impression that Bingley does not really want her is made too hastily. She feels betrayed and rejected unnecessarily, because in actuality Bingley still has affection for her. Second, Darcy's opinion that Jane is indifferent to Bingley, which is made

² Yes, I used two semicolons in one sentence. The second semicolon is known as "Vera's Semicolon" among the elite literary circles I frequent.

solely based on her outward appearance and not grounded in actions, is a judgment reflecting prejudice. This means that Darcy himself, ironically, is guilty of the same crime that Elizabeth is. Third, Bingley's blind trust of Darcy's ill-founded opinion shows that he is not relying on his observation of Jane's actual actions enough; he is instead operating on what others perceive and feel about her mannerisms. These three perspectives of the same incident intertwine seamlessly to support the novel's overall message.

The story of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's marriage also contributes to the overall theme. At the beginning of Chapter 42, the novel states:

"Her father [Mr. Bennet], captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman [Mrs. Bennet] whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished forever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown."

This passage almost speaks for itself. It is yet another incident of a character from P&P making a hasty judgment about another on appearance and outward presentation, and learning the true nature of that person later on. Each incident of Mrs. Bennet's childlike immaturity in the novel is actually reinforcing the fact that Mr. Bennet made a grave-mistake in judging this book by its cover.

Yet another reinforcement comes in the character of Lady Catherine. Though she is lauded for much of the early parts of the novel as gracious, kind, and understanding by Mr. Collins, she turns out, in fact, to be ungracious, mean, and stubborn in her treatment of Elizabeth. The encounter between the Lady and Elizabeth at the end of the novel, where Catherine tries to strongarm her way into stopping their marriage, is the cherry on top of her true character. A

character is expected, based on societal perceptions, to be one way, but turns out another:
noticing a pattern here?

Darcy's sister, who is described as quiet, unassuming, shy, is revealed to have almost eloped with the infamous Wickham, an action most unbefitting the initial impression she gives off.

Believe me when I say, quite literally, at almost every point of the novel the main theme is presenting itself in some way. This novel has weaved its core message into every page with *astounding* deftness and tact. Not only does it masterfully convey its main theme, but it does so in a way that is unintrusive during the initial reading, but all too apparent upon a subsequent analysis. This skill is a trademark of the literary greats, and it seems that Jane Austen is in possession of it. I completely understand why this book is heralded as a seminal work in English literature; it almost perfectly hits every mark that a novel must meet. It does this all in a way that is enjoyable, enrapturing, and endearing.

That being said, I will offer a small criticism of this work, which is more reflective of this mode of writing in general rather than Austen's instance of it. Novels of manners lack access to traditional plot-pushing devices because they are so focused on analyzing the internal psyches of characters in realistic settings. The high-society setting demands that there cannot be violent action, there can seldom be physical altercation, and that most conflicts must take place verbally within the confines of respectability. If a novel of manners strays from this limitation, it risks losing its focus on the characters and may adopt a focus on the outward features of the plot (outward appearance, anyone?). This leads to the story, at some points, seeming to drag on aimlessly and sluggishly. In P&P, it is very hard to see where the plot of the novel will go from

the first couple chapters; things seem to happen randomly and without reason. By the end, everything connects, but that does not change the fact that P&P is occasionally unengaging.

Nevertheless, the masterfully characterized cast and intricately-woven themes more than make up for the lack of explosions and blood. *Pride and Prejudice*, against my every expectation, did hold up to its reputed name. It is a classic, plainly put, that deserves to be read in every serious English classroom. I like it, I daresay I love it, even though it's by and large a happy book.

One last suggestion for Ms. Jane Austen (who, ironically, never married): Wickham and Mr. Bennet ought to elope together in the sequel. If you throw in Mr. Collins for good measure, you have the perfect plot for *Pride and Prejudice 2*.