

## PRIDE AND PREJUDICE — AN INTRODUCTION

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that Austen was a master satirist, “the finest comic writer of the age” (Paula Byrne), one of the first realists, and perhaps a proto-feminist author. So how is it that, if satire there is, it is so difficult to pinpoint, except for a couple of minor characters; that I for one find it so particularly unfunny and tedious; that we have so little detail about everything and everyone; that the character everybody remembers is Darcy, not Elizabeth?

### THEMES AND ISSUES

Love, courtship & marriage — Money — Social hierarchy, class differences and snobbery — Families — The place of women in (Georgian/Regency) society — Economic power & responsibilities  
Watching & being watched; rumours and gossips — Truth & opinion — Judging and assessing others — Interpreting social signs & behaviours

### COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION

See the Chronology at the end of the Norton edition. Published in 1813, it was the revision of a novel entitled *First Impressions*, written in 1796–97.

### THE NOVEL: A RELATIVELY YOUNG GENRE

Daniel Defoe is commonly said to be the father of the (modern) English novel with *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), followed closely by Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* in 1726. Then came a fashion for sentimental novels, or “novels of sensibility”, frequently in the epistolary form, with such authors as Samuel Richardson (*Pamela* 1740, *Clarissa* 1748), Henry Fielding (*Tom Jones* 1749, but also the parody *Shamela*, 1741), or Laurence Sterne (*A Sentimental Journey*, 1768). The Gothic novel was very popular at the very end of the century, with Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho* 1794 e.g.) and Matthew Lewis (*The Monk* 1796) in particular. Walter Scott published (anonymously) his first novel, *Waverley*, in 1814, and launched the genre of the historical novel with immense success: the era of the Romantic novel had opened.

Several authors of the time theorised the difference between *novels* and *romances*. See Clara Reeves in 1778: “The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what has never happened nor is likely to.” N. Hawthorne, in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), insists on the “very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” which characterizes the novel. Similarly, Walter Scott defines the novel as “a fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society”. That distinction could also be a way to counter the accusations levelled at the novel, a genre which was deemed immoral and dangerous — especially to women.

From this perspective, *P&P* is certainly a novel; this may be why Mme de Staël called it “*vulgaire*” when she read it in 1813.

### REALISM?

It is also in this way (at least) that one can understand *P&P*’s being called a realistic novel. Austen is no Balzac, and gives only very limited details, for example, as to her characters’ physical appearance or dress (who says that Mr. Darcy has to be dark-haired? he would have worn a wig, anyway. What’s his first name already?), or to the locales of the novel — even when describing Pemberton in III, 1. But she does insist on a form of material accuracy, being rather specific about the financial situations of the characters, for example. She also stuck to writing only about situations and people that were part of her readership’s actual everyday life, and her own (no castles in Italy, but estates in Derbyshire, for example). The novel also aims for psychological realism, in a way that sentimental romances of the 18th c. did not. It is coherence, and a fidelity to real life (in the English gentry) that she was aiming for, not the absolute visual accuracy of the Realist school that was yet to be born.

On this topic, see Andrew Elfenbein’s article in the Norton edition (p. 331ff).

## VOICES AND NARRATIVE STANCES

One major feature of Austen's prose is her use of free indirect speech; she may not have invented it, but she was arguably one of the first to use it so extensively. What is immediately striking is how little the narrator intervenes in the novel. Although we do have a heterodiegetic narrator, it is mostly through internal focalisation that we have access to the plot, Elizabeth being the main focal point. Even then, it is not uncommon that some elements of a sentence are actually attributable to a third character. That is particularly remarkable when compared to most novels of the late 18th c.: see Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* (1778–80) for instance.

In a similar vein, it is commonly stated that each character has a distinguishable voice. This would only apply to those characters who *do* speak (only a handful in *P&P*, in fact), but we shall have to pay attention to it.

The narrator is usually said to display irony towards the novel's characters. But can such judgments as "She was a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper" (p. 5, about Mrs. Bennet), or "Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached" (p. 18), to give but two examples, be called ironic? they say *exactly* what they mean — the only question is whether the narrator or Elizabeth means it. It seems to me that there is something paradoxical, if not self-contradictory, in at the same time speaking of irony and polyphonic voices, and saying that the reader empathises with Elizabeth and finds Darcy obnoxious (at least at first), as many do. Or are we supposed to side with him from the first? What about Mrs. Bennet, or Lydia? So in fact, it seems to be sarcasm, not irony, that the narrator uses: which may indeed have been rather a rare thing at the time (although see Diderot above...).

## COMEDY? SATIRE?

*P&P*, and the rest of Austen's novels, are generally considered funny. Apart from a few cynical quips by Mr. Bennet, I am afraid I am personally quite immune to it.

That humour is very frequently said to be the vehicle of a satire of Georgian or Regency society. Accepting that *P&P* makes fun of (some of) its characters, what allows one to take those characters as representatives of something larger, which could indeed make the book a satire? If it seems quite easy to see in Mr. Collins an archetype of the obsequious, pretentious snob, or in Lady Catherine that of the patronising aristocrat, I don't find it so immediately obvious that there is an argument for saying the same of Mrs. Bennet, for example: she most certainly is presented as rather dim-witted and obsessed with marrying her daughters away (as she actually must, given the financial circumstances of her family: it is her duty as a mother...), but does that make her a type? It may be that the more overt satirical tone of some of Austen's other, later works (*Northanger Abbey* e.g.) is the token by which *P&P* is also assessed: with good reason?

## PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS AND POLITICAL ISSUES

Felicia Bonaparte (Norton edition p. 347ff) convincingly argues that *P&P* is (also) a philosophical novel. Being part as they are of the Georgian gentry's social life, the characters spend a lot of time trying to decipher other people's behaviours, feelings and thoughts, whether in person or through their letters. According to F. Bonaparte, this is a way for Austen to raise epistemological questions; Elizabeth's mistakes, as well as Darcy's, are indeed caused by prejudice: not in the sense that they are biased, but that they judge hastily, before ascertaining the facts. But how can one get to the facts? how is one able to know anything? and what does knowing something actually mean? (This might very well be a Shakespearian trait in Austen.) Her use of internal focalisation clearly helps in that reflection, since it gives the reader access to the facts only through the filter of one character's perception and mind, i.e. bias.

The other reason for some of the characters' mistakes is pride: social as much as individual pride. Rank, wealth and birth are what shapes much of the characters' attitudes toward one another, from the overbearing aristocrat (Lady Catherine) to the recent nobility (Sir William) to the wealthy gentry (Darcy and Bingley, in different ways) to the impoverished landowner (Mr. Bennet), etc. to the respectful, devoted servant (Mrs. Reynolds). Given the historical and social context (the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, etc.), there may very well be here a political statement from Austen. See Robert Markley's analysis (*Cambridge Companion*) of Darcy's responsibilities towards Pemberley compared to the entailed Bennet estate.

A special case in terms of social ranks is the status of women. There is little doubt that much of the novel's initial situation and subsequent plot derives from the Bennet girls' (and women's in general) best hope for a future being in a fortunate marriage; or that Elizabeth's explicit request to be treated as a sensible human being can recall demands by Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792) or Olympe de Gouges, among many others at the time. Nonetheless, the fact remains that women (Mrs. Bennet, Mary, Caroline Bingley, Lady Catherine, or Elizabeth herself) are as much the butt of the narrator's criticism as are the men. If a feminist reading of *P&P* might be legitimate, one must proceed with caution.