“My Own Darling Child”

Introduction to Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice

One winter morning, early in February 1813, Cassandra Austen received a letter from her sister Jane. Cassandra—the novelist’s elder sister, beloved companion and unfailling confidante—was visiting their brother James, who, since 1801 had held the incumbency of the parish of Steventon (Jane Austen’s birthplace in Hampshire, England), following the retirement of their father, George. The two sisters were quite rarely apart, but whenever this was the case they unfaillingly corresponded with one another, sometimes even on a daily basis.1 Any letter from Jane was a source of pleasure for her sister, and the feeling was certainly mutual. But this letter is one that has come down to us as particularly valuable. Indeed even for Cassandra, for whom these things were commonplace, Jane’s letter of Friday, January 29, 1813 must certainly have stood out from the many others; it contained news of a small event that would eventually, in its own way and in good time, change the face of English literature. “I want to tell you (writes Jane) that I have got my own darling Child from London”.2

The ‘child’ she so lovingly refers to is her very first printed set of the recently published three-volume novel Pride and Prejudice. Some critics have suggested that, for Austen, writing was in effect a substitution for marriage and motherhood—a controversial issue that I won’t pursue in this introduction. But no-one can doubt, I think, her authorial delight at receiving the books, the end result of many, many years of writing and revision. Pride and Prejudice has become that rare thing: a truly canonical work. By this, I mean that it is generally acknowledged to be a literary masterpiece, enshrined as one of the major texts of its time. But beyond this is an aspect that marks Austen’s novel as more special still, namely, that its enthusiastic acceptance by readers continues even to this day. Its popularity grows by the year; polls by the BBC and in other British national media, for example, regularly place the work at the top of their rankings, or very close.3 Another quite exceptional quality of this work is its ability to appeal—although for different reasons and circumstances, to be sure—to entirely distinct ambitions: a ‘must-read’ for the general public, it is also a fundamental text in the academic study of the nineteenth-century novel.

The critical studies that have grown up around this work are quite simply vast (as a cursory search on Internet would reveal), and an introduction like this one has to face the uncomfortable question of whether anything new and interesting is left to be said about Austen’s “darling Child”. That’s a very good question, and I don’t claim that my comments here are innovative or original, though I do hope that they prove to be an engaging means of approaching the text, whether you’ve read it before or not.

Let us begin, then, as the proper study of any novel should, at the very beginning: with its title. “Pride and Prejudice” tells us many things; this pairing of abstract nouns, for a start, points us to the rhetorical concerns of an earlier age (the eighteenth century) in which the balanced cadences of such word groups were seen as desirable and sophisticated forms of expression. In fact, it seems likely that Austen took her title— and other aspects of this work—from the novel Cecilia (1782), by Frances Burney (1752-1840), one of her favourite writers.4

This reminds us that Austen, born in December 1775 and not yet 42 when she died in July 1817, lived over half her life in the world of the 1700s, imbibing its concerns, its culture, its very particular perspectives, beliefs and forms of expression. So it is apt to recall that Austen’s novel itself was also begun in the eighteenth century, though under a different title and,

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1 Cassandra must have replied almost immediately to this correspondence, since Jane’s next letter—in which she thanks her sister for her kind response to the news—is dated February 4, 1813. In the case of this particular series of letters, the distance between the two sisters was not considerable (Jane was in Chawton; Cassandra in Steventon, both villages in Hampshire, some 16 miles/26 km apart); nevertheless, all these letters would have travelled by horse-drawn carriage along the difficult wintry roads of rural southern England, yet they reached their destinations with admirable speed and efficiency.
2 Le Faye, p. 201.
4 Burney uses the expression three times in a single paragraph towards the close of her novel, each occasion in capitals, rather unsurprisingly driving home the moral of her tale to show the detrimental consequences of these character failings. As a point of comparison with other late eighteenth-century writers, it is interesting to see how Austen attenuates this sort of moral conclusion (emphasising particular words and phrases through capital letters is simply not her style) and so avoids the didacticism that we find in many of her contemporaries, and which has now fallen from favour. The conjunction of the two abstract nouns is also found in a number of other eighteenth-century texts, among which there is Sir Charles Grandison (1753-54) by Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), another writer apparently very much admired by Austen.
perhaps, even as a different kind of writing. A

According to a memorandum drawn up by Cassandra after her sister's death, Austen began writing a novel in October 1796, which she finished in August 1797. This was titled First Impressions. The novel was never published (although we do know that Austen's father corresponded with a London publisher about it) and the manuscript has not survived. What we also know from the memorandum is that this text was the forerunner to an extraordinary literary work, "Published afterwards, with alterations & contractions under the title of Pride & Prejudice".

For those of us who know its later incarnation, "First Impressions" may well seem a very good working title, since much of the story revolves around mistaken first impressions made, principally, by Fitzwilliam Darcy and Lizzie Bennet. But actually there is rather more to it than simply an apposite expression applied in the form of a title. The phrase itself "comes directly from the terminology of sentimental literature, and Jane Austen would certainly have met with it in Sir Charles Grandison, where its connotations are briefly defined". Those connotations, as made clear in other works from the heyday of what is now known as the Novel of Sentiment, are that the heart's first and instinctive response, essentially in the guise of love at first sight, is most to be treasured and trusted. In Pride and Prejudice, and also presumably in First Impressions, this tenet of sentimentality is viewed ironically. First, because the heroine's instinctive response to her hero is not love but dislike; second, because when first impressions do in fact pertain to feelings of amorousness (Lizzie's towards Wickham, most especially) these are seen to be utterly unreliable. Thus the romantic formula of sentimental impulsiveness is judged to be foolhardy, even dangerous. What Lizzie learns—and we will return to this later—is that true judgement, true perceptive ness, is rarely attained through the fickle subjectivity of emotional turmoil, whether this is pressing for love or for its opposite.

But, beyond some speculation on what its title may suggest to us, there are obvious limitations to what else we can really say about First Impressions, since ultimately we need to accept the hard fact that not a single syllable of this work has survived for us to consult. In a certain sense, this is also true of Pride and Prejudice, as Austen's manuscript has never been found. Fortunately, as we have seen, that manuscript made it through to publication, and so the text gained access to a wider world of public readership, won popularity and was rewarded with further editions.

How, then, do we approach this exceptional, canonical, perennially popular work of literature? What can, or should, be said about this novel that may help us to get beyond the goings-on of its plot, however much they may intrigue us, so as to understand why the text is thought of as so remarkable? The truth—exciting for some, frustrating for others—is that there are myriad ways of looking at this work, all of them valid, all of them with refreshing insights into why it was a success, and why it continues to interest us and act as a cultural beacon of Regency England. Politics, society, philosophy, money, the status of unmarried women, and the prospects facing them, inheritance law, architecture and landscape, Romanticism, domesticity, written and spoken language, textual authority, narrative strategy, the parameters of personal happiness, parental authority and responsibility, personal integrity, social class and social

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5 The now well-established belief that First Impressions was probably an epistolary novel largely derives from a study in the early 1960s on Austen's literary manuscripts by the British scholar, Brian Southam. Though not an unchallenged opinion, this view is the contemporary critical consensus. Earlier critics were less sure of this and often held that the work was written in what is called direct narrative (that is, with a third-person narrator). However, the text has not survived and so the debate can never advance beyond supposition.

6 See Southam, 52-60.

7 In November 1797, George Austen wrote to a London publisher, Cadell, to enquire about the possibility of publishing First Impressions. The publishers, however, were not interested. See Southam, 58.

8 Cassandra's memorandum (Southam, 53).

9 As Southam (60) points out, it seems possible that Austen, in reworking her 1797 text, would have given up on her original title following the publication in 1801 of a novel by Margaret Holford, called First Impressions. The coincidence is not as great as it might appear, however, since the words are the opening of a common English expression, though one with many variants: "first impressions are last impressions".

10 See Southam, 59. See also n.4

11 Also termed the 'Novel of Sensibility', these were of great popularity in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, although tastes had moved on to other styles of writing by the end of the 1700s. The 'cult' derived from mid-century writers such as Sara Fielding (1710-1768) and Samuel Richardson, though the most representative works are largely agreed to be Brooke's The Fool of Quality (Dublin, 1765-70; London, 1766-70), Mackenzie's The Man of Feeling (1771) and Sterne's A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy (1768).

12 Much of Austen's juvenilia made a similar point; however, her clearest statement of this critical position came with Northanger Abbey (published posthumously in 1817) and, especially, Sense and Sensibility (published in 1811).

13 A fate that is common to every one of Austen's major novels. The only extant manuscripts we have are three volumes of juvenilia; the epistolary novella Lady Susan; two cancelled chapters of Persuasion; the unfinished novel, Sanditon (which Austen was writing shortly before she died); the short and ironic Plan of a Novel, and a fragment of a novel called The Watsons. These manuscripts are mostly held in a number of museums and libraries in the UK and the USA.
decorum, property and propriety, gender and literary genre...these are but a few of the many concerns that *Pride and Prejudice* raises, and each one of these questions represents an in-road that can be taken to a fuller, more complex but also more rewarding understanding of this novel.

No introduction can ever hope to do justice to Austen’s ‘darling Child’, and far less so a short review such as this. But, given this limitation, I would like to draw attention—though only very briefly—to just two of these approaches, the political and the narrative-based, in the hope that they might provide us with, on the one hand, a contextual understanding of this novel and its concerns, and, on the other hand, a textual perspective that reveals how it actually ‘works’ as a piece of fiction writing. Both of these approaches have proved to be of great interest to a range of academic movements and tendencies.

It is sometimes said by modern readers of *Pride and Prejudice* (particularly those unfortunate souls whose reading is not a voluntary act) that nothing significant ever happens. It’s true that people dash about here and there, are occasionally invited to dance (or not) and spend time taking tea with one another; and it’s true that the ladies—the young and not-so young—are forever gossiping about money and marriage. But where is the real action? In a similar but more serious vein, certain critical voices have asked how it is that Austen, living as she did through the enormous upheavals of post-revolutionary Napoleonic Europe, could have so thoroughly ignored the political and social questions of her time.\(^1\) In fact, neither view is really tenable: many, many things are going on in *Pride and Prejudice*, it’s simply that we need to learn what to look for and how to listen. And—perhaps above all—we need to realise that narrative action (understood as quantity and frequency of physical activity) is only one way, and often not a very important one, of assessing what is happening within a work of fiction. One of the largest problems we face in understanding the political and social comments that Austen is making in her novel is that her context is now all but lost to us. Recovering the contours of that world is the work of specialists, and that effort is often beyond the means or interest of the general reader. But a little information on this aspect of her writing will not only show us how Austen actively engages in the debates of her world; it will also give us new and exciting ways of reading the text, and of appreciating an ‘inner life’ to this work that takes us well beyond the surface of its plot.

At the time when Austen would first have been working on this novel, that is, in the late 1790s, the political climate in England was complex and adversarial. Society was essentially divided between supporters of the French Revolution and its objectives and those who opposed it (known, respectively, as the Jacobins and Anti Jacobins). It is no exaggeration to say that, in the early post-revolutionary years, social unrest in England at times threatened to spill over into civil conflict, a fate that was eventually avoided in large measure by the forceful reaction of conservative political forces. But this reaction in its stead created a stifling atmosphere of propaganda and control from which, amongst many other ideas, came the much-debated notion of how women ought to act, what was their true role in society, and what their conduct ought to be in all aspects of their life. Although some critics, most notably Claudia Johnson, have argued that Austen’s sympathies lay with the reformers rather than the upholders of the status quo, on balance most critics tend to agree that Austen’s political preferences are somewhat conservative. But that is not to say that she unhesitatingly accepts the frankly subservient roles that women, in this context—and very especially, young and unmarried women—were expected to assume and encouraged to endorse. Vivien Jones has perceptively remarked that, rather than anti-revolutionary, it is more constructive to see Austen as post-revolutionary, “strategically assimilating rather than blindly opposing ideas for change”\(^\text{15}\). As far as thoughts on women’s behaviour were concerned, a basic division was between the liberal, egalitarian views put forward principally by Mary Wollstonecraft (notably in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792) and her ideological counterpart, Hannah More (a prolific writer, but whose 1799 work *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* is most relevant to this discussion). Wollstonecraft believed that the different responsibilities, expectations and possibilities existing between the sexes—differences she viewed with frustration—were culturally imposed and not at all the consequence of women’s natural inferiority, as was commonly propounded; More thought that such differences—which she, in turn, viewed positively—were natural and inherent. As a result, both had highly contrasting ideas on the proper role that women should play in society, and on what their attitudes and actions within that society should be. But in England, the tide was turning against notions that were or might readily be associated with revolutionary

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\(^{14}\) Frederic Harrison, corresponding with Thomas Hardy in 1917, notoriously complained that “[Austen was] a rather heartless little cynic...penning satires about her neighbours whilst the Dynasts were tearing the world to pieces and consigning millions to their graves... Not a breath from the whirlwind around her ever touched her Chippendale chiffonier or escritoire”. (Kent, 59).

\(^{15}\) Jones, xvii.
ideology, and Wollstonecraft’s position was increasingly seen as disruptive and destabilising.

Crucially for the broader acceptance of her arguments, More rejected the traditional passivity that conservative social forces proposed for women, suggesting instead that they actively participate in shoring up the moral and social fibre of their nation:

I would call on [women] to come forward, and contribute their full and fair proportion towards the saving of their country. But I would call on them to come forward, without departing from the refinement of their character, without derogating from the dignity of their rank, without blemishing the dignity of their sex.16

This view encouraged women to act in a more forthright manner, always providing that they did so with every due regard to refinement, rank and the social expectations of their gender (and, of course, for the greater glory of their country). It is clear that this perspective, at a time that was politically repressive for women, was generally well received by them, as it meant, in effect, that some sort of middle ground could be established between the then unavoidable need for public conformity and the desire to participate in ambitions more engaging than limited domesticity.

Austen’s own views on this debate, where she stands in the battle, whose side she is writing for, are questions that are notoriously difficult to pin down, not least because she never makes open declarations of ideology (unlike many of her contemporaries). This of course has given rise to widely varying critical opinion on her as a ‘political’ novelist: some see her as completely non-political; some see her as profoundly conservative; some see her as markedly opposed to the hegemony.

Pride and Prejudice is a clear case in point: in Lizzie Bennet, we appear to have a character whose invigorating sense of independence is far closer to what we could call Wollstonecraftian ideas. She positively eschews submission and restraint. Indeed, the very essence of her personality might be seen as a challenge to traditional expectations of women’s propriety and acquiescence, most particularly as this attaches to youthful, unmarried females (we could recall, at this point, the shock with which Lady Catherine de Bourgh receives Lizzie’s confident verbal repartees over dinner at Rosings: “Upon my word,” said her Ladyship, “you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person”).17 Very significantly, Lizzie refuses to passively accept the imposition of marital arrangements—to her mother’s almost apoplectic frustration—and has an evidently scant regard for certain forms of social decorum (perhaps most notoriously when she happily strides across the muddy fields to Netherfield Park).

But Wollstonecraft urged women to assert and then use their independence to attain more and better education, and to be prepared for professional employment, and not as a means for negotiating matrimony. Austen, on the other hand, applies women’s independence of spirit precisely to this ambit, the very core of the romance novel. As Jones observes, “Austen returns the new femininity to the more familiar pleasures of romantic fiction... reading from Elizabeth’s point of view, we take pleasure in her power, fully confident that Darcy’s pride will have to fall before the charms of a women with ‘independence of mind’”.18

In effect, through Lizzie, Austen projects the vision of a sexually empowered woman, wholly capable of rational self-improvement but willing to accept that her happiness lies within the patriarchal structures of matrimony (an issue that is much debated even today on a whole host of Internet forums, and one which I think can only really be addressed if this political ‘positioning’ is recognised). In short, in a message that was perfectly attuned to the political climate of the times, Lizzie’s story—most especially relevant to women in socio-economic circumstances similar to those of the Bennet girls—can be read as an attenuated conservative political contribution to the post-revolutionary social debate in England. It was a message that ultimately emphasises and celebrates social conformity, and therefore stability, but which also underlines women’s dignity and self-assurance as key components in their happiness, both personal and collective, stressing the need for active participation in defining and attaining such happiness. In this sense, though romantic rather than pragmatic, her novel locates Austen closer

17 Pride and Prejudice II, vii (162).
18 Jones, xxvii. Another way of judging how Austen avoids the political controversies of her contemporaries is to realise not only that she preferred to articulate her ideas within the context of romantic fiction (and so, if you’re not interested in her political undertones, or don’t pick up on them, at least you have a racy story to keep you distracted), but also to understand that Wollstonecraft and More—otherwise opposed to one another—were against such writing, preferring to forward their relative positions in a more sombre fashion. Both of them “condemned romance fiction for diverting women’s energies from more appropriate objects” (Jones, ibid). Austen seems to have had a clear sense that such ‘propagandistic’ ways were not the most appealing form in which to convey these ideas, and time has surely proven her right. Who now, except for students and specialists of the period, reads Mary Wollstonecraft or Hannah More?
to More than to Wollstonecraft, if still firmly within her own camp.

In all events and as I have already suggested, some knowledge of the political backdrop against which Austen’s fiction takes place enriches our understanding of the novel and provides us with new angles from which to consider its scope and concerns. And the same benefits accrue when we look closer at the narrative strategies that the novelist employs.

In a highly influential analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, Tony Tanner memorably expressed the essential narrative movement of this novel as one that is traceable through the growth and development of its two main protagonists. “Let me put it this way”, he says, “for the first two parts of the book, Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet believe that they are taking part in an action which, if turned into a fiction, should be called *Dignity and Perception*. They have to learn to see that their novel is more properly called *Pride and Prejudice*.19

In other words, the ‘true story’ of Darcy and Lizzie is their movement away from the pride and prejudice that affects both of them in different ways and into the higher states of personal dignity and true perception that their previous actions and ideas had prevented them achieving. Only then can their happiness be assured. This ‘movement’ is something that they both have to learn, and painfully.

Tanner’s comments describe what happens in the novel as a whole to the two principal characters; following his clue, I’d like to restrict myself to only a part of this, basically to the first half of the story, and particularly to Lizzie Bennet, to try and show how Austen’s narrative ‘ploy’ actually reinforces the idea of pride and prejudice, and how this dramatically causes us all (readers very much included) to fall into a kind of trap, a device that is essential—as it turns out—for the learning that has to take place if a positive resolution to this romantic comedy is ever going to occur.

What happens is that Austen’s narrator (an unidentified, omnipresent and possibly omniscient third-person voice) tricks us. There’s nothing unusual in that, in itself; in fact, all narrators are guilty of ‘manipulating’ their story and their readers simply by the very fact of selecting certain episodes and of emphasising certain moments or ideas, to the detriment of others. Some narrative management appears to go no further than this; other narrators may play complex and bewildering games with us and, indeed, the notion of the unreliable narrator is a common one in much literary criticism. I’m not at all suggesting that Austen’s narrator in this novel is unreliable; but certainly, some sort of game is being played.

From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator makes sure that we feel unambiguously positive about Lizzie Bennet. And Lizzie doesn’t even have to say or do anything for this to happen. Chapter 1, for instance, introduces us to Mr and Mrs Bennet, the latter nagging insistently about the imperative need for her husband to visit the new tenant of Netherfield Park, in the hope that one of the daughters might marry this wealthy newcomer. The scene is comic, of course, but somehow we don’t quite like this woman (too flippant, too materialistic…). In contrast, we take a shine to her ironic husband from the outset; his gentle teasing—to the evident glee of their daughters—exudes a sense of warmth and humanity, a perfect antidote, and it seems, to Mrs Bennet’s coldly pragmatic scheming over what after all is the future happiness of one of their children. We call this narrative device the ‘attribution of sympathy’, and it is a common way for a narrator to manage our responses to certain characters; following his clue, I’d like to restrict myself to only a part of this, basically to the first half of the story, and particularly to Lizzie Bennet, to try and show how Austen’s narrative ‘ploy’ exudes a sense of warmth and humanity, a perfect antidote, and it seems, to Mrs Bennet’s coldly pragmatic scheming over what after all is the future happiness of one of their children. We call this narrative device the ‘attribution of sympathy’, and it is a common way for a narrator to manage our responses to certain characters. At this very early moment in the novel, to express it simply, we like Mr Bennet, but we’re none too keen on his wife. And then we have this:

[Mrs Bennet] “But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, for in general you know they visit no new comers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him,20 if you do not”.

“You are over-scrupulous, surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying which ever he chuses of the girls; though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy”.

“I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving her the preference”.


20 Social decorum dictated that only men could make the first social call on another man for the purpose of making an acquaintance, therefore Mrs Bennet and her daughters are dependent on Mr Bennet’s visit as the only means of gaining access to Mr Bingley.
“They have none of them much to recommend them,” replied he; “they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters”.\(^{21}\)

This is our first introduction to the Bennet girls, and it throws light on a fairly normal instance of parental preference, though one not really intended to be taken too seriously. Except of course for the crucial fact that, as readers, we have already been edged a little by the narrator towards feeling more positive about the father than about the mother. So, by extension, we are already more disposed towards his preferences than hers. And Mrs Bennet’s rather grumpy “I desire you will do no such thing” clinches our response in favour of Lizzie, who so far has said not a word.

From this moment, we grow unconditionally well-disposed towards our heroine, and the narrator makes use of a whole series of devices to make sure that we stay that way, most importantly by gradually centring all action around her, and by making her perspective the ‘essential viewpoint’ of the story, so that her fate becomes our main interest. We identify with her and with her concerns, we share her opinions (in effect they are ours, too); she becomes, in short, ‘our Lizzie’.

The same thing happens, in reverse, with Fitzwilliam Darcy. Once again, from the outset the narrator pushes us towards a determined class of feelings, mainly antipathy:

The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend [Mr Bingley].\(^{22}\)

When we then come to assess him through what ‘our Lizzie’ sees, hears and thinks, our distaste is guaranteed. Replying to Bingley, who has enthusiastically endorsed Lizzie’s charms (and we love him for it), Darcy infamously observes: “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men”\(^{23}\).

Lizzie has been slighted and however much she may joke about it to her friends, delighting “in any thing ridiculous” (14), she will not easily forget this injustice. Nor will her categorical well-wishers, the readers, maintained in this state of enmity with the proud and arrogant Darcy by Austen’s wily narrator.

Later, when Wickham appears on the scene and first charms Lizzie, we are fully disposed to accepting her preference, exactly as we did when Mr Bennet teased his wife about his ‘silly and ignorant’ daughters, and we too fall under the dashing soldier’s spell. And when—to Lizzie’s indignation—her new favourite tells of his sad mistreatment at the hands of none other than that aloof and unpleasant character who had insulted her at the ball, and whom we have meanwhile come to see on other occasions since that first meeting as a rather self-important, stern and humourless man, we too feel her resentment and share her anger at the arrogant, intolerable Fitzwilliam Darcy.

So we are greatly taken aback to discover—as we do once Lizzie has rejected Darcy’s first proposal (a rejection that leaves us breathless in our admiration for her spirited defence of all that is right and good), that she has been wrong all along in her understanding both of incident and of character. Dumbfounded, she realises how mistaken her judgement of Wickham has been, how misplaced her visceral distrust of Darcy:

“How despicably have I acted! .. I, who have prided myself on my discernment! - I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blamable distrust. - How humiliating is this discovery! - Yet, how just a humiliation! ... Till this moment, I never knew myself”.\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Pride and Prejudice I, i (6).

\(^{22}\) Ibid, I, iii (12).

\(^{23}\) Ibid, I, iii (13).

\(^{24}\) Ibid, II, xiii (202). It goes without saying that, in this analysis, I am simplifying things considerably. About Darcy’s faults—his particular prides and prejudices—many things could also be said (not least, his badly misjudged intervention in Charles Bingley’s relationship with Jane Bennet, a question that takes a long and difficult period of self examination for him to understand and rectify), but the trap that the narrator prepares for us is best illustrated, I think, through Lizzie.
She has been guilty, to put it in terms of the novel itself, of both pride and prejudice; pride, through an over-reaching belief in her own powers of perception, prejudice, through her hasty and heady judgment of both Wickham and Darcy, though different in each case.

And Austen’s narrator keeps yet another shock in store for us: reading Darcy’s letter alongside Lizzie, as the terrible truth of her misperceptions dawns on her, it is suddenly apparent that we, too, have been guilty of the same sins. Prejudiced from the beginning in favour of Lizzie, we shared in all her opinions, all her passionate likes and dislikes, and—discerning readers that we imagined ourselves to be—our pride is now wounded to discover that we have signally failed to pick up the many clues scattered throughout this story that pointed to an alternative explanation of these events. We have been, so to speak, tricked into a pride and prejudice that mirrors that of our (as yet) hapless heroine. From the moment of Lizzie’s éclaircissement onwards, the more we review this novel, the more we see just how much the narrative strategy has taken us in, hook, line and sinker. The nagging Mrs Bennet who we began disliking in the opening chapter turns out on balance—given the extraordinarily delicate circumstances that the girls would find themselves in if they were still unmarried on their father’s death25—to be actively (if rather obsessively) seeking a solution to this problem, in the only way that she can—by pushing her husband towards some sort of action. The affable Mr Bennet, who we like so much precisely for his rather relaxed attitude towards the girls, turns out to be irresponsibly passive, a critically flawed element in the near-collapse of his family’s reputation, a collapse that would have been irreversible for the prospects, and therefore survival, of the remaining daughters, whose life after his death—had their situations then been the same as at the opening of the novel—would have been devastatingly precarious.

In all this, we have proudly assumed that our ‘first impressions’ were valid; in all this and more, Austen’s narrator deftly reveals to us just how prejudiced we have been. It is a salutary and serious lesson for us to learn, as it was for Lizzie, however much the generic comedy of a happy ending leaves us with a smile.

First impressions may not, after all, be as trustworthy as they appear; this teaches us to be better readers; it teaches us to be better companions, and (now drawing the political and narrative strands together) it teaches a post-revolutionary society seeking to move beyond the fault lines and divisions of civil unrest that tolerance and understanding are a far better recipe for stability and reconciliation than fickle distrust fuelled by prejudiced notions of how others may have acted in the past.

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25 In accordance with the inheritance laws of the time, on the death of the father, the family wealth (in the Bennet’s case, their house and lands) would pass to the closest male relative. Since there are no sons in this family, the inheritance would therefore go to Mr Collins, Mr Bennet’s nephew. The daughters and mother would then have only whatever financial settlement their father had been able to arrange for them, but would have no further claim over their home, from which the inheritor could dispossess them at will. This is, incidentally, one of the many aspects of socially unjust circumstances faced by women that, it can be argued, Austen implicitly criticises, reminding us that, even if she is a conservative writer, she is not an unconditional supporter of the male patriarchy.

26 Put simply, without Darcy’s ‘arrangements’, the ensuing scandal of Lydia’s elopement would have meant an end to all possibility of the other daughters making an economically sound marriage, acceptable to their own social level, since no one suitable would have been willing to associate themselves with such a ‘fallen’ family.


