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Setting a Good Example in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Setting a Good Example in *Pride and Prejudice*

I must admit, I am a real sucker when it comes to romances. I always enjoy reading a novel in which love is a major theme. When the hero and heroine are finally united at the end of a story with the promise that they will live happily ever after together, I cannot help sighing with contentment. It is no wonder then that I enjoy Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* as much as I do, for it certainly fits into this mold. Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy are the most prominent lovers in this novel, although Jane Bennett and Mr. Bingley are quite significant as well. Both of these couples ultimately end up happily married, but interestingly there is one more pair of "lovers" who, though they do marry, do not end up happy. That couple is Lydia Bennett and Mr. Wickham. Though their story is not as satisfying as Elizabeth and Darcy's or Jane and Bingley's, these two characters play a vitally important role in Jane Austen's novel. While Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, through their complex emotions and ultimate realization of their sincere affection for one another, illustrate an ideal, satisfying, happily-ever-after type romance, Lydia and Wickham are a direct contrast to this ideal. Lydia's feelings are inconsistent, Wickham's insincere, and while Elizabeth and Darcy's satisfying union is brought about honorably and honestly, Lydia and Wickham's marriage is achieved through disobedience, deception, and scandal. Through this book, Jane Austen sharply contrasts these two couples, and the amount of happiness they experience in their respective marriages shows clearly which couple Austen believes has merited a happier married life. Though Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship is at

times confusing and undergoes great changes by the end of the novel, their behavior towards one another is morally above reproach. Lydia and Wickham, on the other hand, behave quite differently, and are presented by Jane Austen as a warning—a striking example to readers of the type of unhappy, unsatisfying marriage that can result from improper, imprudent behavior. By comparing these two with Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, Jane Austen emphasizes the underlying theme that romantic fulfillment, while it is wonderful when it is attained, can only be reached through honorable and sincere means—never through impropriety and immorality.

The point has been made in the past by the critic Richard Whately that Jane Austen is a “Christian writer,” meaning that she instills religious principles and moral lessons in her works (317). Whately praises the tasteful subtlety that Austen uses in conveying these attitudes, a subtlety which she employs from the very outset of the novel. From the very beginning of the book, Elizabeth and Lydia Bennett are clearly characterized as very different individuals, with Elizabeth clearly the superior of the two. A good indication of this is the attitude that their father takes towards the two of them. Mr. Bennett refers to his youngest two daughters, Lydia and her sister Kitty, as “uncommonly foolish” (Austen 21), though he concedes that “Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (4). To Lydia and Kitty he says, “You must be two of the silliest girls in the country. I have suspected it some time, but I am now convinced” (Austen 20). When the militia arrives in Meryton not long into the book, the differences in the attitudes of Elizabeth and Lydia are further exemplified. While Elizabeth continues fairly unaffected in her usual life, Lydia suddenly “could talk of nothing but officers; and Mr. Bingley’s large fortune... was worthless in [Lydia and Kitty’s] eyes when opposed to the regimentals of an ensign” (20). Elizabeth still associates with her previous companions, such as Jane and Charlotte Lucas, but Lydia no longer thinks of anyone who is not in uniform. While

Elizabeth and Jane think more seriously about romantic matters, thoughtfully assessing the virtues and flaws of their romantic possibilities and honestly considering them as marriage partners rather than passionate crushes, Lydia is only aware of the dashing appearance of the officers. She never gives any indication that she truly appreciates the character of any of the officers, or that she sees any of them as worthy husband material. Instead she seems only interested in the shallow satisfaction that she gets from her incessant flirtatiousness, and her behavior is often inappropriate. With such a careless disregard of the impropriety and foolishness of her actions, it is no wonder that she should so easily fall prey to such an unsavory character as Mr. Wickham. As one critic notes, “Lydia falls an ‘easy prey’ to Mr. Wickham because he is thoroughly self-conscious and she is not. And she is a prey to herself by her self-will and carelessness” (Weinsheimer 417).

Though both Elizabeth and Lydia show interest in Mr. Wickham at times during the novel, the different ways in which they handle their interest again illustrate the contrast in their character. Elizabeth likes Mr. Wickham from their first acquaintance, and though she is in many ways deceived as to his true character, she is more thoughtful in her assessment of him and behaves more appropriately than does Lydia. Though Elizabeth does not hide the fact that she enjoys Mr. Wickham’s company, she certainly does not throw herself at him. She has intelligent conversations with him and appreciates his friendship, but her behavior is such that when she eventually learns of Wickham’s true nature she does not need to be ashamed of any of her actions. Though she feels humiliated at having allowed herself to be deceived by Mr. Wickham, she has not disgraced herself in any public way.

Elizabeth shows similar propriety in her interactions with the other male characters with whom she comes in contact throughout the course of the novel. She maintains her integrity and

keeps within the guidelines of what is socially acceptable. In her dealings with Mr. Collins she is respectful of him, though she makes no effort to lead him on in any way. When he finally proposes to her, she is completely honest with him about her feelings although it leaves him disappointed. When Elizabeth is introduced to Colonel Fitzwilliam while visiting Rosings Park with Mr. and Mrs. Collins, as in the case of Mr. Wickham, she again meets a man to whom she finds herself attracted, but as before she behaves completely appropriately. She enjoys talking to the Colonel, but when it is clear that a romantic relationship between them is improbable, Elizabeth accepts this fact and does not seek anything more than friendship with the man.

Lydia, on the other hand, shows no such decency in her dealings with the men that she meets. At every turn she behaves rashly and foolishly, throwing herself at the men that she finds attractive and ignoring or harshly berating those that she does not. After running across the street to “accidentally” cross paths with Mr. Denny and meet the handsome Mr. Wickham, she dismisses other men as “stupid, disagreeable fellows” (Austen 50). This being considered, it is no surprise that Lydia’s basis of affection for Mr. Wickham is weak and shallow. She is interested in him only because of his physical appeal and the attention that he gives her. She has no confidant to whom she reveals a deeper level of attraction to Wickham, as Elizabeth does in Jane, therefore the reader is given no reason to believe that Lydia has any true appreciation for Wickham as a person. In her willingness to run away with Wickham she not only displays foolishness, considering the fact that Wickham has no money and no way to support them, but also demonstrates disobedience to what she should know to be proper and right, as well as complete disregard for the shame that her choices will undoubtedly bring down upon her family. She acts with no consideration for anyone but herself. Elizabeth, though her relationship with Mr. Darcy is far more complicated than Lydia’s relationship with Mr. Wickham, shows herself

superior in her handling of every situation. Critic Joseph Wiesenfarth addresses this superiority when he speaks of the “cardinal virtues” that exist and develop within Elizabeth.. According to Weisenfarth, she possesses not only prudence and temperance, but also justice and fortitude. All of these characteristics are sorely lacking in the character of Lydia. While Lydia’s behavior is marked by superficiality and deception, Elizabeth is always straightforward and honest. She never attempts to flatter, draw undue attention to herself, or go against what common decency and her modesty allow. Even towards the end of the novel, when Elizabeth’s relationship with Mr. Darcy is marked by ardent affection, the way in which she handles her feelings is vastly different from Lydia’s rash conduct. During the time that Elizabeth must spend waiting to be married to Darcy after their engagement, the reader is given every reason to believe that her behavior remains above reproach. Her passion is evident; in speaking to her Aunt Gardiner of her relationship with Darcy, she declares that Mrs. Gardiner may “give a loose rein to your fancy, indulge your imagination in every possible flight which the subject will afford, and unless you believe me actually married, you cannot greatly err” (Austen 238). However, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy choose to control their passions, maintain their honor, and show respect to each other as well as their families in doing so.

Just as Elizabeth and Lydia show decidedly different character qualities that are thrown into sharp contrast by Jane Austen, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham also demonstrate very different natures. Mr. Wickham is in many ways much like Lydia. His character is superficial, and though he presents himself in a pleasing light, as we see during his early acquaintance with Elizabeth, we learn later that it is a false and calculated presentation, which Darcy later refers to as a “form of falsehood” used to “impose” on Elizabeth (Austen 133). Wickham deliberately hides dishonorable aspects of his past, just as Lydia is willing to hide her whereabouts and her

scandalous behavior from her family. Wickham also, like Lydia, demonstrates little or no concern for anyone but himself. In his pursuit of fortune and pleasure he nearly destroys several lives. Unable to manage his own finances responsibly, he turns to deception to try to obtain money from others. First he seeks to take advantage of the sweet, trusting nature of Georgiana Darcy when he attempts to marry her for her fortune. In doing so he almost devastates her brother, Mr. Darcy, as well. After this first scheme of his fails, he turns to the Miss Bennets, particularly Elizabeth, for temporary gratification and pleasure. He leads Elizabeth on through his charm and flattering treatment of her, until another opportunity for wealth appears in the form of Miss Mary King, and Elizabeth is pushed to the bottom of Wickham's priorities. He shows little concern for Elizabeth's feelings, as he quickly transfers the concentration of his charm to Miss King. His own wealth and welfare are apparently his greatest concerns, for as Elizabeth calmly observes, "There can be no love in all this" (Austen 100). Unfortunately for Mr. Wickham, and fortunately for Miss King, his scheme is again thwarted as Miss King goes away permanently to be with an uncle. Once more without the immediate prospect of a rich wife, Wickham turns again to temporary pleasure, this time in the person of Lydia Bennett, whom he persuades to run away with him, apparently without any intention of marrying her. Because Mr. Wickham has a history of insincerely flirting with women that hold little serious interest for him, the reader can only shake his head when Wickham finally "falls victim to his own contrivance" (Weinsheimer 417). His careless flirtations at last land him in an unhappy marriage relationship with a woman he neither loves nor respects.

Mr. Darcy, though often appearing proud and aloof (and sometimes cruelly untactful), is a type of moral hero, unlike Mr. Wickham, behaving with honor and integrity towards Elizabeth throughout the entire course of the novel. Feeling himself strongly attracted to her, but knowing

that that her social station is below his, Mr. Darcy could have followed the same course as Mr. Wickham and attempted to run off with Elizabeth, obtaining temporary gratification without the necessity of a permanent alliance, but he does not. Instead, he goes against his instincts and proposes marriage to Elizabeth. Though he does so in a way that mortifies Elizabeth's pride, the marriage he proposes is a morally acceptable course of action, and he never once threatens Elizabeth's honor. When Elizabeth refuses him, though he is shocked and embarrassed, he never oversteps the bounds of integrity. He hurts her feelings, but never puts her reputation in jeopardy.

Mr. Darcy's superiority to Mr. Wickham is even more clearly brought out by the role that he takes in bringing about the marriage of Lydia and Wickham. Wickham's indecency and selfishness are at their peak as he refuses to face up to his responsibility to marry Lydia after having brought scandal and shame upon her and her family, while Darcy's virtuous and generous nature shines its brightest as he sets aside his pride to pay Mr. Wickham to marry Lydia. Not only does Darcy stoop to offer help to an undeserving and unappreciative young lady, but he also gives money to a man who formerly threatened to destroy Mr. Darcy's own happiness by taking advantage of his sister. In his willingness to sacrifice his personal dignity to save what little dignity Lydia and Wickham have remaining to them, Mr. Darcy shows himself to be the most upright and heroic gentleman of the novel.

Mr. Darcy's final display of gentlemanly nobility comes when he again proposes to Elizabeth near the end of the story. As soon as Darcy makes known his desire to be married to her, Elizabeth accepts his proposal and the two promptly become engaged, whereas Lydia and Wickham run away with no indication whatsoever that he intends to marry her. Elizabeth and Darcy's intentions are clear, and Mr. Darcy goes to Mr. Bennett almost immediately to express his wish to marry Elizabeth, which is in direct contrast to Mr. Wickham, who makes a significant

effort not to be discovered by Mr. Bennett. Even when Wickham finally is discovered, he must be bribed by Mr. Darcy to take the honorable course of action and marry Lydia, as previously mentioned. Knowing that Mr. Darcy expects no material gain from marrying Elizabeth, the reader can be assured that his affections for her are sincere. Furthermore, because Mr. Darcy refrains from toying with any other woman's heart and shows himself through every situation to be a worthy young man, the reader feels satisfied knowing that Mr. Darcy fully deserves the happiness he receives when he and Elizabeth finally wed.

In the end, Jane Austen makes clear which couple is to have the happier and more fulfilling married life. In a letter to her aunt following her engagement, Elizabeth exclaims that "I am the happiest creature in the world," and that Mr. Darcy sends "all the love in the world, that he can spare from me." Of Lydia and Wickham, Austen simply informs the reader, "His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer." Elizabeth and Darcy, by dealing with each other in all situations honestly and respectfully, even before they realize and confess their romantic inclinations towards one another, are able to love each other all the better when they finally do marry. As one critic states, theirs is "an ideal form of love, one grounded in a well-tested respect for each other's character" (Stovel 29). Their lives have followed a pattern of prudence and forthrightness that is completely unlike the patterns that Lydia and Wickham have set for themselves—patterns of self-centeredness and carelessness for the concerns of others. Another critic, Mordecai Marcus, addresses these selfish flaws in Lydia and Wickham and their contrast to Elizabeth and Darcy by emphasizing how strongly they allow their "personal claims," including their sexual passion, to influence their behavior (276). Though Lydia and Wickham may have felt passionately towards one another during their London affair, passion alone, Austen seems to imply, is by no means an appropriate guide where romantic

matters are concerned; Lydia's passion, in fact, blinds her to the foolishness of associating herself with an immoral and dishonest debtor. After they are married and no longer enjoy the excitement of their scandal, Lydia and Wickham have little left to look forward to through their life together.

Through these two couples, Jane Austen ultimately conveys a strong message to her readers. Beneath all of the smiles and happy endings experienced by many of the characters, Lydia and Wickham serve as a healthy reminder that only when the guidelines of integrity and morality are followed can true matrimonial joy be achieved. Yet even while holding Lydia and Wickham up as a significant illustration of the folly of impropriety, Austen gives positive encouragement to her readers, through Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, to behave in a manner that will render them worthy of a quality marriage partner and a happy marriage, characterized by love and respect. Follow the example set by Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, she seems to say, and avoid at all costs the path followed by Lydia and Mr. Wickham. By doing so, one may indeed become "the happiest creature in the world" (Austen 238).

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