

Go back to [Dave's Essays](#)

www.davestravels.com/essays/index2.html

Go back to [Dave's Travels](#)

www.davestravels.com

**The Use of Characterization to Break Down Sexist Stereotypes of Women
in
Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice"**

David Penner

June 21, 2005

Jane Austen lived in a time when even feminists advised the “husband must govern absolutely and intirely [sic]... she [the wife] has nothing else to do but to [p]lease and [o]bey... to struggle with her [y]oke will only make it gall the more” (Astell). “Pride and Prejudice” sets forth Austen’s views of prevailing 18th century attitudes regarding women through the actions and comments of her characters. Mr. Collins, chief among silly characters, reveals attitudes Austen opposes. Elizabeth, the protagonist, possesses character traits women should strive for and ideas about marriage women should adopt. Darcy, another rational character, conveys Austen’s views on women’s education. In this way, Austen creates a reference manual that helps to erode the sexual stereotypes of the day.

More than any character, Mr. Collins embodies the conventions in society that Austen condemns. During his proposal, “[Mr. Collins] discounts what [Elizabeth] says as ‘merely words of course,’ for even his dim, self-mired mind correctly perceives that a lady’s word carries no definitive weight” (Fraiman, 357). As he is bluntly characterized as “absurd” and “not a sensible man” (Austen, 47, 48), his choice of literature to read for the Bennets is therefore something Austen chooses to censure. Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) extols the “‘submissive dependence’, ‘timidity of temper’, ‘lovely meekness’, ‘modest pliancy’, and ‘complacent deportment’ of the female sex” (qtd. in Churchyard). Intended as a compliment, Mr. Collins instead objectifies Miss De Bourgh by stating her absence from town deprives the court of its “brightest ornament” (Austen,

46). In this age, it is a common belief that the “loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable... one false step involves her in endless ruin” (Austen, 187-188). Austen downplays the seriousness of Lydia’s elopement by having Mr. Collins state “[t]he death of [Lydia] would [be] a blessing in comparison” (Austen, 192). In a very unchristian manner, this character is suggesting that impropriety cannot be forgiven. Austen clearly uses Mr. Collins to discount the views she abhors.

The protagonist, Elizabeth, portrayed as an intelligent, independent, and strong spirit serves as a voice for Austen and a role model for women. Like her father she is able to see above situations, such as when Mr. Bennet asks Mr. Collins about his “talent of flattering with delicacy” (Austen, 47). Defying her mother by crossing the muddy fields to visit her ailing sister, Elizabeth demonstrates devotion over decorum – an act condemned by Miss Bingley (another silly character) as “an abominable sort of conceited independence” (Austen, 25). Further reflecting her “freedom to think for herself” (Morgan, 340), she says to Lady Catherine “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (Austen, 233). There is no “timidity” or “meekness” about Elizabeth’s choice to tell Darcy about his “arrogance, [his] conceit, and [his] selfish disdain of the feelings of others” (Austen, 128). Therefore, it is no surprise that “[b]y Elizabeth’s instructions [Georgiana]” and the reader “[begin] to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband” (Austen, 253). Elizabeth calls her strong spirit by another name: “[d]id you admire me for my impertinence?” Her impertinence, of course, is why generations of readers have admired her” (Morgan, 340). Elizabeth has what it takes to be successful and represents what women in her day could be like.

Elizabeth’s view of marriage is based on modern ideas and love. Further endorsing practicality over normative values, Elizabeth contradicts Catherine De Bourgh’s conservatism by stating “it would be very hard on younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early. – The last born has as good a right to the pleasures of youth, as the first” (Austen, 110). As Charlotte marries based on her desire for “a comfortable home” (Austen, 85) Elizabeth feels “that no real confidence could ever subsist between them again” (Austen, 87). Marriage must be based on love, she believes. Austen herself refused an offer of marriage from a “country gentleman” whose love she did not reciprocate (William Austen-Leigh, Richard Austen-Leigh and Le Faye, 263). Even though it would secure the future of herself and her entire family, Elizabeth shows great conviction by refusing Darcy’s first offer of marriage. By having Elizabeth

stick to her values, Austen demonstrates even those with high social status “have to earn [their] right to consideration by respect for others” (Butler, 324). Through Elizabeth’s beliefs in marriage Austen offers guidance to women in her age.

Darcy endorses Austen’s support for women’s education with his view of an accomplished woman. As women of the landed gentry class generally did not have careers, formal education was viewed as unnecessary. In his 1782 treatise, “The History of Women”, William Alexander advocates “women should [not] pore [sic] out their fair eye in becoming adepts in literature. Nature seems not to have intended them for the more intense and severe studies” (Alexander). Thus, as marriage “[is] the only honorable provision” (Austen, 83) women confine themselves to accomplishments that make them marriageable, such as “cover[ing] screens [sic] and net[ting] purses” (27). Indeed, it is no wonder that Mary, a “mouthpiece of platitudes” (Auerbach, 329), observes Lydia’s mindless pleasures as “congenial with the generality of female minds” (Austen, 146). Contrary to popular opinion, Darcy believes skills and manners are not enough. “[S]he must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by substantial reading” (Austen, 27). The consequences of not pursuing such an education are illustrated by Mr. Bennet’s feelings towards his wife: “captivated by youth and beauty... [he] had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her” (Austen, 155). By having such a respectable character as Darcy make a statement towards the necessity of proper education, Austen promotes her beliefs.

Compared to today, Austen’s views are still conservative. She never pushes the idea of women’s professionalisation and she still sees the necessity of Lydia marrying Wickam because of their impropriety. Marked by the speeches and actions of her silly characters, she does, however, set a standard for women to rise beyond. Through Elizabeth Austen presents a modern-day intelligent, independent, and strong minded role model. Through other sensible characters, such as Darcy, Austen is able to express her views on issues that affect women, and to help break the sexual stereotypes of the day. Perhaps Miss Bingley is right when she says Elizabeth “[undervalues her] own” (Austen, 28), but it is only because sometimes we all need a little tough love.

Alexander, William, The History of Women From Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time. Wiltshire, England: Thoemmes Press, 1995. Rpt. in Sunshine for Women. 2001. 18 Jun. 2005. <http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/book-sum/w_alex.html>.

Astell, Mary. Some Reflections Upon Marriage, Occasioned by the Duke and Dutchess of Mazarine's Case; Which is Also Considered. Ed. John Nutt. London: Stationers-Hall, 1700. Rpt. in Sunshine for Women. 2001. 18 Jun. 2005. <http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/book-sum/astl_mrg.html>.

Auerbach, Nina. "Waiting Together: Pride and Prejudice." Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978. 38-46, 48-55. Rpt. in Pride and Prejudice. Third Edition. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001. 326-338.

Austen, Jane. Pride and Prejudice. Third Edition. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001.

Austen-Leigh, William, Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, and Deirdre Le Faye. "Prospects of Marriage." A Family Record. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989. 121-122, 126-127. Rpt. in Pride and Prejudice. Third Edition. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001. 262-264.

Butler, Marilyn. Jane Austen and the War of Ideas: Pride and Prejudice. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. 197-198, 203-207, 210-213. Rpt. in Pride and Prejudice. Third Edition. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001. 319-326.

Churchyard, H. Pride and Prejudice – Notes on Random Topics. 15 Jun. 2005 <<http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/pptopics.html>>.

Fraiman, Susan. "The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet." Unbecoming Women: British

Women Writers and the Novel of Development. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. pp 69-87. Rpt. in Pride and Prejudice. Third Edition. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001. 356-368.

Morgan, Susan. In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 4-5, 10-12, 78-81, 90-92, 101-104. Rpt. in Pride and Prejudice. Third Edition. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2001. 338-347.