

A Story Without Love: On *Pride and Prejudice* From the Feminism Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyzes *Pride and Prejudice* from the viewpoint of feminism. First, the paper deals with the relationship of young couples and concludes that the book only discusses marital relations between two sexes. The story has nothing to do with love or romance. Furthermore, the paper probes into the deep roots and points out that low social status of women is the main cause for the author to write such a book with cool and sarcastic attitude.

Key words: *Pride and Prejudice*; Women; Men; Marry

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen is famous for dealing with trifles in life and her representative work *Pride and Prejudice* begins with women's gossip. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Bennet informs her husband of a piece of news, "My dear Mr. Bennet, have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?" (Austen, 2012) In fact, a gossip has been scattered that "a young man of large fortune from the north of England" came down on that Monday "in a chaise and four" to move into the splendid house Netherfield. The Bennets have five daughters and the business of Mrs. Bennet's life is to get her daughters

married. The story just begins with the intent that the neighbors who have daughters want to get acquainted with this young man with an income of five thousand pounds a year.

1. RELATIONS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

The novel mainly writes around the relation between the daughters of Bennet and several young men. In order to welcome the rich new neighbor, a party has been held to treat Mr. Bingley and his relatives. At the welcome party, Mr. Bingley seems to be attracted by beautiful Jane, the eldest daughter of Bennet. In the meantime, a friend of his, Mr. Darcy receives dislike and enmity from the neighbors, especially Elizabeth, the second daughter of Bennet, because of his proud attitude. Mr. Darcy was born of a noble family and has an income of 10,000 pounds a year, which is quite different from his friend Bingley, who though rich, in fact comes from the middle class. In the text, the writer delicately introduces the family background of the characters. From the dialogue between the Bennets, Bingley's family origins are revealed, "Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England." This hints the Bingleys are nouveau riches because of the Industrial Revolution since it is well-known that the north of England is an industrial area. Likewise, at the welcome party, the writer describes Miss Bingley in this way:

They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others. They were of a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade.

Up to 18th century, although the Bourgeois Revolution had been over for about 100 years, there was still a clear class distinction which though sometimes could be understood by some open-minded people. At the party, Mr. Darcy shows an obvious discriminatory attitude towards her and her family members because Mrs. Bennet and some of her daughters have a very vulgar behavior. Darcy's arrogance arouses Elizabeth's prejudice against him, hence the title of the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr. Darcy comes to be attracted by the beauty and intelligence of Elizabeth, which is not realized by her. So when Mr. Darcy proposed to Elizabeth with a despised and winning attitude, she was deeply hurt and insulted. She reacted rather radically, which shocked Darcy. Later Darcy changes his behavior little by little. Misunderstanding between them is eliminated and Elizabeth accepts his proposal finally. In the story between Darcy and Elizabeth, there inserts the story of several other young couples, including Mr. Bingley and Jane, Mr. Wickham and Lydia, the youngest daughter of Bennet, Mr. Collins and Charlotte, the best friend of Elizabeth's. After reading the novel, many readers may misunderstand it as a love story since so many young people are involved. However, after a careful study has been made, we find it is not the case.

Firstly, before Mr. Bingley encountered Jane, he had been presumed as one of the sons-in-law of the Bennets. In fact, any rich young man is the object of pursuit of young ladies. Although Mrs. Bennet is stupid and vulgar, her husband follows her advice to visit Mr. Bingley as one of the earliest neighbors. When the Bennets realized that Mr. Bingley was probably attracted by Jane's beauty, all the family members made full use of every chance to encourage Bingley to go on while Mrs. Bennet urged her daughter to leave for the Bingleys in spite of rainy weather. Above all, when she got the news that Jane had fallen seriously ill at the Bingleys, she was happy instead. After all, her only hope is to marry off all the daughters. Likewise, when Charlotte found that Elizabeth had showed obvious dislike to her cousin Mr. Collins, she deliberately talked with him much with a sure intent that the stupid man would propose her sooner or later. In fact, as soon as Mr. Collins proposed her, Charlotte agreed immediately, which was envied by Mrs. Bennet. The engagement astonishes the Bennet sisters, especially Elizabeth. Among the five daughters of Bennet, Elizabeth is the cleverest one and loved by her father best. Charlotte is her best friend, from which we conclude that the two girls must share similar intelligence. The stupidity in Mr. Collins is so obvious that both Charlotte and Elizabeth mention it more than once. But why does Elizabeth reject Mr. Collins's proposal while Charlotte accepts? The following passage is the reflection of Charlotte after accepting the proposal:

Her reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome,

and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. —Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it.

After Charlotte got married, in her letter to Elizabeth, “she wrote cheerfully, seemed surrounded with comforts, and mentioned nothing which she could not be praise. The house, furniture, neighborhood, and roads, were all to her taste, and Lady Catherine's behavior was most friendly and obliging.” As a newly married woman, she mentions everything that has satisfied her except her husband, the most important element that constitutes marriage, which may be the very only one unsatisfying her most. Later, Elizabeth went to visit her friend's new house,

Elizabeth was thankful to find that they did not see more of her cousin by the alteration, for the chief of the time between breakfast and dinner was now passed by him either at work in the garden, or in reading and writing, and looking out of the window in his own book-room. Elizabeth at first had rather wondered that Charlotte should not prefer the dining-parlor for common use; it was a better-sized room, and had a pleasanter aspect; but she soon saw that her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr. Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment, had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement.

Through the delicate arrangement, Charlotte could see her husband less. As a new wife, how strange her ideas! It only means that among all the elements that constitute her marriage, she cares for her husband least.

In fact, there is love neither between Charlotte and Mr. Collins, nor even between Elizabeth and Darcy. At the beginning of the novel, when Elizabeth realized that Darcy looked down upon her and her family, she began to hold hostile attitude towards the latter. She explains her prejudice in this way,

His pride does not offend me so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favor, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a right to be proud.

However, as Darcy changes his attitude, Elizabeth changes her attitude, too. Especially when she found that Darcy stooped to do everything to please her relatives, to help her family in economy, she was easy to change. It is evident that in the relation between pride and prejudice (the title of the novel), pride comes first and prejudice comes second, which is just the causal relation. With disappearance of the former, the latter will disappear soon. Up to now, readers may find a cruel truth that there lacks real love among the relationship of the young people in the novel.

2. WOMEN'S POSITION

From the discussions above, we can find that women always seem to be passive and subordinate in the relation between two sexes. However, they seem to be very active in temptation of men to go into marriage. Throughout the novel, all the women, rich or poor, clever or stupid, seem to be ready to make a trap for the men to marry them. The Bennets wish to marry off all the five daughters. Charlotte is eager to choose the stupid man whom her best friend has just rejected. Even the rich Miss Bingley is so anxious to become the wife of Mr. Darcy's that she wants to manipulate her brother's marriage. Besides, Mr. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, comes to the Bennets herself just in order to prevent Elizabeth agreeing to marry Darcy while her real intention is only to marry her own daughter to Darcy. If we want to know the real cause for this, an analysis has to be made about the social status of women in 18th century.

In 18th century, the social position of women is very low. In fact, until 19th century, women in European countries can enjoy limited suffrage rights. Women are excluded from society and confined to house. The first sentence of the novel has become a classic one in literature, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." The sentence vividly reveals women's real living state. The sentence is a subjective clause revealing a truth universally acknowledged by women. "Must be" in the clause expresses a positive inference but the execution is omitted which leaves an imaginary space for readers. It is not difficult for readers to know that women are trying to guess what men really want. There are two prepositional phrases in the sentence, "in possession of" parallels with "in want of", which makes their central words "fortune" and "wife" become equivalents of each other, that is, fortune=wife. This vividly reveals women's miserable living state of the time: Women are regarded as men's possession, but not equals. Moreover, in the clause, the subject "man" parallels with the object "wife" which should have been another word "woman". However, the fact that wife appears here instead of woman just hints that "wife" has become the only identity of woman. Through a very simple sentence, Jane Austen sarcastically reveals women's low social status. That is why the first sentence has been regarded as classics worth reciting.

The first sentence has set the basic tone of the novel, no love, no romance. For women in the novel, the only identity is to become someone's wife. Otherwise, her life will become worthless. Therefore, the ideal of all the

young women is to become a wife, which is the only way to realize their value. When Lydia was found to elope with the rascal Mr. Wickham, the only way out for saving the fame of the whole family was to make them married. For the sake of Elizabeth, Darcy had to spend a big sum of money in persuading Wickham to marry Lydia. Nobody cares for Lydia's life-long happiness. What the family has done for her is to marry her to this rascal.

When we read the novel, we cannot help doubting: Why are the two men who propose to Elizabeth so proud? If the pride in Darcy lies in his wealth and intelligence, why is the stupid Mr. Collins proud, too? When they propose to Elizabeth, they are so sure of the reply that they cannot control their arrogance. In fact, the pride does not only come from money they have owned, but also from the advantage of their gender. Therefore, the "pride and prejudice" is also due to the difference of two sexes. The woman writer creates a clever and beautiful woman Elizabeth who dare say "no" to handsome and wealthy Darcy. However, even the author cannot evade the custom. After all, she marries her favorite heroine to the richest man in the novel. Otherwise, maybe she herself cannot regard her work successfully.

CONCLUSION

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the writer creates a beautiful and intelligent woman image Elizabeth who is loved by modern readers, but in the novel she is not so popular as her elder sister Jane. Jane is beautiful, gentle, tolerant, but somehow a bit simple-minded. It is evident that clever woman was not popular in 18th century. At that time, men love beautiful but a bit silly woman like Snow White in Brothers Grimm's fairytale. Jane Austen seems to be too mild towards problems between two sexes. Therefore, "G. H. Lewes recommended Austen to Charlotte Bronte in 1848, but Bronte rejected her as being elegant and confined, 'a carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden, with heat borders and delicate flowers.'" (Showalter, 2004) However, for a woman writer in 18th century, the fact that she never goes to the extreme can be forgiven for ever.

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