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Changes in Location and Perspective in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* was written at a time characterized by its divided class system and a desperation to return to a way of life that was disappearing in a rapidly industrializing society. Widely accepted to be a satirist of the wealthy and its pretentiousness, Austen explores the permeability of social class and emphasizes the importance of character over a person's wealth. She also explores the extent to which narrow perspectives can be limiting and destructive, especially when considering social class. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen uses location changes as a device to illustrate changing perspectives, in which we see an increase of apparent wealth, but a decrease in the pride associated with it and a wider understanding of one's own social prejudice.

At the beginning of the novel, Austen takes advantage of structural elements to depict a distrust of societal or universal views as she gradually narrows our perspective to Elizabeth. The famous first sentence of the novel, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (3), presents the reader with what seems like a stereotype widely accepted to be a fact. This universal fact is then reduced to be a view of a singular neighborhood: "However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families [...]" (3). Finally, the view is revealed to be held by Mrs. Bennet, a woman who is

quickly revealed to be “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper” (5). This reduction of perspective into one that is so obviously unreliable exposes the ridiculousness of a social construct that involves marrying for money instead of for love. Jane Austen is also challenging the perspective implying that women are the shallow ones that are hunting men that display wealth.

This structure of narrowing perspective is used yet again throughout the first few chapters, as the first dialogue the reader encounters from the novel’s protagonist, Elizabeth, is relatively late in the novel. In the descriptions of the two main males of the novel, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley, which occupies the majority of the first two chapters, the reader gains the view of society, then the local families, and finally the perspectives of Elizabeth and Jane in the fourth chapter. The rather limited view of society paints the two men as incredibly wealthy, good-looking, and a perfect match for any single girl lucky enough to gain their attention. The local families then discover that while Mr. Bingley is perfectly agreeable in every way, Mr. Darcy provides a sharp contrast in his haughty manner and pride. Rather than a specific individual declaring Mr. Darcy’s character, the narrator says, “His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and every body hoped that he would never come there again” (8). This implies that it is the general view of the neighborhood, and does not specifically belong to Elizabeth. The reader only learns of Elizabeth’s direct opinion in Chapter four, which presents a dialogue between Elizabeth and Jane where it is revealed that Elizabeth “was very little disposed to approve [Mr. Bingley’s sister and Mr. Darcy]” (12). The parallel between Mrs. Bennet’s and Elizabeth’s perspectives, as those are the final views the reader is

presented with within their respective structures, reveals the unreliability of both characters, and thus the novel's narrator.

Austen does not make this unreliability apparent, so the reader is as blind to Elizabeth's prejudice as Elizabeth is herself. Compared to Jane's perceived naivete, Elizabeth seems pragmatic and aware of the world and its failings. Therefore, we as readers trust her and her views of the people she is surrounded by. The novel starts at Longbourn, which is the Bennets' home and the least extravagant of all the main estates presented in the novel. As far as the reader knows, Elizabeth has remained at Longbourn the majority of her life without extended stays elsewhere. This means that as a member of the lowest bar of the upper class she has maintained a view of the highest elite as pompous and pretentious, as she has only perceived them from a distance. She has been sheltered, and therefore the reader is also sheltered, as other people's perspectives are notably absent.

The reader begins to be presented with other people's viewpoints after the first major location change, or once Elizabeth and Jane are obliged to partake in an extended stay at Netherfield. Most notably, Darcy's perspective is beginning to be explored. Similar to Elizabeth, Darcy is shown to see through people and their ridiculous societal charade. However, he still perceives value in high-bred manners. Darcy, who belongs to the absolute highest rank of social class, is compelled to try to distinguish himself from the other classes, especially the class right below him. Someone of his position can easily refute the claim that he is from a class much lower than him, but being mistaken to be of a class just below him is less ridiculous and thus more embarrassing. Staying at Netherfield is a constant reminder of this need for distinction. Therefore, he is even more guarded against downgrading himself, which would happen if he

marries Elizabeth Bennet, who belongs to a much lower class. It is revealed that, “he really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger” (38), intimating that he cares more about status than love. At this point in the novel, both Darcy and Elizabeth are still blinded by pride and prejudice.

This next significant location change is Rosings, Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s estate near Mr. Collins’ home with Charlotte Lucas, where Elizabeth and Darcy each recognize their own faults and prejudices. At Rosings, they are confronted with haughty grandeur that Elizabeth declares dislike for and shows no connection to. However, she is forced to admit that Charlotte, who she was disappointed in for marrying disagreeable and insensible Mr. Collins just for his wealth, has made the best of the unfavorable situation and is considerably happy. Despite her certainty that any marriage with someone like Mr. Collins would fail, “Elizabeth in the solitude of her chamber had to meditate upon Charlotte’s degree of contentment, to understand her address in guiding, [...] and to acknowledge that it was all done very well” (111). Already, Elizabeth is having to come to terms with her narrow perspective and the extent to which she projects her view of the world onto other people. Moreover, Rosings is the place where Mr. Darcy proposes, is refused, and is forced to give Elizabeth the letter explaining his former actions. The fact that Darcy proposed is significant of the change that this location brought out in him. At Netherfield, where he was reminded of his need for social distinction, he avoided thinking of Elizabeth in every way possible. However, at Rosings, which is of wealth equal to his own, he realizes that he loves Elizabeth more than he cares for social status. Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Collins are both very concerned with maintaining the social order that they witness disappearing, and Darcy is reminded of its ridiculousness. He is already overcoming

pride, even though he may not realize his prejudice. Elizabeth quickly remedies this, as she challenges the rude manner in which he proposed and the way he has treated her prior to the proposal. His letter soon afterwards makes her question her own judgement, as she realizes how wrong she was about Mr. Darcy. Both Darcy and Elizabeth leave Rosings with high emotions that delay proper evaluation of their own character and the changes they may need to make, which a later change in location helps bring to light.

Pemberley, Darcy's beautiful estate, is the last major change in location, which sees the solidification of both Elizabeth and Darcy's character and their attempt to overcome their prejudice. Pemberley is described as rather simplistic in contrast to Rosings:

> and in front [of the building], a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. (166)

Rosings was arrogant, formal, and artificial, whereas Pemberley was elegant, simple, and natural. This appearance does not align with Elizabeth's preconceived notions of Darcy as haughty and of bad taste and solidifies the version of Darcy presented in the letter as of a higher moral standard than most men Elizabeth had previously encountered. Elizabeth had not known someone of such high class could value understated simplicity, and her seeing Pemberley leads to her recognition of the similarity of perspectives across social boundaries.

Through Darcy and Elizabeth's widening perspectives, which is closely aligned with their travels to different and increasingly wealthy locations, Jane Austen's view of the diminishing social class is revealed. She satirizes the pretentious and gaudy wealthy and celebrates the

simplicity into which Elizabeth and Darcy envelop themselves. Following these two characters on their journey to lesser prejudice towards each other and their respective social classes exposes a link between location, social class, and the artificiality associated with it, which Austen explores through the structure of her novel. Elizabeth's perspective and her narrative ability becomes more trustworthy as the novel progresses and she presents a more encompassing viewpoint. The reader's initial agreement with a prejudiced Elizabeth not only unveils the reader's gullibility but their prejudice as well, as they are not considering the narrowness of Elizabeth's perspective. Austen thus effectively brings the reader into the discussion of social class and their own hidden judgements, which may have been polarizing at a time of such class divisions.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice: an Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. Edited by Donald J. Gray and Mary A. Favret, 4th ed., W . W . Norton & Company, 2016.