
Daudnagar College, Daudnagar

Subject: English Literature

Class: B.A. Part II (Honours)

Paper: IV (Novel)

Topic: Critical Assessment of *Pride and Prejudice*

Critical Assessment of *Pride and Prejudice*

This novel tells the story of the gradual union of two people, one held back by unconquerable pride and the other blinded by prejudice. In spite of the thin plot, the interest is sustained throughout the book. The characters are drawn with humour, delicacy and an intimate knowledge of men and women that Jane Austen always shows. The scene is laid in England in the countryside; and the characters are the ladies and gentlemen Jane Austen describes so well in her novels.

In the sustained scenes between the more developed characters where the dialogue is highly charged, Jane Austen shows dramatic power of a high order. One of the best of these scenes is that between Elizabeth Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, in which Elizabeth, like a good swordsman, light on her feet and ever ready, completely disarms her lumbering opponent. Elizabeth is certainly attractive and convincing as a woman and Jane in her own way is equally convincing, but the comic characters generally go too far towards caricature. And for this reason we often have the feeling that the heroine is moving among a world of grotesques who do not really convince us of their truth to life.

Pride and Prejudice is by far the most popular of all Jane Austen's novels. Jane Austen said of it that it "is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade." And this is perhaps the reason for its popularity. The precision and vivacity of style carry the reader through the novel with ease and spirit; there is a sparkling life about the characters and a freshness about the scenery which combine to make this the gayest of Jane Austen's novels. The pace never falters, and even in that

middle section of the book when Mr. Bingley and company have left the neighbourhood apparently for good, the plot continues to unfold with new and arresting developments, each arising naturally out of the preceding action and leading as naturally to the conclusion.

Structurally, the novel shows the highest degree of craftsmanship. We begin with the Bennet family and their interest in the new tenant of Netherfield Park. The characters circle round each other in an almost ballet movement: beautiful and kind hearted Jane, witty and high-spirited Elizabeth, charming Mr. Bingley, proud Mr. Darcy, gallant Mr. Wickham, scheming Miss Bingley, not to mention foolish and garrulous Mrs. Bennet and her self-defensively offensive husband. Each reveals his or her character in conversation, helped out by an occasional flashing forth by the author of a brief but pungent descriptive remark.

The problem posed in what might be called the first movement of the novel is the marrying off of the elder Bennet girls. They have beauty and intelligence, but inconsiderable fortune. Mrs. Bennet's desire to have them married, though her expression of that desire reveals the defects of her character in a richly comic manner, is in itself both natural and laudable; for girls of negligible fortune genteelly brought up must secure their men while they may, or face a precarious shabby-genteel spinsterhood with few opportunities of personal satisfaction or social esteem. The problem as originally posed has its comic side, but the arrival of Mr. Collins shows it in another light though he himself is a highly comic figure.

In the gradual unfolding of the truth about Mr. Darcy's character, the revelation of his goodness to his tenants and in general of his playing the part of the land owner who understands the social duties that ownership implies (we see this in the housekeeper's talk to Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle at Pemberley) represents a crucial stage. Jane Austen had a strong sense of class duty and a contempt for any claims for superiority based merely on noble birth or social snobbery. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a monstrous caricature of Mr. Darcy; she represents pride without intelligence, moral understanding, or understanding of the obligations conferred by rank. Jane Austen of course accepts the class structure of English society as she knew it; but she accepts it as a type of human

society in which privilege implies duty. Her view of life is both moral and hierarchical. But it is far from snobbish, if by snobbery we mean the admiration of rank or social position as such.