
UNIT 4 CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to offer a reading of *Pride and Prejudice* that lays a particular emphasis on the characters on the novel, and that sees these characters as embodying, in themselves as well as in what happens to them, the main themes of the novel.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most immediately striking things about the character-portrayals in Jane Austen's work is the fact that nowhere, unlike in the fiction of Fielding for example, does the reader get the impression of the characters as entirely **manipulated** by the author, or subordinated to the interests of the plot. Plot here does not consist of dramatic happenings and events, but rather arises from character, in that the changes in the thoughts and feelings of the characters is at least as important (and often more so) than any external event. Even a fairly dramatic event like Lydia's elopement is important more for what it reveals of the characters of Lydia, Wickham, and Darcy, and for its role in effecting Elizabeth's changed feelings, rather than for the literal consequences, which are simply that they are forced to marry, and that the marriage does little to make society at large forget the event.

Another very noticeable feature of the portrayal of characters in the novels, and one for which Jane Austen has been repeatedly and extravagantly praised, is their fidelity to life, or more correctly, to 'real' people. One source, both of this feature, and of the fact that it has been so highly valued, is the eighteenth century notion of 'nature', and the idea that the imitation of nature as closely as possible was an ideal of all art. It might be helpful, therefore to look at some of the more common eighteenth century perceptions of character.

4.2 EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IDEAS ABOUT CHARACTER

The most obvious feature of the eighteenth-century conception of human character to a reader today is its self-confident assertion of a universal human nature which holds true in its basic features across different historical contexts. It is impossible for us

today not to question the assumptions behind such a conception of character, but in doing so we do run the risk of simplifying what is a complex and detailed idea, and moreover one that is behind the emergence of the modern 'self' or the 'subject', which cannot be seen in isolation, but has to consider them in terms of its simultaneous opposition to, and continuity with, the eighteenth-century idea of the human being. Something of this has already been discussed in 1.4.2 in a discussion of the passage where Foucault asserts that we cannot escape the Enlightenment conception of character, because we cannot extricate ourselves from it. Human nature may have been conceived in the eighteenth century as an inclusive and all-encompassing category, but it does remain a severely limited one, the best example of this limitation being the approximation of human nature to 'Man'. Though this has been much criticized, it is important to remember that the bias is an implicit one – women are not being consciously sought to be excluded from humanity, and indeed are often assumed to be so obviously present that they do not require special mention. 'Man' is held to be not only intrinsically 'good' but also essentially and 'naturally' social. Interestingly, this idea of inherent 'goodness' is problematic not only from the twentieth-century perspective, but also from that of the Christian conception of human nature, since the Christian tradition itself includes contradictory ideas of human virtue – on the one hand, mankind is the supreme part of God's creation, second only to the angels and on the other, there is the presence of original sin, which man brings upon himself through his own deliberate fault. One might argue that the idea of the human being as essentially sinful nowhere enters into the eighteenth century confidence about the naturally rational and moral man, but in fact the force of satire (and this is a period inevitably associated with satire) rests in no small measure upon it — at least two of the most important satirists (Swift and Johnson) were also devout Christians.

In seeing the human being as the most worthy subject of study, this idea of character refers back to Renaissance humanism, and the emphasis on the essential and inborn nature of different types of human character. The theory of humours, which had been part of popular physiology in medieval and Renaissance Europe offered one way of classifying different types of characters, and saw the varying amounts and combinations of bodily fluids as formative of individual characteristics, temperament, mind and behaviour. It is the use of 'humoured' characters in comedy that results in the eighteenth century association of the word 'humour' with comedy, wit and laughter.

In the assertion that man was a social being, there is a coming together of the ideas of 'nature' and 'culture' (or society) that Romantic thinkers later saw as polarized. Locke's idea of the human being as formed through received impressions also contributed to the Romantic cult of personality. The eighteenth century thus debates endlessly over whether individual character traits are inherent, or formed by education (see 3.2.2) and upbringing, and if inborn, whether or not they are alterable. *Pride and Prejudice* includes a look at both sides of the argument (see 4.4.1) but stops short of attempting a resolution.

4.3 FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

Of the many existing models available for the analysis of fictional character, I have chosen E. M. Forster's for a closer look, since he deals specifically with Jane Austen's characters. Do remember however that Forster's analysis falls within a particular kind of literary criticism or way of reading a text and that this is only one among many such possible readings, not all of which even accept the idea that the characters in a fictional text merit this kind of attention. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, provides the terms 'flat' and 'round' as a tool for the analysis of fictional character, using them to describe two different kinds of literary character and two methods of characterization. A flat character is one who does not change in the

course of the fiction where he or she is found and is a 'type' with a few (often only one) prominent features and characteristics. Such characters are usually — though not exclusively — used in caricature where comic effects are desired. A round character is one who changes and develops as the story or play progresses. This classification is useful as a guide to literary intention (to use an outdated phrase). A flat character could be evidence that the novelist is trying to focus on a particular quality or state of mind, while the use of a round character, could indicate an effort to show personal growth (as happens with Elizabeth — contrast her with a relatively 'flat' character like Mary, who does not change in the course of the novel) or show a commitment to realism, in that 'real' people are of course far more 'round' than 'flat'. Forster goes on to specify that none of Jane Austen's characters could really be called flat, since 'she never stooped to caricature'. He goes on to add:

She is a miniaturist, but never two-dimensional. All her characters are round, or capable of rotundity. Even Miss Bates has a mind, even Elizabeth Eliot a heart, and Lady Bertram's moral fervour ceases to vex us when we realize this: the desk has suddenly extended and become a little globe. When the novel is closed, Lady Bertram goes back to the flat, it is true; the dominant impression she leaves can be summed up in a formula. But that is not how Jane Austen conceived her, and the freshness of her reappearances are due to this. (Forster, pp 113-14)

This opinion has been contested by critics who see as evidence to the contrary, the very fact that Jane Austen's characters are more or less clearly divided into the morally admirable and the morally reprehensible. They see Lady Bertram as characterized neither by the 'evil' of her sister Mrs. Norris, nor by the virtue of Fanny Price, but simply by indolence and weakness. Kitty would be a comparable example from *Pride and Prejudice*, an easy-going girl, not 'good' as Elizabeth and Jane are, nor 'bad' as Lydia proves to be, if such an oversimplified good/bad opposition is retained for the moment.

Another such opposition that was maintained in the eighteenth century, and even by Romanticism, but that Modernism has sought to do away with, is the dichotomy between 'reason' and 'emotion' which are seen as polarized opposites. However, to strictly locate the identity (as distinct from the behaviour) of Jane Austen's characters within the terms of this particular opposition would, I think, be a mistake. Though some critics have for example seen Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in these terms (that Jane Austen is here conceiving of two different character types is of course indisputable) it makes more sense to look at the modes of rational or emotional behaviour that each of the characters in the novels exhibits at one time or another. It has been argued that one of the reasons for the success of Jane Austen's characters is that we are not expected, in moving from one character to another, to shift from one level of reality to another. This means that we do not have to judge different characters by different standards of reality and probability. Even a character like Mr. Collins, who is certainly meant to be seen as obnoxious, is psychologically convincing — we are told about his repressive father, and though this does not serve as an excuse for his behaviour, it does provide some kind of explanation for it. Character in Jane Austen's fiction, is based on the idea of the unified subject, but sees the subject's qualities as revealed in, and constituted by, the particular decisions and actions which he or she undertakes, or as the case may be, fails to undertake.

4.4 THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

I have here listed out for you all the characters who might be considered to come under this category, and offer as a sample of analysis, a consideration of the different

characters in the Bennet family in terms of their role in the text. I have also indicated in bold type the names of those characters whom you might like to analyse in the same way.

The Bennets:

Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet, Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, Lydia

The Bingleys:

Bingley, Caroline, Louisa Hurst

The Darcys:

Lady Anne Darcy, Darcy, Georgiana

Wickham

Mr. Collins

Lady Catherine and her daughter Anne de Bourgh

The Lucases:

Sir William, Lady Lucas, **Charlotte, Maria.**

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner

Colonel Fitzwilliam

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are both presented in the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, first through direct speech, and then through authorial comment on them and their marriage. The parodic 'truth' of the novel's opening sentence is clearly an article of belief with Mrs. Bennet, who is characterized by her resourceful 'nerves' and "the business of her life" which is to get her daughters married. Mr. Bennet is described as "so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character." (PP, 3) The incompatibility of the relationship serves to show up the peculiarities of both – a clear instance of marriage being revelatory of character. The book doesn't just end with marriage, it also begins with the portrayal of a marriage, and if the projected marriages of the couple's five daughters were to take into account the unhappiness of this one, a great deal of the supposedly idealistic picture of marriage as a suitable and desired end is undercut with cynicism. If the choice of a marriage partner is an indication of personality (as it is throughout the novel), then Mr. Bennet is being judged unfavourably for a lack of judgement and "an unaccountable bias in favour of beauty". At the same time, his 'wrong' choice is presented as a mistake that he acknowledges, and his judgement of his children's characters – his preference for Elizabeth and his recognizing Kitty and Lydia as "two of the silliest girls in the country"—is borne out by the novel. Mrs. Bennet, though by far the less disinterested parent, is completely lacking in knowledge of her daughters, as well as in self-knowledge: "When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous."

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet function to bring out the debate over the role of upbringing in character-formation. Of their five daughters, two are shown to have inherited their father's good sense, two to have demonstrably taken after their mother's silliness, and one to have more or less formed herself through pedantry (as opposed to real learning). Considering this, one might conclude right away that people's natures are seen by the novel as inborn and dependent on the natures of their parents, if on anything at all. On the other hand, Mr. Bennet is clearly faulted for not actively intervening in Lydia's development, and Kitty, we are told, improves rapidly once she is away from Lydia's influence. Parental influence on, and responsibility for, people's characters is posited here, and Mr. Bennet is guilty of neglecting his daughters, a failing that Mrs. Bennet cannot be accused of, however harmful her influence. Yet there is no denying that the characters of Elizabeth and Jane are constituted despite (as much as by) their parents, whose failures are somewhat compensated for by the Gardiners in their role as surrogate parents. It seems to me that the novel's stand on the nature/nurture question remains deliberately ambiguous in order to avoid any easy moralising in the form of apportioning 'blame' or 'praise', as well as to limit causality. Such a limiting serves to balance out the emphasis equally between plot development and the outlining of the various characters to the point where the two merge. What do you think?

The inescapability of the family is brought out through pairs of characters where the virtues of one are suspiciously close to the vices of the other – Elizabeth’s frankness and Lydia’s coarseness, Jane’s sweetness and Mary’s moralism, Darcy’s superiority and his aunt’s arrogance. Of the five Bennet sisters, Jane is considered the most beautiful. On the surface, rather a bland picture of goodness, she is important because she provides, in her sometimes exasperating refusal to form hasty or condemnatory judgements of people, a standard besides which Elizabeth’s propensity to ‘prejudice’ is shown up. All the same, Jane’s over-willingness to believe the best of everyone is **not** held up as ideal – her father says that she (as well as Bingley) is “... so complying, that nothing will ever be resolved on”, and the extent to which her happiness is in the hands of other people – not just Bingley, but also his sisters and Darcy – as well as her relative quietness, show her to be much less capable of self-defence than Elizabeth is. Jane’s chief purpose in the novel seems to be an exemplary one – in a society where she might have chosen to flaunt or to use her beauty more obviously she refrains from doing so – and in providing an additional story-line which contributes to the main one by providing occasions for the main characters (Elizabeth and Darcy) to demonstrate their ‘pride’ and ‘prejudice’ as well as their overcoming of these faults.

Most of the important issues in the novel are presented through the figure of Elizabeth and the choices she faces regarding the preservation of the integrity and autonomy of the self, the reliability of attraction at first sight and the right basis for choosing a marriage partner. I shall not here discuss her character in greater detail since this is done later in 4.6, but it is interesting that Jane Austen thought her “as delightful a character as ever appeared in print”. If the figure of Elizabeth is used to criticize the conventional attractions that women are made to cultivate, it is equally meant to provide an alternative to them by depicting a woman who is ‘delightful’ for reasons other than those of beauty alone. That said however, it is important to remember that whatever else Elizabeth might be, she does also remain beautiful, and it is the character of Mary, the third Bennet sister, that shows us a woman who must cope with being unattractive. Mary is described as “the only plain one in the family” and is seen as having to rely on her supposed learning and accomplishments to get attention. I see Mary as being in some ways an extremely problematic character, since she could well be seen as falling within the contemporary stereotype of the ‘scholarly’ woman who is lacking in feminine charm. What do *you* make of this? On the other hand, Mary could be read as illustrating the limitations of mere bookish knowledge and the danger of becoming pedantic, especially when combined with a lack of enthusiasm for life outside books and an unpleasantly superior and judgemental tone. Listen to her speaking to Lydia:

Far be it from me, my dear sister, to depreciate such pleasures. They would doubtless be congenial with the generality of female minds. But I confess it would have no charms for *me*. I should infinitely prefer a book. (Ch.39)

Mary also overrates her own talents – witness the scene where she shows off her musical abilities to Elizabeth’s embarrassment. Though she appears (to me at any rate) a somewhat ‘flat’ character, she does serve to bring out the complexity of the ideal of learning and education. These are seen as desirable, but also as possibly resulting in undesirable qualities. The decisive factor would seem to be the way in which learning is pursued, by whom, and above all, to what end.

Catherine (called ‘Kitty’) is, I think, one of the few failures in character development in the book, since hers is a portrayal that is left underdeveloped and unelaborated. Though two years older than Lydia, she is completely guided by the latter, and we are shown nothing at all of her personality outside the context of her defining trait of extreme impressionability. Lydia is however developed in detail as a character completely incapable of restraint. Yet the portrayal is not entirely negative, and though she is greedy, selfish and manipulative, she is certainly not guilty of marrying

without love, as is Charlotte Lucas. Lydia's faults are obvious ones and dwelt upon by the text at some length, but all the same, I see the fact that she genuinely loves Wickham in her own way (though it is not the best way) as to a large extent meant to redeem her, and show that at least some of her faults are attributable to a faulty upbringing. I do not see her as a completely 'black' picture of vice, and I think Jane Austen steers quite clear of any stereotypical depiction of the 'fallen woman'. Lydia also serves as proof to the contrary, in answering the charge that Jane Austen shows women as unswayed by sexual desire. What do *you* think?

4.5 GENDER AND CHARACTER IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Do the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* conform to any of the various gender-based characteristics that are held to define, and to distinguish between, men's and women's 'natures' in the eighteenth century? Before answering the question, it might be useful to take another look at the rather stereotypical outlines of these 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics. A starting point for this discussion has been presented in 2.3 and in 3.2 above, but a necessary clarification in terminology is needed here. I use the words 'male' and 'female' to refer to biological difference, that is, the condition of belonging to one sex or the other, while 'masculine' and 'feminine' are used in the much wider sense of a set of culturally contingent norms, codes of behaviour, and ways of self-construction that are based upon, but not necessarily synonymous with, the former categories. So 'male' and 'female' here refer to sex, and 'masculine' and 'feminine' to gender. To avoid confusion, please do remember that this usage—and, it might be argued, also this distinction between sex and gender—is a contemporary one, and that Jane Austen does not always use these terms with the same qualifications—for instance, in calling Elizabeth an "elegant female", Mr. Collins is clearly incorporating the connotations of 'feminine' in the word, in that he refers to behaviour that he thinks is in accordance with what society considers appropriate for women.

Women are expected in this society to be (or at least to pretend to be) delicate, helpless and incapable of intellectual activity on the same level as men. Moreover, while ideas of the selfhood, identity and role of men are being continuously revised as a result of political and economic changes and the expansion of empire, womanhood is still defined in terms of the domestic. But Jane Austen does not present any simplistic picture of women as victims (except of the biologically imposed necessity of child-bearing). Rather she even criticizes the way in which women gain control, since they often do so through manipulation, hypocrisy and a rationing of affection. Her heroines are characterized by their **imperfections** rather than their perfections, at least when compared to the conventional heroines of earlier novels, of whom Pamela is the most obvious example.

Darcy expresses the opinion that a woman should strive for more than the conventional accomplishments, and while this view is meant to be a welcome corrective, Elizabeth does point out with irony that his expectations of women are almost as unrealistically demanding as are those of society. Since women are judged in terms of their attractiveness to men, or of the superficial accomplishments they have acquired in order to make themselves thus attractive, and men are equally subject to the standards of public behaviour, the metaphor of **performance** runs through the portrayal both of people's actual behaviour and of the societal norm that they are expected to live up to. It is not necessarily only women who have to 'perform' (though the need to perform is probably more crucial for women). Darcy, for example suffers because of his inability to "play to strangers", while Wickham benefits from his talent for doing just that. Two different kinds of personality, or two aspects of each person's personality—interiority as opposed to a public self—are

being interrogated here, and the public self is in most cases, eventually seen to be more a matter of role than of identity.

Another and perhaps more helpful area to locate the perception of gender difference in this society is in the dichotomy traditionally set up between reason and emotion (see 4.3). This remains crucial to a context where the reading and writing of novels are seen as essentially female (and feminine) activities. If you return for a moment to the discussion in 1.4.5 of the rise of the novel, you will recall the general identification of the novel with 'emotion' rather than 'reason' and the way in which the genre is criticized for its apparent lack of rigorous intellectual activity and learning. It is because of the latter view, and the identification of the fictional with the supposedly 'feminine' subjects of love and marriage, that novels are considered a suitable genre for women. The fictional is often set up in opposition to the 'factual' realm of history (see 6.2 for the relevance of this to women) but also with the emotional, and the domestic sphere to which it is allied. One of the most all pervasive of gender-differentiations has been the idea (not by any means dead today) that women are in some often unspecified way, more 'emotional' and less 'rational' than men. To leave aside for the moment the many and complex value judgements such an idea brings forth, and concentrate on how Jane Austen deals with it, look first at women like Mrs. Bennet and Lydia, who seem to, on the surface of things, embody it. They are however, for all their preoccupation with marriage, more interested in the social trappings that go with it than the emotional life it supposedly rests upon. While the sexual thrill Lydia's feels for Wickham is made clear, she is not shown as having any sort of interiority at all, and this does away with the possibility of showing emotion. On the other hand, if a woman like Jane feels deeply, so does a man like Darcy (both show less than they feel) and 'emotion' cannot really be seen in the novel as in any way a feminine preserve or characteristic. The reason/emotion dualism is itself largely done away with in this book – it is impossible to see either Elizabeth or Darcy in its terms — as compared to *Sense and Sensibility*, though even there it is present in two women characters instead of in a woman and a man.

Elizabeth Bennett, the main female character in *Pride and Prejudice*, is characterized by wit, independence, and a courageous ability to admit her mistakes. These are, however, generalized qualities present in varying degrees and combinations in almost all of Jane Austen's heroines. It might be helpful therefore to look at some of the common features in the portrayal of these heroines, where the circumstances in which they are placed are shown to be almost as formative of character as the inborn traits they possess. The material circumstances of these heroines vary widely, from the poverty and dependency of Fanny Price to the independence that comes from the possession of a fortune in the case of Emma Woodhouse. But they are equally subject to the conventions that form women's lives – indeed even women's selves—within the society they inhabit.

The fact that all Jane Austen's novels have a strong orientation towards the lives, characters and interests of women inevitably leads to the question as to whether she believed in and is trying to portray an essentially 'feminine' nature, and if so, what this would constitute. I do not think that such an attempt can justifiably be attributed to the very different and sharply individualized characterizations of women, but the idea of there being certain ideal or desirable qualities that all human beings (and not just women) ought to aspire to, does seem to be present in the novels. What is interesting is while these qualities do not have much to do with the virtues conventionally required of women, more often than not they are illustrated through a female character. One such absent convention is the wish that women unequivocally subscribe to the view that marriage is the only and essential fulfillment of their selves. On the face of it, Jane Austen might seem to be upholding this idea since each of her novels ends with the happy marriage of the heroine. But in view of the fact that this marriage is always one entered into out of love, and after the heroine's having rejected other offers irrespective of their material desirability, this could be seen rather as a belief that it is only the ability to form a lasting relationship based on

affection for another human being that is being praised and not necessarily the circumstance of having done so. Also consider Emma's clearly expressed disinclination to marry. Secondly this ability is as highly valued a quality in the men in the novels – Mr. Knightley possesses it from the beginning, and Darcy comes to acquire it in the course of the book

Meenakshi Mukherjee (1991) points out that in Elizabeth's refusal of Mr. Collins' proposal, Jane Austen is placing before us a serious confrontation, not only of two different views of marriage, but also of two opposing ways of looking at women. One of these sees the ability to attract men as the defining characteristic of 'femininity', while the other mocks this, and argues instead for women to be seen as rational and autonomous human beings in the same way that men are. This is expressed in Elizabeth's asking Mr. Collins to see her as "a rational creature" instead of as an "elegant female". The ideal of rationality as being constitutive of humanity has already been discussed. What is important here is that the ideal is being extended to include women, to whom it was not usually considered relevant, and the contradictions between the ideal itself and the standards set up for women by society are being exposed. Can you think of other instances from *Pride and Prejudice*, where conventionally emotional and 'irrational' female behaviour is satirized?

4.6 LET US SUM UP

The novel is concerned with the tacitly accepted but not clearly formulated codes which determine people's choices in their interaction with one another. It is collective beliefs and conventions which enable individuals to cast their desires and aspirations in patterns which have gained legitimacy through their continued practise in the community and have been approved by it.

There are gradations in the levels of conformity to standards and norms attained in practise by different characters. When the novel is viewed as a comedy of manners, its characters are not seen as having any existence independent of the community of which they form a part. The subjectivity of the characters and their external behaviour are both seen as an embodiment of the culture created by the community as a whole. While some characters may seem to have come fairly close to an adequate representation of the community's norms, standards and proprieties, others may represent only a partial or even a false or distorted expression of different aspects of the community's culture.

4.7 GLOSSARY

Essentialist	Involving, or based on, a belief in essences
Polarized	Having been given opposite properties with the maximum differences being highlighted.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the terms 'female' and 'feminine'? Do you find the distinction made here between them a helpful one?

2. Do you think that in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen privileges 'education' or upbringing over 'nature' (or the other way round) as formative of a person's character? Discuss.

4.9 SUGGESTED READING

Mukherjee, Meenakshi

Women Writers: Jane Austen. London: Macmillan, 1991.

McMaster, Juliet (Ed.)

Jane Austen's Achievement. London: Macmillan, 1976.