



## ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS: JANE AUSTEN'S PORTRAIT OF REGENCY GENTLEMEN IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper studies Jane Austen's articulation of gentleman in *Pride and Prejudice*. The term gentleman is not new to *Pride and Prejudice* but has its roots in the medieval ages of Chaucer's times. Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* highlights the social turmoil and class conflicts between the upper class and the middle class of the early 18<sup>th</sup> and late 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Through the themes of courtship and marriage Austen artfully creates a social circle with fictional characters belonging to the upper class 'landed gentry' and the middle class. However her focus is on the middle class especially the traders and merchants who earn a great fortune as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution and aspire to be associated with and be recognised as upper class. Austen satirises the Regency Era society through her sense of good humour and wit exposing the social reality. As a result of class distinctions becoming blur Austen uses the term 'gentleman' to introduce a man of gentle birth and noble inheritance belonging to the landed gentry. Although traditional in her views of social hierarchy her portrait of a true gentleman is not defined by virtue of birth and wealth alone but on their social mannerisms and conduct. Austen herself is well read and belongs to an educated family with noble connections. Her gentlemen besides being educated and wealthy are men of wit and charm. Her novels are also known as 'novel of manners'. True modernisation and the social revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is reflected in her gentleman who climbed the social ladder accepting the rigid social codes of conduct of the upper class. Austen uses the female voice to mock at and express her opinion on the new social order of Regency Era. *Pride and Prejudice* gives an insight to the readers on the impact of reputation of an individual based on 'class' not determined by financial status alone but good breeding, social conduct and social judgement.

Keywords: class, gentleman, landed gentry, Regency England.

### 1. Introduction

Austen's fictional family of the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice* belongs to the landed gentry of Hertfordshire, England representation of the 'untitled members' of the upper class who do not

have to earn for a living and are dependent on the revenues generated from their estates. Austen classifies him as a gentleman by virtue of birth and inheritance of the Longbourn estate, Hertfordshire. Austen satirizes the Regency society for its rigid

social structure and hierarchy. The Bennets include Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their five daughters Jane, Elizabeth, the female protagonist, Mary, Catherine and Lydia. Mrs Bennet is desperate to get her daughters married to wealthy gentlemen since their estate will be entailed to Mr William Collins a distant cousin of Mr Bennet as she has not been able to bear a male heir to Mr. Bennet's estate and the daughters will be rendered homeless after the death of Mr Bennet. Although Austen mocks at Mrs Bennet for her hunt of eligible men for her young daughters Austen uses it as a theme for the novel to highlight the social issues of property, inheritance of land, rights of women and class consciousness of the upper class in Regency England.

Mr. Darcy, Austen's male protagonist and Mr. Bingley are good friends and part of a common social circle. They are eligible bachelors for the Bennet sisters for who solace lies in marriage in a patriarchal Regency society. Austen tactfully creates two social circles of the Bennets and Mr. Darcy as a tool of reflecting the social and family dynamics in the light of the social turmoil in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England.

Austen also uses the theme of marriage and courtship in an endeavour to highlight the inner motives of her characters, their true selves and their outwardly appearances, mannerisms and impressions created by the fairer sex and vice versa. She highlights the family background, upbringing of adolescent children, parent-child relationship to judge their social conduct in an attempt to justify her essence of a true gentleman. Her gentlemen in PP also belong to the one or more of the Regency Era gentlemanly professions who may be from learned professions, the church, law and medicine or military officers. Austen's father himself was an Anglican parish priest and Austen spent her adolescence in extensive reading and being well accomplished through painting, dancing music, piano and domestic affairs of the house.

## 2. Conflict of Noble Birth and Wealth:

*'He is a gentleman and I am a gentleman's daughter. So far we are equal'.* -Elizabeth Bennet, *Pride and Prejudice*.

Jane Austen emphasises the class conflict between gentle birth and wealth through her female

protagonist Elizabeth. Her craftsmanship of a gentleman is a blend of both traditional and modern views reflecting the new social order of Regency England initiated by the Industrial Revolution.

Austen introduces Mr Bennet in the beginning of the novel as a gentleman by virtue of the Longbourn estate he inherits and his sensitivity to following social codes of conduct by mentioning his calling on Mr Bingley when he shifts into the neighbourhood in Hertfordshire which is a social courtesy to be followed in Regency England.

While on a visit to Mr Bingley at Hertfordshire, Mr Darcy, the male protagonist is introduced to the Bennett sisters at a ball but refuses to dance with Elizabeth and acts rudely with her. During their conversation, Mr Bingley comments about Elizabeth the female protagonist, '.....she is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me'.

Through this Austen projects Mr Darcy as proud and arrogant and not gentleman-like. His attitude towards Elizabeth and refusal to dance at the ball is unacceptable according to the socialising norms of Regency England expected of a gentleman. Also Elizabeth is introduced to Mr Darcy at the ball by Mr Bingley which is in accordance with the society's correct channels of introduction between a man and a woman of upper class. Austen reinforcing repeatedly that money cannot buy 'class'. Austen compares and contrasts him with Mr Bingley, introduced as a thorough gentleman and gives her opinion through a conversation between the Bennett sisters, Jane and Elizabeth when Jane remarks about Mr Bennet,

'he is just what a young man ought to be ..... sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners!.... so much ease with such perfect good breeding'.

Through female voices Austen mentions good breeding as a prerequisite to be identified as a gentleman in Regency England. Not through words alone Austen describes her gentlemen through actions also.

As the novel progresses Mr Darcy is captivated with Elizabeth's wit and charm falling in love with her. Initially Mr Darcy is disinterested in her, considering her looks not so handsome and

considering himself class apart. For Austen looks are deceptive what matters is good breeding and mannerisms. Austen's militia officer Mr. William Wickham is charming, good looking and associated with the one of Regency gentlemanly professions. But Austen ridicules him for his wicked ways and unpolished mannerisms for having eloped with Lydia, Elizabeth's younger sister and being a mercenary. Austen satirises the Regency society for its rigid social structure when the commission of a military officer could be purchased for younger sons in upper class families as their inheritance of property was restricted. As a favour in return of Wickham's father's services on the Pemberley estate Mr Darcy's father gifts the commission as a military officer to Wickham. Austin reflex her opinion on Mr. Wickham's class and breeding through the dialogues between Jain and Elizabeth,

'There certainly was some great mismanagement in the education of those two young men. One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it.'

Austin highlights the correlation between good breeding and social etiquettes she does not ignore manners and conduct a prerequisite for the title of a gentleman. Austin represents a traditional view of being a gentleman by noble birth and indirectly satirizes the wealthy middle class who have earned a fortune and consider themselves upper-class. Nevertheless her male protagonist Mr Darcy from the 'nouveau rich' middle class is a true gentleman, a man of character and virtues who later on saves the reputation of the Bennett family by paying money to Wickham and forcing him to marry Lydia, Elizabeth's youngest sister.

Another character in *Pride and Prejudice* bestowed with good fortune is William Collins a distant cousin of Mr Collins who is a clergyman at the Hunsford parsonage near to the estate of his patroness Lladly Catherine de Bourgh. He is also the next heir to Mr Bennet's Longbourn estate through entailment. Austen reflects his class through his grooming and upbringing by mocking at his behaviour and mannerisms when he first visits the Bennets showing a lot of concern for the Bennett sisters and even offering to marry one of them.

Austen introduces him as a 'pseudo gentleman' by portraying him as a pretentious man and falsely courteous. On Elizabeth's first visit to his house after his marriage with Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's best friend, Collins ridicules Elizabeth by saying,

'Do not make yourself uneasy my dear cousin, about your apparel. Lady Catherine is far from requiring that elegance of dress in us. .... Lady Catherine will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved.'

Austen mocks at Mr Collins for considering himself upper class on account of his association with Lady Catherine de Bourgh and the property of Mr. Bennet that is to be entailed to him, but lacks the social etiquettes and the conduct required for the upper class. Mr Collins lacks grace in conversation and actions; neither his words nor etiquettes are gentleman- like.

## 2.2 Neighbour's Envy, Owner's Pride:

The central theme of the novel is marriage and the novel begins with the opening lines:

'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.'

Jane Austen's gentlemen Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley are sought after for being the most eligible bachelors from well-to-do families and attract the attention of all young women in *Pride and Prejudice* but the gentlemen have a choice for well accomplished and socially graced ladies from families of repute in Regency Era. Austen's couples are made for each other and her true gentleman are also identified with true gentle ladies. Austen's female protagonist is a gentlewoman of intelligence, wit and charm.

## Conclusion

The use of the term 'gentleman' in *Pride and Prejudice* highlights Austen's respect for the traditional social structure represented by the landed gentry in *Pride and Prejudice* and the openness to modern 'nouveau rich' middle class represented by wealthy merchants who earned a fortune as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. However her chief concern is the middle class and their aspirations to climb the social ladder

and become upper class as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution which proved to be a boon to their financial status. Her gentlemen are not necessarily from the upper class landed gentry or the gentlemanly professions defined by the society but are men of character, virtues and social grace even from the wealthy middle class. Mr. Darcy is the embodiment of her true gentleman. Austen is well known for her use of sharp observation of the behaviour of people and their conduct in society. Her protagonists are educated or read extensively and represent 'class' of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century by birth or wealth and are characters of wit and charm. They follow the society's code of conduct and are a target of judgement by other characters in the novel to focus on their social interactions, how they are perceived by others and what is acceptable according to the social norms. The term 'gentleman' gives an insight on the rigid social structure of Regency society as well as the class mobility of the wealthy middle class. Austen considers money important but social judgement based on social etiquettes even more critical for an individual to be acceptable as upper class. *Pride and Prejudice* is also known as 'novel of manners' and Austen emphasizes on the role impressions formed by others as a source of introspection for oneself to evolve as an ideal man or woman for living in a civilized society.

**References**

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