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Too Much Antipathy Towards Too Much Formality: Jane Austen's Social Criticism in *Pride and Prejudice*

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The figure of a young girl who stands aloof from the surrounding people is familiar in Jane Austen's novels. Whether it is the state she herself voluntarily seeks—as with Marianne Dashwood—or the state to which she is helplessly abandoned—as with Fanny Price—this estrangement usually involves a certain material disparity in value judgments between her and other people, and the struggle to overcome this gulf is what she has to go through to achieve maturity. And so is the case of Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*.

At first glance, however, this delightful heroine seems to suggest nothing of solitariness or isolation, and certainly she does not follow Marianne by demonstratively removing herself from those around her and withdrawing into stubborn silence and secrecy. Yet Elizabeth is in fact as much mentally estranged from the surrounding people as is Marianne, and if silence and secrecy are the manifestations of Marianne's estrangement, it is laughter that denotes that of Elizabeth. She is often described as laughing, and what should be noted is that her laughter is always satirical, directed at something ridiculous or absurd. She herself admits her love of laughter, but against solemn Darcy who insinuates that she is indiscriminate in her derision, she returns: "'I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies *do* divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can'" (57).[1] Such laughter is then obviously a form of antipathy, and

the fact that she is continually laughing—that is, she is continually perceiving absurdity—is certainly indicative of her mental isolation from the society to which she belongs.

This detachment of Elizabeth is very important, and to grasp the full meaning of it, we need to look a little more closely at the society described in this novel which she finds full of absurdities—we shall return to her solitary struggle later. In the opening chapter of the book, Mrs. Bennet complains to her husband that he would not attempt to visit a newcomer at Netherfield Park; it will be impossible, says she, for her or her daughters to visit him, if Mr. Bennet does not. This impossibility arises from the convention of the times that forbade women's initiative in social intercourse, and such minutely prescribed rules of propriety are indeed dominant in the novel's world. Of course any society has its own rules; without them society simply cannot exist. But what is conspicuous in *Pride and Prejudice* is that they are respected with rather too much rigidity. In the early part of the book there is an episode in which Elizabeth takes a long solitary walk through muddy fields to Netherfield in order to attend to her sick sister Jane, and the reactions of the surrounding people are a good illustration of the inflexibility. Her mother protests against her attempt, saying: '" You will not be fit to be seen when you get there "' (32). Darcy feels 'doubt as to the occasion's justifying her coming so far alone ' (33). Above all the rest, the most merciless are Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst; they show a contemptuous surprise at the young girl's lonely country walk, and are aghast at her dirty appearance which results from it. The former concludes: '" It seems to me to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum "' (36). The action of Elizabeth is certainly bold, but the emergency and her sisterly affection may amply justify its slight deviation from conventional propriety. Yet no such concessions are to be granted—this is the principle of the society portrayed in this novel.[2]

The rules of propriety are important for the lubrication of social intercourse, but such characters as Darcy and the Bingley sisters tend to forget this, their original function, and such irrelevant adherence to

social forms is comically exaggerated in certain characters. Sir William Lucas is a man who ' [occupies] himself solely in being civil to all the world ' (18), and whose ' civilities [are] worn out ' (152); for him the forms of civility are something which are merely to be mechanically repeated. But the character who is most memorable in his ridiculous adherence to forms is Mr. Collins. His ceremonious politeness is always extravagant, and his endless thanks and apologies are especially ludicrous. He is totally oblivious to the original purpose of these forms, and we can see how his over-adherence to forms becomes an impediment to smooth social intercourse in the scene where he receives Elizabeth and the Lucases to the Hansford Parsonage:

> She [Elizabeth] saw instantly that her cousin's manners were not altered by his marriage; his formal civility was just what it had been, and he detained her some minutes at the gate to hear and satisfy his enquiries after all her family. They were then, with no other delay than his pointing out the neatness of the entrance, taken into the house; and as soon as they were in the parlour, he welcomed them a second time with ostentatious formality to his humble abode, and punctually repeated all his wife's offers of refreshment. (155)

In contrast to this clumsy work, later when they are invited to a dinner at Rosings Park, the office of introduction is assigned to Mrs. Collins, instead of her husband, so that the ceremony is ' performed in a proper manner, without any of those apologies and thanks which he would have thought necessary ' (161).

Mr. Collins is indeed a comical representative of the novel's world in which the conventional rules of behaviour are so minute and so rigidly stuck to as to impede and oppress man's natural activities. In parallel with this over-adherence to rules of behaviour, another feature that is also dominant in the novel is the over-adherence to rank. It might be natural that in a society in which a hierarchy is firmly established those in high positions should sometimes become pompous and imperative, but in this novel too much adherence to rank of such characters as Darcy

and Lady Catherine de Bourgh—especially their overweening arrogance towards social inferiors—seems to be deliberately emphasized. Darcy is, as soon as he appears in the book, stamped as insufferably proud; he considers it a disgrace to behave affably in such vulger assemblies as the Meryton ball, and does not deign to conceal his proud contempt. He obviously assumes his high social position is a mark of ' superiority of mind ' (57), and refuses to be on familiar terms with his inferiors. Similarly, or more extremely, haughty is his aunt Lady Catherine. On the reception of Elizabeth and the Lucases at Rosings Park, ' her air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank ' (162). She cannot for a moment bear the idea that she should be connected with attorneys or tradesmen, and that Pemberley—her nephew's estate—should receive visitors ' from city ' is for her its ' pollution ' (388). It is not, though, that Darcy and Lady Catherine are negligent of the responsibility which their status assigns to them; on the contrary, Darcy ' is the best landlord, and the best master . . . that ever lived ', as Mrs. Reynolds describes him (249), and Lady Catherine is ' a most active magistrate in her own parish ' (169). But their problem is that they put much more emphasis on and attach much more meaning to rank than is necessary or rational, a manifestation of which is their undue hauteur.

One notes, however, that in the novel's world such hauteur of the gentry is received very compliantly. When Darcy behaves proudly at the Meryton ball, we are told that everybody is offended; but, in fact, apart from capricious Mrs. Bennet, the character who is really offended at his hauteur is Elizabeth alone. The others' views are represented in Charlotte Lucas's words:

> ' 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, every thing in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a *right* to be proud.' (20)

Furthermore, Darcy's pride sometimes leads him to commit injurious acts, such as his separating of Bingley and Jane. In spite of his asserted motive of saving his friend from an imprudent match, it is essentially his conceited belief in his own superiority that induces him to dictate to Bingley—that is, it is really not for Bingley's sake, but for the gratification of his own self-esteem—and the resulting unhappiness for Jane and Bingley proves that it is no more than a very officious interference. Yet no one perceives the unjustness of this selfish imposition except Elizabeth. In the case of Lady Catherine, this dictatorial tendency is more outstanding: ' nothing was beneath this great Lady's attention, which could furnish her with an occasion of dictating to others ' (163). And, as in the case of Darcy, her instructions are often very officious; but she is ' not used to have her judgment controverted ' (163), and obsequious Mr. Collins being at its head, everybody is compliant with her, except again Elizabeth.

We can say, then, that in the novel's world society in general over-adheres to rank, just as it over-adheres to the rules of behaviour, with much of the restriction and inconvenience which are caused by it quite readily tolerated. And the spirit of such society is most clearly embodied in the people's attitude towards marriage. Marriage in those days, and especially among the upper classes, was certainly not only a matter of mutual affection, but also an important institution on which continuation of families depended. Yet in the world of the novel the case is extreme; the people so stick to social status that it becomes a matter of fact that marriages are made merely on the consideration of interest or gain, without any love or esteem. Thus Darcy, who has been conditioned by this climate, finds it ' due to the consequence he [is] wounding ' to convince Elizabeth that it is an exceptional condescension that he should offer his hand to a social inferior such as her (189). Later, when these two are finally united after many vicissitudes, Lady Catherine tries to break up their marriage in order to accomplish the ' planned union ' between Darcy and her own daughter (355)—a union purely based on the family interests. One may notice that such attitudes towards marriage are again comically exaggerated in Mr. Collins. He is

to marry Charlotte Lucas eventually, but he first attempts to choose his wife from among the five Miss Bennets as ' atonement ' (70), for he is to inherit their father's estate on account of the entailed interest he possesses. And according to ' his strictest notions of what was due to seniority ' (70), he selects first Jane, then Elizabeth (though his intention is frustrated in both cases). This impersonal selection of a wife is indeed symbolic of the prevailing atmosphere in the novel's world which gives priority to claims of society over any other.

Having examined the peculiar features of the society described in this novel, we might at this point consider the social circumstances from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, during which the novel was composed, in order to clarify these features' relevance to the actual society of the times. Generally speaking, English people in the eighteenth century were notorious for their easy-going indifference to manners and morals; but their tastes and behaviour began to change gradually during the second half of the century, and, as many historians elucidate, from the 1780s onward—especially after the outbreak of the French Revolution—England experienced a most thorough reformation of manners and morals.[3] The decade 1780–90 was marked by the appearance of various movements for moral reform, and, among the rest, the most outstanding were the activities of the Evangelicals, who eagerly joined in any scheme to further reformation of manners and revival of religion. And in the next decade these activities of the reformers flourished immensely, for the impact of the French Revolution greatly favoured them. For one thing, in the midst of the political agitation the general need for spiritual comfort brought many people to the church which they had long abandoned. For another thing, the strict conservative policy which was adopted by the English authorities for fear of contagion by French liberalism produced an ideal soil for the reformation; anti-Jacobinism was so widely and so successfully propagated as to make the people vigilant against any form of liberalism, including liberty of manners, and such a climate was very favourable for the spreading of the Evangelical teachings (sometimes the Evangelicals combined their teachings with political propaganda, such as Hannah

More's ' Cheap Repository Tracts '). Thus, under these circumstances people became stricter and stricter on the matter of manners and morals. Furthermore, owing to the continual activities of the Evangelicals and the prolonged war with France which reinforced the demand for a strict ethical system, the shift in national character that had started in the 1790s was accelerated after the turn of the century, and by the time Prince George took the regency, a new outlook on life permeated the population: very strict standards of conduct were now established. The over-formality in *Pride and Prejudice* is undoubtedly a reflection of this new-born rigid society in the early nineteenth century.

As regards the undue adherence to rank, one can easily associate it with the inflexible conservatism of those days that was brought about by the strong reaction against the French Revolution. The ruling classes were very anxious to maintain the *status quo*, and their wish was imposed throughout the country by their successful anti-liberalism propaganda, so that not only the landed élite but the people in general became more than ever mindful of the differentiation of status. Yet there was another context for the gentry's excessive adherence to their position: the rapid growth of the bourgeoisie. Owing to the remarkable progress of industry from the late eighteenth century, those who were engaged in trades and professions increased their wealth and raised their position at such an accelerated rate that upper classes were driven to hauteur, as it were, to defend their position. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, this defensive hauteur of the gentry grew strong enough to cause separation of circles between them and their inferiors, a good illustration of which can be seen in the two contrasting depictions of Bath society, one in *Northanger Abbey* and the other in *Persuasion*. As B. C. Southam points out, the Bath of the 1790s portrayed in *Northanger Abbey* is ' a social mixing-pot ', in which people of different ranks—from families of wealthy gentlemen to those of lawyers or obscure clergymen—assemble together in the Public Rooms; whereas in the Bath of the 1810s depicted in *Persuasion* the gentry confine their social intercourse to the narrow range of the upper classes.[4] This change in pattern of social intercourse was not restricted to Bath, but

was a nation-wide phenomenon. In *Pride and Prejudice* Darcy's proud detachment in the Meryton assembly suggests this new social atmosphere, and in his later confession that from his childhood he has been ' allowed, encouraged, almost taught . . . to care for none beyond [his] own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to *wish* at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with [his] own ' (369), we can perceive the uneasiness and defensiveness that were dominant emotions among the gentry in this period.

Pride and Prejudice was originally written during the years 1796–7 under the title of *First Impressions*, and was later revised, circa 1811–12; and now that the original version is lost, we cannot know exactly how the author revised it. In spite of this complicated history of composition, however, there is no obscurity as regards the period to which the novel's action belongs, for, as we have seen, the social features in this novel distinctly point to the time around 1810. Actually, one cannot fail to date them, since social circumstances in the 1810s had much altered from those in the 1790s. Indeed, when Jane Austen settled in Chawton Cottage and resumed novel writing, many customs that had been prevailing in her youth had disappeared. We know that in her teens her family enjoyed amateur theatricals, but thanks to the severe attacks of the Evangelicals, this innocent pastime was now seldom seen among decent people. This is of course only an instance, and so great were the changes in society that when in 1816 she intended the publication of *Northanger Abbey*, she was obliged to add the *Advertisment* to the novel in which she entreats the reader to remember ' that thirteen years have passed since it was finished, many more since it was begun, and that during that period, places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes '.[5] In preparing the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* during 1811–12, however, aware of the changes in society that had occured since it was first written in the late 1790s, she extensively revised the novel and deftly interwove a criticism of the new social circumstances.

To probe the author's critical intention, let us now return to Elizabeth and her solitary struggle. With her seemingly progressive ideas,

Elizabeth is apt to be regarded as representing ' modern ' personality;
in fact, however, her character—her value judgments and modes of
thought—is in many ways tied to the eighteenth century. And what is
important is that her eighteenth-century attitudes are on the whole
incompatible with the new modes of the nineteenth century. She in-
sists on marriage for love, for instance, and, as Lawrence Stone eluci-
dates, such romantic attitudes towards marriage were quite prevalent in
the last quarter of the eighteenth century;[6] yet this principle of hers
is rather unorthodox in a society in which marriages tend to be made
only in view of social considerations. And also indicative of the eigh-
teenth century is her sarcastic humour. As I have suggested at the
outset, she is outstanding in her witty satirical laughter, and wit and
satire were indeed dominant features of eighteenth-century literature—
one may note an affinity between her specification of the objects of her
ridicule (57) and Henry Fielding's definition of the ' Source of the true
Ridiculous ' in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*.[7] Even Hannah More,
one the leading Evangelicals of the times, started her career as a witty
writer in the 1770s. But later she forsook her humour and devoted
herself to serious moral writings, and this change in Hannah More is
symbolic of the change of social character in this period: wit and satire
came to be suppressed in the growing inclination for seriousness.

Yet a more important aspect of Elizabeth that is associated with the
eighteenth century is her balanced attitude, respecting the demands of
both society and the individual equally. In his ' *Pride and Prejudice
in the Eighteenth-Century Mode* ', Samuel Kliger argues that through-
out the eighteenth century such parallel antitheses as art versus nature,
reason versus feeling, and rules versus originality, were commonly em-
ployed in aesthetic and ethical debate, and the ' rationalistic temper of
the period required that exellence be found in a mean between two
extremes '.[8] The art-nature antithesis can be extended, as Kliger sug-
gests, to the more general opposition between society and the individual,
and the need for compromise and adjustment between the demands of
both sides was emphasized in eighteenth-century society. Kliger's sug-
gestion that this eighteenth-century mode occupies an important part in

Pride and Prejudice is certainly approvable, but there is one aspect of his argument—and that of many others' who have followed Kliger—which is difficult to accept, namely that Elizabeth is stamped as a representative of only one pole of the art-nature antithesis. If she is absolutely on the side of ' nature ' and antipathetic to all ' arts '—that is, all the man-made rules and systems—how does one account for her frequent efforts to conform herself to the rules of behaviour? When she is unexpectedly informed of Charlotte's engagement with Mr. Collins, for example, she is so astonished ' as to overcome at first the bounds of decorum ', but soon ' recollect[s] herself . . . making a strong effort to it ' (124–5). If she ' possesses the illusion of total freedom ', and is ' contemptuous of all conventions that constrict the individual's freedom ', as A. Walton Litz puts it,[9] why does not she in this scene go on venting her contemptuous surprise which is her natural emotion, instead of trying to suppress it in compliance with the rules of decorum? True, she sometimes breaks the rules of propriety intentionally, such as her walk to Netherfield; but on such occasions she has valid reasons, and she never infringes the conventions indiscriminately. She possesses the true eighteenth-century spirit of esteeming the happy mean, and the reason why she appears to be a conspicuous non-conformist is that all those around her are too rigid in their conformity to the forms of society.

At one point Elizabeth complains to Jane: ' " There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it " ' (135). Being a child of the age of reason, she cannot harmonize herself with the new atmosphere of a society which puts such undue stress on forms—whether forms for social intercourse or forms for social organization—as to oppress individuality to the extreme, and so she fights a solitary battle with the irrationality that encompasses her, with her wit as a weapon. Her attitude is indeed defiant: when she notices that Darcy's eyes are frequently fixed on her, she reasons thus:

> She could only imagine . . . that she drew his notice because there

was a something about her more wrong and reprehensible, accord-
ing to his ideas of right, than in any other person present. The
supposition did not pain her. She liked him too little to care for
his approbation. (51)

She is contemptuous of the undue adherence to the rules of propriety
which is current around her, and definitely refuses to adjust herself to
such irrationality. Similarly, she is sick of the excessive sticking to rank.
When she and the Lucases make their first appearance at Rosings Park,
in contrast to the latter who are inspired with extreme awe by Lady
Catherine, Elizabeth tries to dispel from herself any undue reverence
for her:

> She had heard nothing of Lady Catherine that spoke her awful
> from any extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue, and the mere
> stateliness of money and rank, she thought she could witness with-
> out trepidation. (161)

And later in the conversation Elizabeth contends with Lady Catherine
about a trivial matter, and is half proud of herself ' to be the first crea-
ture who had ever dared to trifle with ' this great Lady (166).

It may be natural that this challenging attitude should invite criticism,
and actually Elizabeth's manners are often condemned as ' impertinent '
(she herself owns her impertinence). And it is worth noting that she
incurs the displeasure not only of the characters in the book but also
of the contemporary reader. Thus Mary Russell Mitford in her letter
written in 1814:

> The want of elegance is almost the only want in Miss Austen....
> it is impossible not to feel in every line of *Pride and Prejudice*, in
> every word of ' Elizabeth,' the entire want of taste which could
> produce so pert, so worldly a heroine as the beloved of such a man
> an Darcy.[10]

As a fellow author Mary Mitford highly valued Jane Austen's skill as a

novelist (she does declare her preference of Jane Austen to Maria Edgeworth); but she was too much imbued with the new prudish principles of the age to admit Elizabeth's old rationality, and her response represented, we can assume, the dominant opinion of this period.

But if she was thus surrounded by enemies, Elizabeth had at least one strong supporter: the author. Born in 1775, Jane Austen grew up in the rational spirit of the eighteenth century, and Elizabeth is in a sense a spokesman of the novelist who was doubtless perplexed at the new social climate after the turn of the century. Nevertheless, the author's real purpose in the book is not merely to expose the irrationality of the new trend through Elizabeth. One will readily admit that Elizabeth is by no means perfect; on the contrary, she has her own faults—or, at least she does make mistakes—and this negative aspect of Elizabeth may require further consideration.

Of Elizabeth's faults, probably it is her over-confidence in herself that first catches the attention of the reader. She certainly has neither the humility of Catherine Morland nor the self-scrutiny of Fanny Price, and her over-confidence in her own judgment sometimes leads her to glaring errors, such as her mis-perception of Wickham's character. She is indeed so hasty in judgment as to determine Wickham's goodness at the first meeting, without sufficient data. We should be careful on our part, however, not to hastily ascribe her misinterpretation there to her over-confidence in judgment alone, because, as several critics point out, her partiality to Wickham is deeply connected with her dislike of Darcy.[11]   One notes that at his first appearance in the book Wickham presents exactly the opposite traits to those of Darcy in demeanour: Darcy is very formal and cold in manners, Wickham is easy and warm; Darcy varies his attitude towards others according to their rank, Wickham is invariably amicable to everybody. And since she has a pet aversion to Darcy who thus behaves himself with too much stress on social values, she is very favourably impressed by Wickham on the rebound who appears to her to value the intrinsic worth of the individual, without any unnecessary adherence to social values. Evidently, then, the direct cause of her mis-perception of Wickham's character is her strong

antipathy for Darcy, or rather, for the irrational tendencies in the society in general of which he is a representative; she believes that those who unduly stick to social forms must be ' devoid of every proper feeling ' (368), and this belief is so strong that she jumps to a hasty conclusion that those who do not attach themselves to forms must have every virtue.

But if it were merely that Elizabeth is favourably impressed by Wickham, her error might be comparatively small; yet in the succeeding interactions with him she falls into more serious confusions of judgment. Wickham is indeed indifferent to forms, but his indifference is in fact not a judicious indifference, as Elizabeth expects, but a careless and thoughtless indifference. He is presumptuous in manners and insincere in professions; he readily reveals past private affairs in his benefactor's household to a stranger, and would not mind even disgracing it in public. Originally loose in morals, he is rather indiscriminate in infringing the rules of behaviour. So, even if she could not know his real character, Elizabeth should at least have noticed this dangerous tendency that is openly presented before her, but her wish to believe in his goodness makes her blind to all this. Furthermore, she even attempts to vindicate his most glaring misconduct. He is at first markedly attentive to Elizabeth, but when he hears that a Miss King has acquired 10,000 pounds, he suddenly discards Elizabeth to woo this lady. Far from being offended at this evident mercenariness, however, Elizabeth tries to justify his conduct: to her aunt who mildly censures him for his ' indelicacy ', Elizabeth retorts: ' "A man in distressed circumstances has not time for all those elegant decorums which other people may observe "' (153). Here she utterly confuses the flexible attitude towards the rules of behaviour with the disregard of them; her opinion has been that one should not unduly adhere to forms, but her too strong hatred of the inflexible adherents disorders her judgment and causes her to incline to anarchism. An antipathy for undue adherence to forms has been turned unawares in her to an antipathy for forms themselves.[12]

In a similar way, her excessive antipathy for undue adherence to rank makes Elizabeth blind to the *raison d'être* of rank in society. Her belief

that one's rank has nothing to do with one's intrinsic worth is certainly reasonable, but her hate of irrelevant sticking to rank goes so far that she grows disgusted with the existence of rank itself and becomes quite insensible to what a rank stands for in terms of social organization. The division of status was, it is true, apt to be regarded as a classification of men, but this by no means annulled its essential aspect—the distribution of social roles: one's rank was indeed an emblem of one's role in society. Naturally, the higher one's rank, the greater one's social responsibility was, and those in a privileged position who did not need to earn a living—the landowners—were especially under the heavy obligation of public service. G. E. Mingay states that on the whole the English gentry had a strong sense of responsibility, fulfilling ' their role as keepers of the peace, unpaid civil administrators, promoters of the public good and benefactors of the poor and unfortunate ',[13] and, haughty as they are, Darcy and Lady Catherine can certainly be counted among the responsible gentry. Yet Elizabeth is unmindful of all this; she is rather indifferent to Lady Catherine's public activities, which she witnesses during her stay at Hunsford (169), and determines the badness of Darcy's character solely due to his hauteur, without any reference to the social aspect that lies behind his high rank.

Thus Elizabeth, with her excessive antipathy for the over-adherence to social forms, loses her balance and inclines to an anarchic attitude. But her over-reaction is checked before it goes too far: Darcy's letter awakens her to the impropriety which has often manifested itself in Wickham's conduct, and her visit to Pemberley helps her to become aware of the social responsibility that is attached to Darcy's rank. As a result of this realisation, she can now begin to shake off her undue hatred of forms themselves. In the course of her recovery, though, she has to experience bitter humiliation. ' " Till this moment, I never knew myself " ', cries she after the perusal of Darcy's letter (208); she must now admit that she has totally lost sight of herself. Indeed, her mental isolation has driven her to a series of self-delusions. When she is forced to fight a solitary battle with the world, she apparently presents no gloomy image of a lonely fighter like Marianne Dashwood, because she

tries to assume the role of a detached satirist. In reality, however, she cannot achieve that detachment; behind her ridicule lies a bitter feeling that her own views, which she believes to be right, are not accepted, and in spite of her seemingly courageous attitude in setting at nought the opinion of the world, she has a deep-seated desire for approbation. And this mentality promotes her blindness. Her depreciation of Darcy and prizing of Wickham is a sort of demonstration to convince others of their wrongness and her rightness, but her impatient and exasperated mind causes confusion in her judgment; she condemns any adherence and applauds any indifference to forms indiscriminately, and when she comes to herself, she realises that she has far diverged from her usual self. She deplores her thoughtless impetuosity, and certainly she is blamable; at the same time, however, there is much to sympathize with in her solitary struggle.

Concerning this solitary struggle of Elizabeth and its consequent effect on her mentality, I think it is worth referring here to a book by Muriel Jaeger called *Before Victoria*.[14] As we have already seen, English social life underwent a radical change from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, and based on the ample evidence found in individual life-stories Jaeger suggests that the abrupt change of social character caused confusion of mind in many people; they were ' caught ', says she, ' between the standards, morals and tastes of the Age of Reason and those of the Victorian Age ' (122). In the chapter entitled 'A Schizoid Society ', she elucidates, taking the example of Caroline Lamb who was notorious for her scandalous love affair with Byron, how those ' caught ' people were driven to desperation as a result of emotional struggle, and notes that the Regency period (1811–20) witnessed remarkable prevalence of libertinism—the multiplication of scandals, the ubiquity of ruined gamblers, the increase of duels, the craze for prize-fighting, and so on—as if ' eighteenth-century freedom and tolerance had worked itself up into a frenzy of perversity and dissipation ' (75). Contemporary observers seem to have been much perplexed at their society, in which licentiousness thus grew in the midst of the vast improvement of manners and morals, and Jaeger quotes

Hannah More, who wrote in 1818: ' It appears to me that the two classes of character are more decided than they were; the wicked seem more wicked, and the good, better ' (76). The people were polarized into the good and the bad in consequence of the new rigidity of social life.

It may be obvious now that Jane Austen delineated Elizabeth Bennet in view of the general social circumstances of the times. Although Elizabeth recovers herself before going too far, the way in which she is gradually losing herself and inclining to an anarchic attitude owing to her emotional revolt against society is indeed suggestive of the fate of a number of the unsteady minds in this period that were caught between the old style and the new. For those who had deeply committed themselves to the eighteenth-century freedom and rationality, the rapidly formalizing social life after the turn of the century was hard—even impossible—to be reconciled to, and when they found themselves isolated in society, they resorted to desperate acts. Jane Austen was of course well aware of the importance of forms as maintainers of social order, but she also knew that too much formalization—especially when it happened suddenly—would incur revolt and eventually produce a consequence which was the exact opposite of the intention of those who furthered it: that is, loss of orderliness instead of its advancement. Hannah More might wonder why licentiousness prevailed in spite of the immense progress of reformation of manners and morals, but it was clear to the shrewd observer that it was precisely this sudden crystallization of manners and morals that caused the swelling of recklessness (incidentally, in her letter to Cassandra written in 1809 Jane Austen professes her dislike of the Evangelicals).[15] It is interesting, therefore, that Elizabeth should finally achieve happiness by marrying Darcy, who has discarded his undue adherence to social forms; if Darcy represents society and Elizabeth the ' caught ' people in this period, Darcy's conversion means the normalization of society, and Elizabeth's marriage with him suggests the reconciliation of the isolated minds to their society. That is, this *dénouement* indicates the course that the author wished her society to take, and their harmonious married life in Pemberley is a symbolic

picture of a society in which order is restored. It seems, however, that Jane Austen felt this ending rather too optimistic; in her next work, *Mansfield Park*, she was again to deal with the same problem as was taken up in *Pride and Prejudice*, but this time she became far more serious and severe in expressing a warning to her society.

Acknowledgment

NOTES

1) All references to *Pride and Prejudice* are included in the text and are taken from *The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol. II, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1932).

2) For an excellent discussion of the rigid formality in the novel's world, see Tony Tanner, Introduction, *Pride and Prejudice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 34–46. As regards the rules of propriety in this novel, see also Jane Nardin's examination in *Those Elegant Decorums: The Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen's Novels* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1973) 47–61.

3) Among the rest, I am particularly indebted to Maurice J. Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude: A History of English Manners 1700–1830* (1941; rpt. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1956), for my argument on the shift in national character in this period.

4) B. C. Southam, ' *Sanditon:* The Seventh Novel', in *Jane Austen's Achievement*, ed. Juliet McMaster (London: Macmillan, 1976) 4–5.

5) *The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol. V, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1933) 12.

6) Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London: Harper & Row, 1977) 282–7.

7) *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed. Douglas Brooks (London: Oxford UP, 1970) 6.

8) Samuel Kliger, ' *Pride and Prejudice* in the Eighteenth-Century Mode ', *U of Toronto Quarterly* 16 (1947): 357–71; rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Pride and Prejudice: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Rubinstein (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969) 46–58; the quotation is found in p. 46.

9) A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965) 104–5; others who regard Elizabeth as

representing one pole of the antithesis are E. Rubinstein, ' Jane Austen's Novels: The Metaphor of Rank ', in *Literary Monographs*, vol. II, ed. Eric Rothstein and Richard N. Ringler (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1969) 121–33; Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971) 116–43. On the other hand, the only critic that points out Elizabeth's balanced view is Jane Nardin (160).

10) *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968) 54.

11) See, for example, Duckworth 120; Jane Nardin 58–9.

12) Jane Nardin (59–60) discusses this shift in Elizabeth's view of the rules of behaviour in terms of moral rules and fashionable rules.

13) G. E. Mingay, *The Gentry* (London: Longman, 1976) 163.

14) Muriel Jaeger, *Before Victoria: Changing Standards and Behaviour 1787– 1837* (1956; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967); all references to the book are taken from this edition and are included in the text.

15) *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (1952; rpt. London: Oxford UP, 1959) 256.