

“We Neither of Us Perform to Strangers”: The Revealed and Resolved Misunderstanding

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ABSTRACT

In her renowned novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen employs different kinds of arts to reveal the personality of certain characters and to advance the plot. Specifically, Jane Austen first uses piano-playing to introduce Elizabeth and Darcy’s misunderstanding, and then she uses decorative arts to advance the process of how the two characters come to know each other. This essay sets out to examine Jane Austen’s use of the arts through various details from the novel.

Keywords: *Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, Arts*

1. INTRODUCTION

Arts such as performance arts and fine arts played important roles in Jane Austen’s novels. As in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne’s discussion with Edward Ferrars about picturesque beauty reflects her ideas about romanticism. To understand the underlying messages in Jane Austen’s novels, it is inevitable that the employment of such elements, in this case the arts, is analyzed. Thus, this essay sets out to explore how arts like decorative arts and performance arts are employed specifically in Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

2. ANALYSIS

In *Pride and Prejudice*, certain scenes are centered around piano, a kind of performance art, and the decorations within Pemberly. Overall, the arts are used both to reveal the characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, and to advance the plot of how they came to know each other better in the novel.

Throughout the novel, two marriage proposals were made by Darcy to Elizabeth, with the first one rejected. It is not until the rejection that both characters began to be fully aware of their views about each other, and be actively engaged in their transformation. However, earlier in a dialogue between them about piano performance at Rosings, an implication about their misunderstanding towards each other was already made, foreshadowing the failure of Darcy’s first proposal.

While Elizabeth was playing the piano at the request of Colonel Fitzwilliam at Rosings, Darcy, probably out

of curiosity or jealousy, joined them. They started a conversation about “why a man of sense and education (like Darcy), and who has lived in the world, is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers”[1]. During the conversation, Darcy defended his refusal to dance while many young ladies awaited his invitation at the assembly ball by saying he “certainly does not have the talent which some people possess” of conversing easily with strangers[2]. In response to his defense, Elizabeth replied indirectly:

“My fingers,” said Elizabeth, “do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women’s do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault —because I would not take the trouble of practising. It is not that I do not believe my fingers as capable as any other woman’s of superior execution.”

Darcy smiled and said, “You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you, can think any thing wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers.” [3]

Elizabeth’s response implied that Darcy’s lack of “the talent” was an excuse for his pride, which was described in Colonel Fitzwilliam’s words as not giving “himself the trouble”[4]. Nevertheless, Darcy took Elizabeth’s remark at the face value, and responded by hinting at a commonness between their characters through both meanings of the word “perform”. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, “perform” can mean “to present to an audi-

ence” and “to entertain an audience”[5]. In this circumstance, “perform” is used both in the meaning of presenting a musical piece through piano playing, which is what Elizabeth meant at the face value, and in that of acting by the other’s will to please them or showing off before them. The latter usage in Darcy’s words refers to an independence of mind, which he recognized on Elizabeth. This characteristic distinguishes her from such characters as Mary Bennet and Miss Bingley. Mary Bennet “was always impatient for display”[6] due to her desire to show off her “accomplishments”[7]. Miss Bingley ceaselessly echoed what Darcy said and did, wishing to please him. She once picked up the second volume of Darcy’s book to read but was focused on “watching Mr.Darcy’s progress through his book”[8] instead of reading her own.

A moment in which Elizabeth demonstrates her independence of mind can be seen when she showed up in Netherfield “with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise”[9] due to the three miles walk. This scene justifies Elizabeth’s independence by describing her improper appearance in front of an unacquainted crowd, proving her indifference to both the judgement of others and established expectations for woman. Meanwhile, Elizabeth’s concern for her sister is also manifested, since her acknowledgement of Jane’s illness contributed to this scene. These two qualities are where Darcy finds identification with Elizabeth, paving the way for his first proposal.

There are two major reasons that contributed to Darcy’s misinterpretation of Elizabeth’s meaning. One important factor is Lady Catherine’s indirect criticism of Elizabeth’s piano skills, demonstrated in her suggestion for Elizabeth to practice more on “the pianoforte in Mrs. Jenkinson’s room”[10]. “A little ashamed of his aunt’s ill-breeding”[11], Darcy’s praise on both Elizabeth’s piano skill and character might be his attempt to compensate for the insult. Simultaneously, Darcy’s unconsciousness of Elizabeth’s prejudice on him is also a main factor since he disregarded Elizabeth’s criticism unintentionally. As a result, the misapprehension foreshadows Elizabeth’s rejection of the proposal, allowing this conversation about piano playing to advance the plot of how both characters began to know their true opinion about each other.

After the first proposal befell, Elizabeth and Darcy were both forced to face their respective prejudice and pride. Darcy was “tortured”[12] by the painful recollection of his words, his conduct, his manners, and his expressions during the whole of his proposal after he was confronted with Elizabeth’s “reproof”[13] of “had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner”[14]. In response, he felt determined to change himself, and such transformation can be expected in Darcy’s accidental meeting with Elizabeth in Pemberley.

On Elizabeth’s side, she gave two reasons for turning down the first marriage proposal. The first was Darcy’s act of separating her sister from Mr.Bingley, and the second was his responsibility for Wickham’s misfortunes. Nevertheless, both reasons were retorted by Darcy in his letter, which lessen Elizabeth’s prejudice and reveals her blindness, as exclaimed in her words “till the moment I never knew myself”[15]. To justify his act, Darcy pointed out both Jane’s indifference to Mr.Bingley and the lack of propriety acted out by the Bennets. With his words in mind, Elizabeth was able to perceive acts she was unconscious of being improper earlier, especially when she sees how her mother and younger sisters lament over the regiment’s leave, unable to eat, drink, or sleep, she felt anew “the justice of Mr.Darcy’s objections” [16].

Similarly, as to Wickham’s misfortunes, Darcy listed the wrongdoings of Wickham in his letter, causing Elizabeth to realize her inattention to the untruthfulness of Wickham’s words. In Darcy’s letter, he unveiled Wickham’s “life of idleness and dissipation”[17] under the pretense of studying law and his act of seducing Georgiana under the avarice for her fortune. After a cautious recollection of Wickham’s words, Elizabeth realized that “she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd”[18]. Therefore, the reexamination brought by Darcy’s letter acts an important role in desalinating Elizabeth’s prejudice toward him while her rejection caused a transformation in his attitude toward her lower social connection simultaneously.

Further elimination in the pride and prejudice of both characters is depicted within the setting of Pemberley. While Elizabeth was visiting Pemberley with her aunt and uncle, a different perspective of Darcy was rendered to her with the help of Mrs.Reynolds and the Pemberley House itself. It is described that the interior decoration of Pemberley “was neither gaudy nor uselessly fine; with less of splendor and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings”[19]. In the meantime, the exterior of the house possesses “natural beauty”[20] very little counteracted by an awkward taste, which caused Elizabeth’s exclamation of “to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!”[21] This modest manner of Pemberley distinguishes it from the extravagant Rosings, where “the chimney-piece alone had cost eight hundred pounds”[22]. Such taste exhibited by Pemberley’s decoration reflects aspects of its owner in terms of taste and personality, so it played a vital role in changing Elizabeth’s opinion of Darcy.

A detail that demonstrates Darcy’s tolerance through the decorative arts is the presence of Wickham’s portrait, which still suspends “amongst several other miniatures”[23] after the shameful events listed in Darcy’s letter. This side of him contradicts Wickham’s description of the resentful Darcy, who harbors a dislike for Wickham that can be “attribute in some measure to jeal-

ousy”[24]. At the same time, considering Darcy’s father’s affection for Wickham, this act is also a demonstration of Darcy’s respect towards his father, which contradicts Wickham’s assertions about how Darcy disobeyed his father’s will. Added to the former commendation and decorations of Pemberley, these factors enabled Elizabeth to see Darcy from a different angle and become more sensitive to his merits instead of pride.

On the other hand, when speaking about Mr. Darcy in front of the three guests, Mrs. Reynolds poured out all possible praises of Mr. Darcy, leading Elizabeth to exclaim:

There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth’s mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original that she had ever felt at the height of their acquaintance. The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people’s happiness were in his guardianship! [25]

Supported by the “civil” and “respectable”[26] look of Mrs. Reynolds, this realization contradicts entirely with Elizabeth’s former belief, resulting in her reflection amidst all the astonishments.

However, after the thought of her being the mistress of Pemberley, Elizabeth quickly recollected herself with the realization that her aunt and uncle “would have been lost”[27] to her and that she “should not have been allowed to invite them”[28] due to Darcy’s pride. Being the essential cause of Elizabeth’s prejudice, Darcy’s indifference towards people inferior to him kept Elizabeth from entirely changing her opinion, even after sighting Pemberley’s decorations.

Nevertheless, this on Darcy has also been changed after he was rejected on the first marriage proposal. When accidentally meeting Elizabeth, her aunt, and her uncle at Pemberley, Darcy greets them with a fire-new attitude. Expecting Darcy to decamp upon being introduced to her companions due to the inferiority of their occupation, Elizabeth was surprised by Darcy’s act of entering into a conversation with Mr. Gardiner. Darcy’s act of inviting Mr. Gardiner to fish “with the greatest civility”[29] is evidence of his respectful attitude towards people who he previously would have despised and not even bothered to speak a word to. Consequently, the primary cause of Elizabeth’s prejudice was removed under her eyes, causing the change in her opinion and attitude towards Darcy after her understanding of the authenticity of Darcy’s words and nobility of his character.

In conclusion, the arts revealed certain traits and advanced in plot in *Pride and Prejudice*, making it a pivotal element of the entire novel.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though a limited amount, several scholarly paper focused on the topic of Jane Austen and musical elements within her works.

These essays mainly focus on how music is a signifier of wealth and status, or in other words has strong association with marriage and money. This is not surprising, since class and social status are two themes that show up in Jane Austen’s work consistently. They are also the integral part of young women’s lives, as depicted by the author in a rather sarcastic tone.

Some scholars studied this phenomenon in depth. For example, in their essay *Music and Class in Jane Austen*, Gillian Dooley, Kirstine Moffat, and John Wiltshire argued that “musical taste and ability can indicate hierarchies and boundaries, contributing to the subtle class judgments characters form about each other”[30]. They analyzed how music associates with class through *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion*, and *Emma*, giving out a holistic view.

Many might have more questions about music’s role. Is music simply a symbol of class and social status? Why music plays a special role in the life of these women rather than men? Isn’t music also associated with character and personal expression?

Some researchers took the discussion further. In the realm of Chinese scholars, Huajuan Jiang, in her work *Musical Elements in Jane Austen’s Works and Their Narrative Functions*, analyzed several possible purposes music may serve: indication of talent, amusement, establishment of marital relationships, and means for initiating social life.[31] This is particularly true if the readers could take a closer look at the female characters in Jane Austen’s work. In Jane Austen’s novels, those who could play piano well are generally lovely characters of comfortable homes, and their music skills make them a more charming candidate for marriage and admirable role model for other young ladies.

It is to these background knowledges that this paper stands upon. The multiple meanings behind a single kind of art, in this case music, is what granted it the ability to reveal certain traits of a character and advance the plot of a novel.

On the other hand, some works also extends on the topic discussed in this paper. Melina Moe, in her essay *Charlotte and Elizabeth: Multiple Modernities in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice*, complicates and expands on Elizabeth’s personality by arguing that the relationship between Charlotte and Elizabeth is to be viewed as “an agonistic exchange that produces multiple forms of female subjectivity”[32]. Such opinion undermines the popular notion of Charlotte and Elizabeth being symbols of oppression and liberation in terms of marital relationships. It is mentioned in this paper that

Elizabeth's independence of mind is what attracted Darcy. Through this set of mind, people often regard Charlotte as the opposite of Elizabeth, given their contrasting views on marital issues. Nonetheless, the essay written by Melina Moe undermined such simple duality, showing how certain details within one novel is worth discussing over a length of time.

We could also apply the same analysis to other elements in Jane Austen's work, such as paintings, food, clothes, transportation modes etc. Future studies on these characteristics of life in English in Jane Austen's time could shed light on how the author's talent as a novelist.

There was little information available regarding the music and artistic education that Jane Austen received. It would be interesting to associate the novel with the author's real life experience. It will help us deepen our understanding of the role music played in her time.

4. CONCLUSION

Jane Austen, overall, introduced the misunderstanding caused by prejudice in Elizabeth and pride in Darcy through the art of piano-playing and then described the process of how both characters come to know each other, assisted by the use of decorative arts, consummating her narration on the love story between Darcy and Elizabeth. It is now apparent on how the arts played a part in *Pride and Prejudice*, decoding yet another section of Jane Austen's meticulous arrangement within her works. Further studies on the employment of the arts by Jane Austen in other novels may reveal similarly diverse effects.

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