Liberals, Conservatives, and Pride and Prejudice Part 2: Crash Course Literature 412

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi, I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course Literature. Today we're going to continue our discussion of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a book that reads like it was written by your funny and mean best friend, who also happens to be a brilliant novelist and a pretty interesting moral philosopher.

I mean, I love my best friend, but I *really* wish Jane Austen was my best friend. (Although due to our linear experience of time I suppose that's impossible. And also, let's face it, she wouldn't have been that into me.)

So last time, we talked about the political and historical context of the novel, and how to choose between your personal fulfillment and the good of your family. Today, we're going to look at whether the book is an endorsement of materialism, or a rejection of it. We'll also look at the politics of the novel itself - whether it's liberal or conservative in its outlook, and we'll enjoy some sexy, sexy landscape description. But first, let's consider the epistemological problems of the book. Because here at Crash Course, we know how to party. And also, we just learned the meaning of the word epistemological.

[Intro Music]

Okay, so epistemology is the study of knowledge - it's knowing how we know, and what it means to know. And knowledge is a real problem in *Pride and Prejudice* - much of the plot hinges on what people know and when they know it, and how they know they can be sure of their knowledge.

I mean, you have to remember, this is Regency England. If you like someone, you can't, like, immediately Google them or Snapchat them, or, I have no idea what young people do. Compared to today's young people, I basically grew up in Regency England.

So at the beginning of the novel, when Jane and Mr. Bingley meet, Jane has no way to let him know that she likes him. She can't just, like, swipe right - or left. I really, I don't know. I don't know any of this stuff. I'm trying to sound young, and hip, and relatable, and I should just give up because I am one year younger than Jane Austen was when she died. I'm sorry, what were we talking about?

Right. Jane has no way of letting Mr. Bingley know she likes him, and she also has no way of discovering just how available he is. Characters have to rely on gossip, and subtle inquiries - sometimes in the form of letters - and what they can see with their own eyes.

But Austen is skeptical about whether you even can trust the evidence of your own eyes. I mean, when Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy see each other for the first time, they hate each other. And months go by before they learn enough about each other to readjust those initial impressions. Mr. Darcy's pride flourishes because he doesn't know or understand the people around him, and the same goes for Elizabeth's prejudice.

And in addition to constantly reminding us how little we know of other people, Austen also investigates how little we know about ourselves. Elizabeth is the character that most of us will identify with in this novel. Austen wrote in a letter, "I think her as delightful a character as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least, I do not know."

But even the exceptionally clever and relatable Elizabeth has to admit that she has been mistaken in most of her beliefs, particularly ones about herself. Once she learns the truth of the bad feelings between Darcy and Wickham, for instance, she has to acknowledge her own prejudices and even says, "'til this moment, I never new myself."

And one of the most fascinating things that Austen does in this book is to put the reader into that place of not knowing. Like, take the scene in which Elizabeth watches Wickham, whom she likes, and Mr. Darcy, whom she despises, run into each other. At this point, she believes that Mr. Darcy has cheated Wickham of his inheritance, but when she sees them, she doesn't know what to believe. "Elizabeth happening to see the countenance of both as they looked at each other, was all astonishment at the effect of the meeting. Both changed colour, one looked white, the other red. Mr. Wickham after a few moments, touched his hat - a salutation which Mr. Darcy just deigned to return. What could be the meaning of it?"

I mean, not only do we not know why one turned white and one turned red, we don't even know who turned which color. Now, Elizabeth presumably knows, but by calling attention to what we as readers don't know, Austen is also reminding us of all that Elizabeth doesn't know, just how often she has to wonder, what could be the meaning of it?

And speaking of meaning, Pride and Prejudice spends a lot of time examining the meaning of money. Austen lets us know how much everyone has, where it comes from, how much they stand to inherit, and so on. Let's check everyone's accounts in the Thought Bubble.

Mr. Bennet has 2,000 pounds per year, which just about puts him into the upper-middle class, but because his estate is entailed and will be inherited by the nearest male relative when he and his wife die, his daughters will only have a share of what their mother brought into the marriage. Each daughter stands to inherit about forty pounds a year. It's hard to estimate how much this is in today's money; it could be as little as a few thousand dollars, though, so definitely not enough to live comfortably.

Mr. Bingley has at least 5,000 pounds per year, which is very nice, but Darcy has at least double that every year from rents on his land. He might make even more than that from the interest on his investments, so it's safe to think of him as kind of a multimillionaire. His sister, Georgiana, has an inheritance of 30,000 pounds, so even assuming a conservative investment, she'll be fine.

Wickham inherited 1,000 pounds from Mr. Darcy's father, and then Mr. Darcy gave him 3,000 more when Wickham decided to quit the clergy. But he spent it all, so he'll need to marry rich. Obviously Lydia isn't rich, but between paying his debts and buying his commission, Mr. Darcy gives Mr. Wickham another 1,500 pounds. Plus, he may have given him 10,000 more pounds in order to convince him to marry Lydia and avoid scandal.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So the real question here is whether the amount of money someone has indicates moral worth, which may seem like an answered question in 21st Century Investment Banker America, but in 19th Century England, things were a little different. For instance, Darcy is certainly richer than Wickham, and he's also morally superior.

But there are a couple places in the novel that indicate that money definitely isn't everything. Like, Mr. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine, has plenty of money, but that doesn't stop her from being portrayed as a killjoy and a snob. And Austen satirizes her materialism to great effect, like the way Lady Catherine pays attention to how nice people's carriages are, or how Mr. Collins fawns over Lady Catherine and her daughter just because they're rich. But Austen also satirizes materialism in people who have much less money, like Wickham with his debts. And the book is pretty hard on Lydia, too, who can't afford to buy lunch for her sisters because she spent all of her money on a disgusting hat, saying, "look here, I have bought this bonnet. I do not think it is very pretty; but I thought I might as well buy it as not." Here, Austen seems to be suggesting

that how you spend money probably matters as much, or more, as how much of it you have.

Quick side-note: the growing industrialization of England meant that more artifacts were available to the average person, and when I say artifacts, I mean everything from, you know, pots and pans to clothing. Even a generation or two before, the middle class had been vastly smaller, and there weren't as many, like, materials to be materialistic about. So almost all people, almost all of the time, would've been buying lunch rather than buying bonnets. Maybe, then, money can actually chip away at personal happiness and moral character, but again, not exactly.

The book is way too nuanced for that. Austen doesn't come out and say that you should marry for money, but the novel does seem to endorse the idea that the characters who acquire the most money do end up being the happiest. I think it's clearly implied that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are going to live happily ever after, and so will Jane and Mr. Bingley. Charlotte and Mr. Collins are only a little happy, because Mr. Collins is almost as horrible as Mary, but they'll probably be happier once Mr. Collins inherits. And it doesn't seem like Lydia and Wickham, who have the least, will be very happy at all. They don't even like each other by the time the book ends, and it's only Mr. Darcy's money that saved Lydia from total disgrace.

And also, we need to remember how and why Elizabeth falls in love with Mr. Darcy. Part of it is the letter he sends her, and part of it has to do with how he rescues her sister, but a lot of it has to do with his estate, Pemberley. When Elizabeth first sees Pemberley, we get a rare passage of description in the book. "It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; - and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance...and at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!" Now, obviously, this is a stand-in for Mr. Darcy himself, who is also large and handsome and not artificial, but it's the revelation of this beautiful estate that really wins Elizabeth's heart, which suggests that Pemberley is not only a metaphor for Darcy, Darcy is also a metaphor for Pemberley.

Now it's easy to argue that this is a conservative book: everyone gets married in the end; Elizabeth gets to be both happy and rich; Mr. Darcy, an authoritarian figure who holds power over a lot of people, turns out to be the hero; and Wickham, the upstart who comes from the servant class, is the villain. So the established social hierarchy gets reaffirmed in terms of class, but also in terms of gender. Like, Elizabeth, who seemed so free-thinking and independent-minded is rewarded with marriage to a wealthy aristocrat who said that her looks were tolerable.

But on the other hand, you could argue that the book is a lot more radical than that. Yes, Mr. Darcy makes Elizabeth happy, but arguing for her own individual happiness is a really progressive stance. Like, when Lady Catherine tries to get Elizabeth to say that she'll never marry Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth replies, "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness." *My own* opinion, *my* happiness - maybe that doesn't sound revolutionary, but I think it is. I mean, this book was written in a time when individual happiness was not privileged over family status and security.

And that was especially true for the individual happiness of women. So Elizabeth saying that she would only act in a manner that would constitute her happiness is a claiming of full personhood, with certain inalienable rights, including liberty and the pursuit of happiness. She's saying not only that her opinion matters, but that she gets to make the final decision in what she does independent of what her family wants for her, which was another radical idea for women in Regency England.

And the novel also suggests that Elizabeth's vivacity might have a beneficial effect on Mr. Darcy, hinting that it might be possible to work from within to change some of the older, more authoritarian systems. She's not wild, or flighty, or buying terrible bonnets like Lydia, but she is independently minded, and the fact that Mr. Darcy falls for her suggests that maybe he, and men like him, are capable of change.

Now, this would be a darker and more radical novel if it actually made Elizabeth choose between happiness and financial security, instead of presenting all of that, and Pemberley too, courtesy of Mr. Darcy. But it is no sin for a book to have a happy ending, and *Pride and Prejudice* is still a vindication of Elizabeth's character and temperament, and it makes a really persuasive argument for personal happiness as a moral category worth celebrating.

So go forth and pursue some happiness for yourself. And thanks for watching.

[Outro Music]

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