Pride and Prejudice Part 1: Crash Course Literature #411

Crash Course: Literature
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course Literature, and it is a truth universally acknowledged that a video series about literature must be in want of a Jane Austen episode. So here it is. Today we will be discussing *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's Regency era novel of life, liberty, and bonnets.

The book was first published in 1813. It's a social satire about a family with five daughters and quite a lot of economic anxiety, and the novel's characters and themes have remained relevant for centuries now. Which is why there are so... many... adaptations of it, from the Keira Knightly movie, to an Emmy-winning webseries co-created by my brother.

Today we'll talk about the social and historical context in which the book was written, the style that Jane Austen helped invent, and the dilemmas the characters face. In our next episode, we'll look more closely at the politics of the book, and its attitudes toward money, class, and gender. But for now, it's bonnets all the way down.

[Intro Music]

(0:57)
So we don't know that much about Jane Austen's life, because after her death, her sister burned most of her letters. Just a friendly note by the way to any future literary executors out there: maybe don't burn so much stuff, even if you're told to. Wait, unless you're my literary executor, then burn everything.

But here's what we do know: Jane Austen was born in 1775 to an Anglican clergyman and his wife. She was the second-youngest of eight children, and her father farmed and took in students to make ends meet. Jane was mostly taught at home, and sometimes she wasn't taught at all, although she and her sister did go to a year or two of boarding school. And when she was eleven, Jane started writing plays and novels, mostly social satires and parodies of "novels of sensibility", a literary genre in which women, like, cry and sigh and faint a lot.

Many of these early works were in the style of the epistolary novel, which is a story composed of letters, and we see echoes of that form in *Pride and Prejudice.* We also see some echoes of *Pride and Prejudice* in Austen's life. She never married, but she did receive at least one proposal, that she accepted for a few hours.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

And after her father's death in 1805, her financial position, and the positions of her mother and her sister became increasingly insecure. By 1816, four of her books had been published and she was working on a new novel called *Sanditon*, when she died in 1817 at the age of just 41. Two more of her works, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, were published after her death.

And all of her novels are really good, but to me at least *Pride and Prejudice* is the most perfect of them. There's this precision to it. Like *The Great Gatsby* or *Sula*, *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel in which every single word feels genuinely essential.

(2:34)
So what happens in *Pride and Prejudice*? Well, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet live in rural England with their five daughters: pretty Jane, lively Elizabeth, horrible Mary, airhead Kitty, and boy-obsessed Lydia. When Mr. Bennet dies, the estate will go to a male cousin, so the daughters **have** to find rich husbands, **or else**. Or else live in poverty, or become governesses, and if you've read *Jane Eyre* you know how great that gig is.

Mr. Bingley, an eligible bachelor, arrives on the scene and he and Jane fall in love. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley's best friend, definitely don't. In fact, Elizabeth sort of hates him. Elizabeth gets a proposal for marriage from Mr. Collins, the cousin who's going to inherit the estate, and marrying him would save her sisters from poverty, but Mr. Collins is awful and so Elizabeth declines. Her best friend Charlotte ends up snagging him.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth starts to fall for Wickham, a soldier in the militia, who also hates Mr. Darcy. Suddenly, Mr. Bingley moves away and Jane is heartbroken. Elizabeth goes to visit Charlotte and is introduced to Lady Catherine, Mr. Darcy's ultra-snobby aunt. She sees Mr. Darcy there and he also proposes marriage but in a very insulting way, so Elizabeth insults him right back.

But some months later, Elizabeth is on a trip with her Aunt and Uncle, and they visit Mr. Darcy's lavish estate, and Elizabeth softens toward him. Then she gets word that Lydia has run off with Wickham. Mr. Darcy saves Lydia's reputation by brokering a marriage, and then it's happy endings all around.

Lydia gets married, Jane and Mr. Bingley get married, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy get married, Kitty learns to be a little bit less of an airhead, and Mary is presumably still horrible.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

(4:08)
Thanks Thought Bubble.

So let's talk life and letters in Regency England. By the way, Regency England refers to a period from about 1800 to 1820, when King George III became mentally ill and unfit to rule.

In England, this was a time of political uncertainty and economic volatility. There was a rising middle class, a burgeoning consumer culture, and a move from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. And that meant less overall poverty, but it also meant a lot of social instability.

And it was also a time when people in England were beginning to talk about the rights of women. Like Mary Wollstonecraft published *Vindication of the Rights of Women* seven years after Austen was born, but it's important to remember that at this place and time, women didn't really have many rights. They couldn't vote, and in *Pride and Prejudice*, the whole plot begins because all of Bennet's five children are daughters. That means that legally, Bennet's estate has to go to this male cousin, but there was a growing belief that maybe women **should** have rights.

Abroad, the American Revolution and the French Revolution had recently unsettled established social and political orders, and everywhere there were increasing discussions about rights, and responsibilities, and liberties, and duties.

You can even hear this in the famous first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." It has an echo of the American *Declaration of Independence*: "We find these truths to be self-evident," but the comic deflation in the second half of the sentence is pure Austen.

Now some people are initially put off by *Pride and Prejudice* because they view it as a kind of a literary-fied romance novel, and it **is** a book intensely interested in human relationships, especially

romantic ones, but I would challenge the idea that those novels can't be great.

I mean, nobody every argues that picaresque novels or Bildungsromans are merely genre novels, even though those are both genres, but the word "romance" is too often and too quickly dismissed.

And by the way, while I'm defending Austen, she has this completely unearned reputation for being genteel and conservative.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

(6:02)
The reality is that her work is very funny, and mean, and super smart about human behaviour. You can also hear that in the letters of hers that survived, like when she writes to her sister: "I do not want people to be very agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal."

But also, while the book certainly involves lower case "r" romance, it is very aggressively not capital "R" Romantic, in the Byron-Wordsworth-Shelley sense that feelings are so overwhelming that they supersede logic.

I mean Wordsworth can write about a hillside for 37 stanzas, but if you read Austen closely, you'll find that there's a striking absence of physical description. We don't know what the dresses look like. We don't know what the people look like. When there is physical description, like in the description of Mr. Darcy's estate or Elizabeth's petticoat, it means something really important is happening, and even then the descriptions are very brief. If we're being honest, there isn't even all that much here about bonnets.

In fact, Austen is suspicious of overwhelming emotion. Remember how I mentioned the novel *Sensibility* and Austen's early satires? She's skeptical of feeling too much, of getting so carried away by emotion that it prevents you from thinking clearly.

This is exemplified by Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship. They don't fall in love at first sight. Actually, it's the opposite. At a ball, she overhears him telling his friend that her sister is the only hot girl in the room, and that Elizabeth is merely, quote, "tolerable."

Given that Elizabeth and Darcy end up quite happy together, this is a novel that's suspicious of romantic love, especially romantic love based on instant physical attraction. And when characters do get carried away by their emotions, they're often fooling themselves, like Mr. Collins, or doing something really wrong, like Lydia.

Pride and Prejudice does have a wish-fulfilling ending, but it is still a sly and ironic and clear-eyed exploration of the individual versus the collective, and happiness versus security. It is about love, but rather than presuming that love is only a feeling, *Pride and Prejudice* explores how thinking and feeling and need and responsibility intersect to form the experience that we call love.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

One might even say that it's a novel about romantic love that deconstructs our ideas about romantic love. Austen joked that the scope of her works was narrow equating her writing with "a two inch piece of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour."

And she also critiqued Pride and Prejudice writing to a friend: "the work is rather too light and bright and sparkling. It wants shade." And yeah, okay, the novel is fun, but reading should be fun sometimes. I mean we already read To the Lighthouse.

And in terms of the prose style itself, Austen was actually pioneering a new style here called free indirect discourse. It means that even though the narration is in the third person, the narrative voice takes on the thoughts and feelings of characters. Like after unexpectedly meeting Darcy at his estate, the third person narration takes on Elizabeth's embarrassment.

"Her coming there was the most unfortunate, the most ill-judged thing int he world! How strange must it appear to him! In what a disgraceful light might it not strike so vain a man! It might seem as if she had purposely thrown herself in his way again!"

This narrative approach reflects emotion without stating it; showing instead of telling as the saying goes. And it makes us feel not as if we can sympathize with Elizabeth but instead as if we are Elizabeth. And to me, at least, that's one of the most profound and important things a novel can do. Great books offer you a way out of yourself and in to other people's lives.

Next time we'll look more closely at a bunch of other themes but for now lets briefly explore the dilemma facing Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters. Because her parents have been bad with money she knows she has to marry well or face poverty. So when Mr. Collins proposes, that is a fantastic solution except for one thing: she doesn't respect him. Mr. Collins is pompous and foolish and the very things that make Elizabeth terrific: her lively mind, her fresh wit, make him nervous. She tells him: "You could not make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make you so."

But the idea that happiness should be privileged over security is pretty radical. Elizabeth is stating that her personal individual happiness should outweigh the economic problems of her family.

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She's taking a huge risk when she rejects him. As Mr. Collins tells her, she's poor, so she probably won't get another proposal. He might not have made her happy but he would have made her and all her unmarried sisters financially secure.

And then Elizabeth takes the same risk or arguably even a greater one when she rejects Mr. Darcy's insulting first proposal. She can't make herself marry a man she doesn't like. This was the same dilemma that Austen faced herself in her life and her rejection of a suitor made things hard for her and her family, but she did it anyway.

Now thanks to the fairy tale ending, Elizabeth doesn't experience, like, catastrophic consequences as a result of her privileging happiness. But as 19th century English readers would have been very well aware, she could've. So the novel helped them, and also helps us, explore when we should put our own needs first and when the happiness and security of others is more important.

Is doing what makes you happy always the right thing to do, or are there moments when you must sacrifice your happiness for the good of your family, your social order, or even yourself.

Next time, we'll discuss on whether the politics of this book are radical or conservative. And we'll answer a vexing question: why does Lydia buy such an ugly bonnet?

Thanks for watching, hope it was tolerable, we'll see you next time.

[Outro Music]

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