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Survey of British Literature (H)

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Jumping Over the Moon¹ : Elizabeth Bennet's Journey to Enlightenment

In Jane Austen's novel, Pride and Prejudice, the main character, Elizabeth Bennet, is the personification of progressive Enlightenment ideas, shackled in a traditional English society. A stealth revolutionary, the middle-class Elizabeth defies the prevailing social convention by marrying the prominent Fitzwilliam Darcy for love, not the benefit of his money. The effects of the Enlightenment, a period in which rights of the common people and the self-determination of the individual were key, were felt strongly when Austen wrote the novel. In Elizabeth's class-conscious world, "marriage economy," or marrying for power and wealth, was the main life purpose for young women. Elizabeth rejects the idea of "marriage economy," and, thus, both redefines integrity and revolutionizes the standard of womanhood.

Elizabeth rejects "marriage economy" and charts her own destiny by marrying for love and personal happiness. Thus, she brings to life the Enlightenment ideals of self-determination and what, today, is called self-empowerment. Though Elizabeth first judges Darcy as a cold and proud man, she eventually realizes that her first impression was incorrect. In fact, she comes to see that she and Darcy are well-suited for each other. Darcy explains to Elizabeth that he lacks the "talent" of easily expressing his true self, as he feels awkward in front of others. Elizabeth empathizes with feeling disconnected from society, and says "my fingers. . .do not move over

¹ "Over the Moon" from the musical RENT

this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. They have not the same force or rapidity. . . But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault—because I will not take the trouble of practicing” (198). As Elizabeth compares her piano playing skills to other women her age, she metaphorically reveals that she is not typical of other young women in her world. She gives an impression of “force and rapidity,” unlike the girls who engage socially in the “masterly manner” expected by society. Elizabeth attributes this “fault” to refusing to conform. Elizabeth feels ostracized by society, but she gains inner power because she follows her own will. Darcy, also a nonconformist, connects with Elizabeth because they perform for themselves and no one else. Paradoxically, what makes them wrong in society makes them right for each other. Ultimately, they are united by their individualism. Some readers might interpret this as selling out to the idea of marriage economy, because Darcy is wealthy and socially prominent. Clearly, Elizabeth is attracted to him despite these attributes. These two characters demonstrate that they are committed to defying the social rules of their society and seeking happiness with soul mates of their own choosing. In keeping with the Enlightenment, they both seize control of their futures and take responsibility for their actions.

Because their love is so strong and they are guided by the desire to attain personal freedom, they are unaffected by the critical judgements of others. Elizabeth, like a true follower of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, believes in the right to personal happiness and to create for herself a better life. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine, however, sternly advises Elizabeth not to marry Darcy because Elizabeth is of a lower status. In response to this insult, Elizabeth replies, “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (400). Elizabeth is “resolved” to do what she desires, regardless of “any person so wholly unconnected

with” her or her “happiness.” Happiness is an important ideal to Elizabeth as it was to the Enlightenment thinkers.

Another key theme of the Age of Reason was control over one’s destiny. As Lady Catherine further berates Elizabeth for imposing her classlessness upon Darcy and his family, Elizabeth indignantly responds, “Neither duty, nor honor, nor gratitude. . .have any possible claim on me. . .[nor] would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy. And with regard to the resentment of his family, or the indignation of the world . . .it would not give me one moment’s concern” (400). Elizabeth does not give “one moment’s concern” to anyone’s “duty, honor, or gratitude” but her own, because she objects to the tyranny of the social rules imposed upon her. She seizes control of her own destiny by marrying Darcy because she loves him, regardless of her social standing, or lack thereof. She is determined to stay true to her feelings and not to the artificial standards of marriage. This is not selling out to secure a prosperous “catch” on the marriage market, but rather buying into the values of the Enlightenment.

Indeed, Elizabeth falls for Darcy when she sees that Pemberley is not a sign of his wealth but an expression of his true character. This demonstrates that she did not, as some might argue, sacrifice her integrity for the grandeur of Pemberley, its lifestyle, and the social dictates of her world. She, instead, redefines integrity as being true to one’s essential nature, not to social structures. This is in line with the Enlightenment emphasis of seeking truth in nature, including one’s inner nature. As Elizabeth first descends the hill and approaches Darcy’s handsome Pemberley estate, she is “delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more,

or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. . .At that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!" (273) Her "delighted" feelings upon seeing Pemberley are in line with the Enlightenment emphasis on seeking truth in "nature," including one's inner nature. When she sees how natural Pemberley is, she thus sees it as a mirror to the "natural beauty" of Darcy's inner self, and that he has been untouched by the "awkward taste" of a superficial society. Her idea of integrity is pursuing truth found in nature, especially human nature; not being true to the dictates of society. "To be the mistress of Pemberley," therefore, is to be the mistress of a natural and independent man like Darcy. He and Elizabeth share the reasoned idea that true empowerment comes from being true to one's nature.

By choosing her own path and following her own rules, Elizabeth creates a new standard of womanhood. While the pioneering Elizabeth takes the road less-traveled at that time by marrying for love, her little sister Lydia marries a disreputable money-grubber. Lydia's opting for marriage economy leads her to a life of economic instability as well as isolation from her family, thereby vindicating Elizabeth's trail-blazing life choices. The youngest Bennet sister, Kitty, though often in line with Lydia's conventional attitude towards men, finds that once she is "removed from [Lydia's] influence...[Kitty] became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid" (431). Lydia, because she is "ignorant" of Enlightenment ideas of progress and intellectual development, negatively "influences" girls like Kitty to follow in her "irritable" and "insipid" footsteps. With "proper attention and management," such as the

personal “attention and management” that Elizabeth devoted to breaking through social barriers, Kitty is able to escape Lydia’s mindless pattern and dead-end life.

The effects of Elizabeth’s redefinition of womanhood and independent thinking are apparent in Darcy’s sister, Georgiana. Initially, Georgiana was “astonished” by Elizabeth’s “lively, sportive manner of talking” to Darcy. When Austen wrote of Georgiana that “Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way,” she confirmed that Elizabeth had become Georgiana’s enlightened teacher. Austen continued, “By Elizabeth's instructions, she [Georgiana] began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband which a brother will not always allow in a sister.” (434) By her example, Elizabeth was educating other women in self-fulfillment. Georgiana eventually sees how a woman is free to “take liberties with her husband,” and is, therefore, empowered by a marriage based on love, not on social convenience.

Jane Austen was raised at a time in history when revolutionary ideas transformed the world, including rural England. The Enlightenment had sparked the American Revolution only a year after Austen’s birth, and her own cousin’s husband fell victim to the French Reign of Terror. Austen felt and reflected her times. She became a voice for change. It was not considered acceptable for a woman to be an author, so even the act of penning *Pride and Prejudice* was an act of willful independence for Austen. Her creation of Elizabeth Bennet demonstrated her belief that women, too, could benefit from the powerful ideas of the Enlightenment. Women could see their true selves, liberate themselves from loveless marriages, and flourish as individuals guided

by their own informed choices. Elizabeth Bennet held true to these ideals, and thus redefined integrity and revolutionized womanhood. It is the tragic mistake of girls like Lydia to stay in one place when they can move forward on their journeys of self-discovery, such as Austen and her heroine do. In the end, it is one's willingness for self-exploration that can allow one to overpower the conflicts presented by their environment. In doing so, Austen's themes of 1814 were as relevant then as they are today.