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British Literature
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The Usage of Letters in *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* depicts the communication between different classes of society in 18th century Britain., when modern day technology was not available. Technology that has been developed through time such as telephones, and computers were not existent and therefore, other ways for communication were established within families of Jane Austen's time. Letter-writing, surviving through centuries, has been a way to provide information whether the letter is an invitation or explanation. Jane Austen wrote hundreds of letters during her lifetime, and many other authors wrote novels in the form of a series of letters between the protagonists. The act of letter writing highlights the personalities and true characters of the characters in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

The act of writing letters is illustrated as Darcy attempts to write a letter to his sister; however, Miss Bingley disrupts his concentration. Miss Bingley fawns over Mr. Darcy not only because he is handsome, but because of his social stature. She attempts to compliment him on his writing style, and even how even he writes. Mr. Darcy, trying to write the best possible letter with thoughtfulness and care to his sister, is annoyed by Miss Bingley and says: "Will you give me leave to defer your raptures till I write again? At present I have not room to do them justice" (50). Without being angry, Darcy cheekily tries to make it obvious to Miss Bingley that he needs peace and quiet to write the greatest achievable letter. The letter he is trying to write is very personal, as it is to his sister and it will reflect his efforts in language and craft. Darcy understands although it is

just a letter, it will have his name written on it, and therefore must mirror effort and the utmost care. Thinking that Darcy is trying to focus on quantity over quality, Ms. Bingley comments on what she thinks Darcy's technique is. "It is a rule with me, that a person who can write a long letter with ease, cannot write ill" (50). While Ms. Bingley, tells Darcy that 'it is a rule,' with her, in reality she is forming her opinion on how letters should be written by her observations about Mr. Darcy. Unlike Mr. Darcy, Ms. Bingley does not take pride upon how others see her, unless it is regarding to her social status. Her idea of 'the longer, the better' goes back to the superficial idea of what is on the outside counts more than what is on the inside. Miss Bingley finds the look of things, or what is on the surface more important than what is deeper in meaning. Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley's outlooks on the act of writing show how two people can be in high social standing, but have different opinions on a subject that reveals their personalities.

Mr. Collins' letter to Mr. Bennet reveals the pretension and pompous nature of Collins' personality. Collins writes a letter to Mr. Bennet to put to rest the issue of disagreements between Collins' father and Mr. Bennet. In the process, Collins mentions, Lady Catherine de Bourgh serves as his patroness to make himself appear more powerful and over exaggerate his social status. "I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards her ladyship" (67). Although Collins' purpose of writing the letter is to ask if he can stay at the Bennets', he uses this as an opportunity to brag and boast about his connections with the upper class. Collins writes "Right Honourable Lady Catherine de

Bourgh,” capitalizing ‘Right’ and ‘Honorable’ as if it is part of her title. This capitalization signifies his agenda and promotion of Lady Catherine’s goodness. Mr. Collins then promotes himself when he says “the valuable rectory of this parish.” Collins’ use of ‘valuable’ in the letter also shows how he believes his title and has great influence and power. At the end of his letter, Collins says, “I flatter myself that my present overtures are highly commendable” (68). It is ironic here that Collins actually writes that he “flatters” himself, because throughout his entire letter this fact is entirely clear. His letter highlights his self-importance and more importantly, his artificial character.

Unlike Collins’ letter of pretension, Mr. Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth is realistic, and he does not use his wealth or stature to make his arguments more convincing. In writing, Darcy clarifies why Mr. Bingley backed away from Jane, and what really occurred between him and Mr. Wickham:

If, in the explanation of them [circumstances], which is due to myself, I am under the necessity of relating feelings which may be offensive to yours, I can only say that I am sorry...further apology would be absurd...I must now mention a circumstance which I would wish to forget myself, and which no obligation less than the present should induce me to unfold to any human being...You may possibly wonder why all this was not told you last night; but I was not then master enough of myself to know what could or ought to be revealed... (218-224)

When Darcy says sorry once, and says ‘further apology would be absurd’ he is demonstrating the fact that he cannot do more than express the truth of the events that took place, along with his feelings. His feelings are remorseful and honest, as he confides in Elizabeth, everything he has been keeping inside of him. Darcy writes that the ‘present’ is his only ‘obligation’ to ‘unfold to any human being’ of his feelings. Darcy has faith in Elizabeth’s ability to keep secret the things he reveals, including his sister’s past relationship with Mr. Wickham. The act of sitting down, and writing the letter to

gather his thoughts, helps Darcy to become ‘master’ of himself, and reveal the truth to Elizabeth. Writing the letter to Elizabeth allowed Darcy’s inability of verbal communication and shyness to be put aside, bringing forth facts, revelations, and visual proof.

Jane Austen illustrates in her novel, that letters can reveal the nature of its writer. Handwriting, length, grammar, and wording are just a few of the points the recipient takes into consideration along with the purpose for writing the letter. A conversation is open-ended, and involves more than one person, while writing a letter is a more thoughtful and independent process. “A letter always seemed to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend,” said Emily Dickinson.