
UNIT 2 MAIN THEMES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*-1

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to offer a possible point of entry into the text by looking at the title and picking out as major themes, the characteristics or feelings to which it refers. These are first looked at in isolation and then in the context of some of the text's larger concerns.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

It might be best to begin with a tentative outlining of what we are doing in setting out to extract 'themes' from this (or any) text. The term 'theme' when used in relation to a literary text, has been variously used to mean an argument, a claim, or an issue raised in the text, but this working definition does not specify whether or not the theme simply raises questions or also proposes answers, and whether thematic elements in a text depend entirely upon a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to raise a certain issue. I think that on the whole we shall restrict ourselves to the latter stand and look for authorial intention with regard to *Pride and Prejudice*, but do try to keep in mind that what Arnold Kettle says about *Emma* ("the subject ... its generalized significance, is not easily or even usefully abstracted from the story") could apply almost as well here.

2.2 'PRIDE' AND 'PREJUDICE'

Some important aspects of Jane Austen's treatment of pride as a theme become more easily intelligible to us when we see her work in the context of the eighteenth century tradition of the realistic novel. Because of the rational and secular framework of the outlook of enlightenment humanism, pride is not presented here in theological terms as a sin but is seen as a common and verifiable fact of human experience which can be analyzed and understood through reasoning. The eighteenth century also witnesses the emergence of the new science of human psychology where human experiences, ideas, feelings, emotions, and experiences in society begin to be studied with the help of methods and concepts used by physical scientists in their study of natural phenomena. Parallel to the concept of matter as a substance which, despite changes in its form, remained essentially the same everywhere, this new science goes

along with (and perhaps even leads to) the evolution of a concept of universal human nature by thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Hume. In the physical sciences, elements are classified under different categories, such as metals and non-metals, gases and solids, and are regarded as the basic units of matter which, through different combinations, form the various substances found in nature. Human nature, if similarly considered, could be seen as consisting of some basic traits which combine in different proportions and combinations to form the personalities of different individuals. Human traits are similarly placed in the categories of 'appetites', 'impressions', 'sensations', 'passions' and 'ideas'. In the analysis of a compound, an important part of the job is to break it up into its elements and see how these elements interact with one another. A similar model begins at this time to be used for human personality which is studied by breaking it up into the traits mentioned above and seeing how they interact with one another in order to produce the specific human personality under study.

Jane Austen's treatment of pride conforms to this pattern of scientific and rational analysis. Commenting on pride, David Hume underlines its two special attributes. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he tells us that as against passions like love, where the self draws pleasure from its orientations towards others, the object of pride is the self alone. Pride is then in other words, a form of excessive self-absorption, self-centredness, self-regard or self-esteem. The second attribute of pride, according to Hume is that unlike hunger, greed and lust, pride does not arise from specific bodily organs or the needs of the self, but it is "pleasurable to the self by virtue of demonstrable externals which are seen as *possessions* whether they are mental or physical possessions." Jane Austen's treatment of pride shows its different varieties where both these attributes are clearly visible to a greater or lesser degree.

2.2.1 The Title

The title of the novel may not provide an instant clue to the 'meaning' of the text, but it does indicate at least one theme in fairly unambiguous terms, offering an indication to the text's chief concerns as well as a useful starting-point for a study of them. The title should not be misread to mean that Jane Austen is dealing here with two entities called 'pride' and 'prejudice', which are independent of each other and exist separately in the personality and behaviour of different characters. It would, for example be too simplistic to assume that Darcy embodies pride and Elizabeth prejudice. It soon becomes clear from the text that prejudice is largely considered as a consequence of pride reflected in the attitudes and behaviour both of the person who represents pride and of those who react to it. Pride shows itself in weaknesses – pomposity, stupidity, snobbery or eccentricity – which may make the character's behaviour look funny or ridiculous. It may also produce a sense of frivolity which makes it difficult for a character like Lydia to understand the consequences of her own actions and makes her insensitive to the pain and suffering she causes others.

2.2.2 The Characters

The text identifies and analyses different forms of pride as they are revealed in the behaviour of various characters, and the difference among them emerges, more often than not, as largely one of degree. In some cases, however, a qualitative difference in the nature of pride is brought out. These different forms of pride are discussed in greater detail later, but it is important to remember here that two such forms are explicitly distinguished from each other in the rather pedantic definitions of "pride" and "vanity" provided by Mary, according to whom "Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us". For once she might be held to be correct, as far as events and revelations of character in the course of the narrative appear to bear out her opinion that pride involves a sense (perhaps even an excessive sense) of self-esteem or self-regard. Still, the more important distinction working behind this difference is that while a sense of dignity and self-respect are substantially present in one form of pride, they are almost negligible in the

other. Darcy's excessive self-esteem is 'pride' of this kind, while Wickham's self-regard is vanity.

Pride is also manifested in varied ways by different characters. Thus the distinction between the vanity of Mr. Collins and that of Sir William Lucas, or the vanity of Lady Catherine de Burgh and that of Mrs. Bennet becomes differentiated because of the presence or absence of other qualities. In order to achieve a sharper focus on pride, certain characters are made to represent a quality opposite to it, so that they can be used for comparison and contrast. So while Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet represent different variants of pride, Bingley and Jane stand for modesty and candour, and the presence of the latter pair helps us in understanding the full meaning of pride in the case of the former, between whom misunderstandings and prejudices delay the development of a relationship. The achievement of happiness in love, therefore, becomes contingent upon the development of a proper understanding of weaknesses originating in pride.

If 'excessive self-regard' is based on an external possession which is not a personal attainment but something acquired through a quirk of chance or fortune (inherited wealth for example) pride takes the form of snobbery. Pride as selfishness pervades the social environment in *Pride and Prejudice* insofar as people's attitudes towards each other depend on the benefit or gain they can derive from them. The most notable instance of this kind of pride is of course Wickham but it is also present in the excessive importance given to petty conveniences and the lack of interest in anything outside a narrow range of personal interests in characters like Mrs. Bennet, Lydia and the two Bingley sisters. As excessive self-esteem which goes with a legitimate sense of dignity and independence of spirit, it is most notably present in Darcy, although Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Bennet also possess it. Pride in this form becomes almost a distorted or perverted expression of the dignity and integrity of the self.

While both haughtiness and snobbery are shown to make people unsociable or cold and contemptuous, self-centredness and selfishness do not prevent them from being voluble and prone to gossip, and in the case of Wickham, even enticingly agreeable. Self-esteem may make a character assertive like Elizabeth Bennet or eccentrically withdrawn like her father. Snobbery may make a character superciliously non-communicative like the Bingley sisters when they have to mix with people of inferior rank or it may make them officiously patronising, domineering and rude like Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Pride in the form of vanity which is often a combination of selfishness and self-centredness can make a person pompous like Mr. Collins, fatuous like Sir William Lucas, giddily talkative and insensitive like Lydia or fretful like Kitty.

All these forms of pride are demonstrated both through dialogue and authorial comment. One main interest is of course the pride of characters like Darcy and Elizabeth, actually a curable distortion of a positive concern for integrity and independence of spirit. But this positive side of self-esteem can be viewed as a concern not fully covered by pride and will be discussed separately when love is taken up as a theme of the novel.

The eighteenth-century thinkers who posit the concept of universal human nature follow the analogy of the physical sciences in another respect which is relevant to Jane Austen's treatment of the theme of pride in *Pride and Prejudice*. In the physical sciences, the structure of argument is raised on the bases of sensory data obtained either through experiments in the laboratory or information collected from reliable findings by other observers. The important thing in this empirical method is the reliability, verifiability and impartiality of the data. The new science of human nature also starts from what were called the 'impressions' and the structure of the argument is erected empirically after trying to eliminate subjective biases or providing a calculated margin of error for them. Biases caused by the pride of the observer or reporter are among the sources of such errors.

In *Pride and Prejudice* we are shown the ways in which observation, and subsequently communication, become distorted by the pride of those involved in the process. The title Jane Austen gave to the first draft of the novel was *First Impressions*. The novel persistently brings to our notice the unreliability of first impressions, even those of intelligent and observant people like Elizabeth and Darcy. On account of his prejudices (rooted in pride), Darcy manages to offend the ladies assembled at the Meryton ball by not paying them the attention that courtesy demands — even Elizabeth is dismissed by him with a casual remark to the effect that she was “tolerable” but not attractive enough to make him want to dance with her. Elizabeth’s hurt vanity similarly distorts her judgement of the characters of Wickham as well as Darcy, something she acknowledges later saying, “How humiliating is this discovery....But vanity, not love has been my folly.”

Also notice the way in which every important incident in the novel is preceded by some rumour or followed by gossip, both obscuring the true version of things — this serves to emphasize the need for a disinterested analysis of what comes to us through hearsay. Language, Jane Austen seems to be saying, is a tangled web since the subjective colouring it acquires under the interests of individuals and groups (which is one meaning of pride or vanity in the novel) has to be recognised and examined in order to get through to the truth. This ‘truth’ is, importantly, valid for the entire community or society, that is to say it is not a subjective truth.

Pride is not an abstraction here, but a general notion which codifies a large area of human experience under a system of cognition and evaluation which had been evolved by eighteenth century thinkers on behalf of a dominant social formation playing an active role in shaping the historical development of English society.

2.3 LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Jane Austen’s interest in pride could be seen as part of her concern with another theme, that of exploring whether the possibilities of a meaningful and durable love relationship (that ends in marriage) between a young man and a young woman, do really exist in the society of her times. Marriage is analysed on two levels — in terms of external obstacles like patriarchy and property relations (see 3.4) and in terms of the characters’ personal attributes. Pride seems to be among the most harmful of such attributes since it has to be overcome by a process of self-education before love can culminate in marriage.

In all love comedies, and more generally, in literature that centres itself around the theme of romantic or sexual love, the man-woman relationship is invested with an extraordinary significance and is considered an experience that transforms the lovers. The best example is the exalted notion of love in the medieval romances where it is considered at par with religious devotion. As pointed out earlier, (see 1.3.5) the novel had emerged in the eighteenth century in conscious opposition to the traditional romances. Most of the attitudes and conventions found in the earlier romances were discarded as outdated and irrelevant. An exception was, however, made in the case of love as a theme and the high value attached to it as an experience. The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of a widely popular tradition of novels where love was a dominant theme, Richardson’s *Pamela* being the prototype of this kind of novel. Love was treated here as a prized experience comparable to that in the romances, but there were important differences. For example, love was not shown in isolation from other emotions and urges, but had to grow and develop by countering their presence. The novel of sensibility which followed in the second half of the eighteenth century maintained, on the whole, the psychological and social realism achieved by Richardson in *Pamela* but the gap between the noble aspirations of the lovers and the crudely materialistic and manipulative social environment became much wider here.

Jane Austen discarded the indulgent subjectivity of the novel of sensibility and restored to love comedy the realism it had earlier possessed in the writings of Richardson and Fielding. In order to understand the distinctive features of Jane Austen's treatment of love in *Pride and Prejudice* we should perhaps go back, as A.N. Kaul has suggested in *The Action of English Comedy* to Shakespeare's comedy of love which represents the initial break with the medieval notions of romantic love.

The most important distinction between the courtly love of the medieval romances and love as portrayed in Shakespeare's comedies, however, lies in the latter's being a way of self-affirmation and expression for the individual, whereas courtly love had demanded a total surrender of the self. While giving priority to love as a theme, Shakespeare did not separate it from social activities since as a mode of self-affirmation it formed an integral part of the larger agenda of general emancipation..

The blending of the personal and the social significance of love in Shakespeare's comedy made it quite natural that it should take the form of a durable union in marriage. In post-Renaissance society a space had been created for marriage to become simultaneously a union between two individuals which signified the sanctity, intensity and persistent strength of their love and an institution which fitted them appropriately into prevailing social hierarchies. In the comedy of love, marriage was presented as a culminating point in this twin process of self-affirmation and social adjustment. When the love comedy made its appearance in the eighteenth century novel, it was basically as a continuation of this tradition. However, we often find in these novels divergence between the significance of marriage as the culminating point of love between two individuals, and its meaning as a means of their incorporation into the prevailing social hierarchies. The novel at this time also explores the limits within which assertion of an individual autonomy could be accepted as valid. The pressure in this regard was particularly acute in the case of women who were neither accorded the full status of independent, sensitive and rational human beings nor given parity in property rights and economic opportunities. The comedy of love, therefore, had to include as a necessary part of its structure a serious and sustained probing of the conditions under which the possibilities of a meaningful and intense love relationship could be actualized in contemporary social conditions. For a proper understanding of Jane Austen's handling of the theme of love and marriage, it will be helpful to take into consideration a significant change which took place in the social and cultural climate of English society at the specific juncture when she wrote her novels. The aftermath of the French Revolution and the protracted war between England and France made the social groups in the culturally dominant alliance extremely distrustful of the radical politics implicit in the ideal of freedom and dignity of the individual they had accepted earlier as an integral part of their collective outlook and value system. The emphasis on an individual's right to think and choose for himself had by this time become so pronounced in the general outlook that when this conservative shift took place, it became virtually impossible to give up these rights completely. The dilemma was resolved by muting down the political dimension of the ideal of individual autonomy substantially but affirming at the same time with even greater intensity than before, its operative power in the private sphere of personal relationships. It is this intensified affirmation of the ideal in the restricted sphere of personal relationships that enabled Jane Austen to lend authenticity and force to her projection of love between Elizabeth and Darcy as a mode of affirmation of their autonomy as individuals and reinforce this impression through her depiction of love between Jane and Bingley.

It has, however, to be emphasized that in bringing this superior conception of love centre-stage, Jane Austen does not underestimate the presence of attitudes and impulses in society which go against it. She recognizes the cynicism and disdain for women and the view of them as mere objects of pleasure or as the route to instant prosperity, which were prevalent among a section of the dominant social and cultural groups. Wickham represents this attitude in *Pride and Prejudice*, though Jane Austen takes only a limited interest in the moral and psychological make-up of such superficially amiable rakes.

There is another negative attitude which Jane Austen takes more seriously – that of the materialism and economic individualism of the up-coming middle classes. Jane Austen deliberately shows the love relationship slowly gaining strength and maturing by contending against the pull of this negative force present everywhere. The varied forms it can take are brought out vividly before us through different characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. We can see it in its grosser forms in the dullness and pomposity of Mr. Collins or the obtrusively meddlesome and domineering behaviour of Lady Catherine. It is present in characters like Mrs. Philip who loves to collect and transmit idle gossip. We can also see it in the supercilious finickiness of the Bingley sisters. Mrs. Bennet, too, is governed by this spirit as her obsessive concern for the marriage of her daughters is based on the presumption that daughters are perishable commodities to be disposed of quickly before their market value goes down and the young man to whom they are to be married off are reluctant customers to be assiduously cultivated to make them agree to complete the transaction.

Jane Austen presents two pairs of lovers in the novel in order to show that the concept of individual autonomy she is invoking is quite complex and a single pair of characters would not give us a fair idea of the full range of human qualities she wants to put into their love-relationship. While Elizabeth and Darcy represent an actively assertive form of independence and critical intelligence, the secondary emphasis falls on Jane's and Bingley's candour and goodwill. For characters like Elizabeth and Darcy or Jane and Bingley, marriage primarily means culmination of a love relationship which starts with mutual physical attraction but necessarily includes feelings of mutual respect, esteem and confidence" (II, XIX). Most marriages in the novel do not conform to this ideal, but the manner in which the story of the heroine's love has been built up demonstrates that such an ideal has sufficient social validity and is to be recognized as a real possibility that can materialize in the normal course of happening in the prevailing social environment. All the four characters who successfully achieve marriages of love are normal products of the middle-class way of life and have their distinctive space in the society. The structure of society with its class and gender iniquities is not challenged politically, but substantive opportunities for fulfilment of love are located within its ambit. This emphasis on the "self-education" of the hero and heroine and the insistence on discovering a vantage-point of compatibility between love and prudence, both indicate that Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage is located in an exploration of the best possibilities available within the limits of the existing social order. Her challenge to class-based snobbery, patriarchal smugness and bourgeois philistinism has to be viewed in this perspective.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

'Pride' and 'prejudice' are picked out as two of the text's main themes, and are considered with reference to the humanist conception of character. These two themes are seen to open up several others, especially those of love and marriage. The themes are also considered in terms of the individual characters, in the portrayals of which they are constitutive factors.

2.5 GLOSSARY

Autonomy

Personal freedom (of the will) to self-determination

Philistinism

An attitude lacking in liberal culture. The term is derived from contemptuous references to the Philistines, a group of warlike people who occupied the southern sea-coast of Palestine, and constantly harassed the Israelites.

2.6 QUESTIONS

**Main Themes in
*Pride and Prejudice-I***

1. Discuss briefly and illustrate the two kinds of pride which, in your view, figure most prominently in *Pride and Prejudice*.
2. What are the salient features of the system of thought in terms of which pride has been dealt with as a theme in *Pride and Prejudice*?

2.7 SUGGESTED READING

Hardy, Barbara *A Reading of Jane Austen*. London: The Athlone Press, 1975, rptd. 1979.

David Grey Ed. *The Jane Austen Handbook*. London: Athlone, 1986.