

***Pride and Prejudice* and the Empowerment of Individuals**

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Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice* was written when Romanticism was at its peak. Romantic artists and thinkers emphasized the importance of individuality and valued emotions as important drivers of behavior and understanding. While Romantic philosophers, thinkers, and artists were largely unified in their interest in individualism, there was little consensus on what roles individual people should play in society or how people should relate to the vastness of nature and time. Artists such as Jacques Louis David, with his paintings *Death of Marat* and *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, and Ludwig van Beethoven with his *Eroica* symphony suggested that individual people could possess great power and unleash larger-than-life forces. Alternatively, the concept of the sublime, developed by philosopher Immanuel Kant, encouraged individuals to contemplate their own insignificance in comparison to nature. Caspar David Friedrich, a German Romantic painter, explored the sublime in such paintings as *Monk by the Sea* and *Abbey in the Oakwood*, by depicting humanity as being almost swallowed up by nature's vastness. Jane Austen addresses both these opposing pillars of Romantic thought in *Pride and Prejudice*. She ultimately empowers the individual by celebrating her protagonist Elizabeth's refusal to compromise her principles for societal norms and by depicting her actions as heroic. In her emphasis on the fulfillment that comes with rich interpersonal relationships, Austen challenges the ideas of some in her cohort of Romantics; she veers from Kant in his conception of the "sublime," and from Friedrich in the message conveyed in *Monk by the Sea* that individual human life is insignificant in comparison to nature.

Austen encourages individualism by having Elizabeth, and to some extent Mr. Darcy, refuse to compromise either their principles or their pursuit of emotional fulfillment, even when it means going against social expectations. When Jane gets sick while staying at the Bingleys', Elizabeth's concern for her sister makes her decide to visit Jane immediately, even though it means she must walk in the mud. Mrs. Bennett points out the impropriety of her plan saying, "You will not be fit to be seen when you get there" (32). Elizabeth couldn't care less, however. She retorts: "I shall be very fit to see Jane—which is all I want" (32). Her indifference about the way she is perceived by Mr. Bingley, his sisters, and Mr. Darcy, all of whom are of higher status than her, reveals her unbending commitment to her principles, in this case making sure her loved ones are taken care of. Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Collins' marriage proposal is similarly impressive. Although the marriage would have provided her and her family a stable financial future and prevented her from becoming a spinster, Elizabeth refuses to sacrifice her future emotional fulfillment. She says, "I am perfectly serious in my refusal.—You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so" (105). It is clear that the rational choice would have been for Elizabeth to secure the future security of herself and her family by marrying Mr. Collins. Instead, Elizabeth's Romantic decision to follow her heart and preserve her chance of entering an emotionally satisfying marriage in the future, demonstrates a unique strength in her character that she is rewarded for. At the end of the book, she realizes that it is her

commitment to her own wellbeing and principles, even if it meant ignoring social norms or risking unpopularity, is what leads Darcy to fall in love with her. In a breathless conversation with Darcy in which they process the development of their relationship, she asserts that he was “disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*” (358).

Austen’s celebration of Elizabeth’s commitment to her own principles is empowering because it illustrates that societal expectations can be defied and that the decision to stay true to oneself is a choice that every person has the power to make. In a sense, the strength of will Elizabeth displays to protect her principles resembles the will and passion depicted in heroic paintings like *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. When Lady Catherine visits Longbourn with the intention of forcibly preventing Elizabeth from accepting a marriage proposal from Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth displays remarkable strength. She tells Lady Catherine, “You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these . . . I am resolved to act in the manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you* or any person so wholly unconnected with me,” (338). In this scene, through sheer force of will, Elizabeth conquers the social rules that would have required her to submit to Lady Catherine and sacrifice her ability to pursue happiness because of her higher status. While this triumph is certainly on a smaller scale than the triumphs of Napoleon over nature and other nations depicted in *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, Austen recognizes that ordinary people can possess the same strength and willpower of the heroes that Romantics revered. Through Elizabeth, she encourages the reader to use their own individual power to defend their beliefs, dignity, and right to pursue their own fulfillment, and to conquer challenges in their individual lives.

Austen challenges Kant’s idea of the sublime, which encourages humans to contemplate their own insignificance in comparison to the natural world, by depicting small-scale human affairs, such as personal relationships as more important. Interestingly, Austen addresses the sublime very directly. After being disappointed in the behavior of the men around her, such as Wickham pursuing a woman for purely mercenary reasons and Mr. Bingley leaving the county indefinitely, Elizabeth remarks on her excitement about her upcoming trip to the country with her aunt and uncle: “What are men to rocks and mountains? . . . And when we *do* return, it shall not be like other travellers, without being able to give one accurate idea of anything. We *will* know where we have gone—we *will* recollect what we have seen” (152). Here, Elizabeth pointedly acknowledges the powerlessness of man in comparison to the greater natural world, or “rocks and mountains,” and demonstrates an intention to continue to let nature impact her by planning to “recollect” what she sees.

Her great admiration for nature, though, lasts only as long as she is disgruntled by the other people in her life, and the human world quickly takes precedence over the natural world in her mind. When she is on her trip and touring the grounds of Pemberley, Elizabeth goes on “a beautiful walk” where “every step [brought] forward a nobler fall of ground, or finer reach of the woods to which they were approaching” (242). This seems

like it would be exactly the kind of scene that would trigger the appreciation for the natural world she expressed earlier. She is too preoccupied, though, with her recent interaction with Mr. Darcy to appreciate it: “she distinguished no part of the scene. Her thoughts were all fixed on that one spot of Pemberley House, whichever it might be, where Mr. Darcy then was” (242). By demonstrating how nature quickly falls away from Elizabeth’s thoughts when her relationship with Mr. Darcy develops, Austen illustrates how little “rocks and mountains” are to humans when compared to the personal affairs that have a much more tangible impact on their lives. When Elizabeth finally becomes engaged to Mr. Darcy, she writes to her aunt: “I am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but not one with such justice” (361). Here, Austen reveals that it is personal successes, like meaningful relationships, that create happiness and fulfillment in people’s lives.

While *Pride and Prejudice* empowers all people by celebrating the importance of human relationships and the heroic qualities ordinary people possess, it is groundbreaking in its empowerment of women. Remarkably, Elizabeth is portrayed as an equal to Mr. Darcy, the most esteemed male character in the novel. Rather than submitting herself to the whims of Mr. Darcy, as Jane is forced to do with Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth has just as much power as Mr. Darcy in determining the terms of their relationship. Elizabeth makes an active choice to reject Mr. Darcy’s original marriage proposal and only agrees to marry him when she is as convinced as he is that it is the right choice. In addition, Elizabeth is depicted as his intellectual equal; Darcy admires her for the “liveliness” of her mind (359). Elizabeth’s most remarkable and distinctive trait, though, is her strength. Elizabeth remains committed to her principles, even when faced with enormous societal and familial pressure to sacrifice her beliefs and chance at personal happiness. Through Elizabeth, Austen encourages women to use their inner strength to defy social expectations to stay true to themselves. In doing so, Austen establishes *Pride and Prejudice* as a groundbreaking feminist work and offers a new application of the Romantic ideal of individualism.