

## NOVEL OF MANNERS

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* represents English provincial life at the turn of eighteenth century. Society, as delineated in the novel is a stratified one and each class observes the rules of social conduct strictly. The characters in the novel range from titled aristocrats, landed gentry on the one hand to the pseudo-gentry who have earned their wealth through trade, on the other. The emergent urban commercial class is also given substantial representation to complete the social picture. While the representation of these classes gives the novel its social authenticity, what is common to all these social groups is the importance they attach to social manners and customs. Austen's narration closely studies the behaviour of the characters and critique it accordingly-frequently characters are defined by their social class. Also the class distinctions are observed quite closely and the characters belonging to the privileged class often judge those lower on the social hierarchy based on their lack of manners. Conversely, those belonging to the lower classes find the behaviour of the aristocrats to be arrogant and condescending. The novel, thus has certain affinities with the genre of comedy of manners (of the Restoration period) which focused on the lifestyle of the cavalier culture and had a sharp, satirical narrative style which we encounter in Austen's oeuvre too.

### Body:

- Meryton Assembly –contrast between Darcy's manners and Bingley's behaviour-later the community favour Wickham for his affability-Darcy's arrogance regarding his stature is further revealed in the manner he speaks poorly of Elizabeth's low social connections-but later developments of the plot reveal Wickham's hypocrisy and sham politeness-Darcy's change is also self-mediated as he takes Elizabeth's criticism that he was not gentleman enough and works upon it to change himself.
- Netherfield chapters-Caroline Bingley scorns Elizabeth's lack of social manners-yet ironically enough the Bingleys have earned their wealth through trade.
- Sir William Lucas who was also in trade and has been knighted. Yet he retains his congeniality and does not intimidate others with his social stature like the Bingleys.
- Mr Collins and Lady Catherine-Collins' obsequiousness is perhaps the trademark of his character –he uses the provision of the entail to intimidate the Bennets but he is servile before Lady Catherine his patron and Darcy. His deference for the nobility shows his hypocritical manners-Austen's satirical comments regarding Collins' behaviour should be mentioned.
- Mr and Mrs Gardener with their social civility also represent the newly emergent, urbane middle class.
- Lady Catherine represents the reactionary, conservative aspect of the erstwhile society.

- Finally Elizabeth Bennet the ‘gentleman’s daughter’ lends credibility to the manners of the landed gentry. Her class ascendancy is rendered believable by her good manners.

#### Conclusion:

• Nearly every character in the novel is defined by his manners or lack thereof. Austen’s narrative voice satirically observes the ways in which society judges people by their social manners and the yardstick of judgement most often proves to be faulty. The main plot involving Elizabeth and Darcy very significantly hinges on the way the couple misread each other’s intention through a false interpretation of their manners. But the first impressions are rectified and each becomes more perceptive of the worth of the other and learns to see beyond manners. Perhaps this is what Austen seems to be suggesting while delineating a society on the verge of momentous social change.

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