

“Narrative Perspective in *Pride and Prejudice*”

[This essay examines Austen’s “artful” use of narrative perspective in *Pride and Prejudice*, considering its role in producing suspense and in directing the reader’s attention to Elizabeth as the novel’s primary character.]

Consider the famous opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” The narrator seems to be standing outside the story, not yet observing the characters but gazing off into the middle distance for some reflections on life in general. But this impression does not last. As Mr. Bennet and “his lady” begin their dialogue, it rapidly becomes clear that the storyteller had them both in view when that opening generalization was made. It is an opinion, we find, that Mrs. Bennet would greet with a clapping of hands and little cries of joy—and one Mr. Bennet would send flying to the paradise of foolish ideas with a shaft of ridicule. The narrator ostensibly takes the responsibility for the opinion; but we see from the beginning that her observations are likely to bear an ironic relation to the views, and points of view, of her characters. This is our introduction to the quality of tough yet gentle irony that will control every page of the novel, making us feel a wonderful balance between sense and sensibility.

This artful control of overall narrative perspective in the service of Jane Austen’s irony is supported by a most subtle manipulation of point of view for the sake of the novel’s unity. Even a sleepy reader of this book must be well aware, before he has read very far, that it is Elizabeth Bennet’s story. But how does he know this? The title gives no clue, and Elizabeth is not the storyteller. The opening pages make it clear that the matrimonial prospects of the Bennet daughters will direct the action—but there are five daughters. True, three of them look far from promising: Mary is a pedantic bore; Lydia is an empty-headed flirt; Kitty is just empty-headed. But both Jane and Elizabeth are attractive and accomplished, and for several chapters it looks as if Jane’s chances with Bingley will bring the central action into focus, with Elizabeth playing some subsidiary role. How is it, then, that by the time we are quarterway through the novel—say by the time Mr. Collins makes his celebrated proposal to Elizabeth—it

has become perfectly clear that Elizabeth is the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, and that Jane is only a secondary character?

Partly, this is revealed by the sheer amount of attention the storyteller pays to Elizabeth, which increases rapidly as we move through the first eighteen chapters. This, of course, is itself a function of point of view. The storyteller chooses to gaze upon Elizabeth more and more often, and for longer and longer stretches of time. But the interesting fact is that this deliberate restriction of the narrator's privilege of gazing anywhere and everywhere is most stringently applied when the mechanics of the plot call, quite on the contrary, for attention to Jane. In chapter vii, Jane goes to visit Caroline Bingley at Netherfield. Mrs. Bennet's most sanguine hopes are fulfilled when Jane catches a bad cold on the way, and therefore has to spend several days with the Bingleys. But note that this is reported by letter; for when Jane leaves for Netherfield we do not go with her. The narrative perspective remains focused on the Bennet household, and particularly on Elizabeth; and it is not until Elizabeth decides to put sisterhood above gentility, and walks three miles across muddy fields, that we make our first entry into the Bingley household. Moreover, we see nothing of Jane until Elizabeth goes upstairs to nurse her; and even then we get a scanty glimpse, since Jane evidently is too sick to talk. By this time it begins to be obvious that the narrator is only slightly more interested in Jane than is the feline Miss Bingley, who tolerates her chiefly for the sake of Bingley's interest. Jane's relation to Bingley will be important in the plot, but much less for itself than as a necessary device to help build up Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy.

Actually, the narrator's audacity in slighting Jane is almost rude. When poor Jane emerges from her sickroom after several days (chap. xi), she is nearly ignored. Everyone greets her politely, of course; but although Bingley "then sat down by her and talked scarcely to anyone else," none of this tête-à-tête between the two nascent lovers is reported. On the other hand, a word-for-word rendering of a most lively conversation including Elizabeth, Bingley, his sister, and Darcy takes up the rest of the chapter; but for all she contributes to the scene, Jane might as well be stretched out asleep on a sofa like the languid Mr. Hurst, who is also present but inaudible.

About this time we also begin to be aware that the narrator's increasing attention to Elizabeth and neglect of Jane is not simply a matter of direction of gaze. We are induced to see much of Elizabeth, and not much of her older sister; but we also begin to see more and more of the action, and of the other characters, from Elizabeth's point of view. In chapter x, for example, just before the one in which Jane becomes so remarkably inconspicuous, we are quite specifically

encouraged to identify ourselves with Elizabeth at the beginning of the scene:

Elizabeth took up some needlework and was sufficiently amused in attending to what passed between Darcy and his companion. The perpetual commendations of the lady either on his handwriting, or on the evenness of his lines, or on the length of his letter, with the perfect unconcern with which her praises were received, formed a curious dialogue, and was exactly in unison with her opinion of each.

We are not told that Elizabeth smiles, or makes any other outward sign of her amusement. The narrative perspective has penetrated to Elizabeth's consciousness; the point of view has become hers not only physically, but psychically.

By means of such skillful technical maneuvering, Jane Austen gradually forces the action of *Pride and Prejudice* to coalesce around Elizabeth, and we are prepared for an essential part of that action to take place in the intimate and subtle chambers of her mind. When we reach the crisis of the novel with Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth (chap. xxxiv)—which, as a matter of structural nicety, comes exactly halfway through the book—we know that everything that follows must depend on her discovery of his true character. The groundwork is laid very shortly, in chapter xxxvi, which consists entirely of a searching analysis of Elizabeth's inward reactions to Darcy's letter of explanation. And the fact that her discovery is chiefly a psychological process, not an outward action, is stressed by her realization that it involves *self*-discovery. "Had I been in love," she cries (tantalizing the reader with the conditional), "I could not have been more wretchedly blind. . . . I have courted prepossession and ignorance and driven reason away where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself."

Thus the management of narrative perspective plays an essential part in establishing the unity of the action: it is Elizabeth's story, and it is the story of her sense and sensibility rather than her outward behavior. But now an intriguing question occurs. If Elizabeth is to be the center of vision, why is she treated, in the opening chapters, merely on an equal plane with the other principal characters? Why the delay in establishing her predominance?

There appear to be some very good reasons for this, having to do with the use of point of view to help create suspense. The most violent outward action in *Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps, is Elizabeth's leap over a puddle on her way to Netherfield. Clearly, the suspense in

this novel depends not on violent action, or even the threat thereof—despite Mrs. Bennet's nervous fears that Mr. Bennet will fight Wickham. It depends mostly on our waiting for Elizabeth to discover two things: that Darcy is in love with her; and that she is in love with Darcy. The reader must be led to suspect both of these things before Elizabeth does, or the suspense is lost. But if the point of view of the narration had been Elizabeth's from the start, the reader could hardly be aware that Darcy is falling in love; for Elizabeth, blinded by intense prejudice, never dreams of his affection. The storyteller therefore treats us to several direct insights into Darcy's mind in the early stages of the action: he begins by finding her eyes entrancing in chapter vi, and by chapter x is obliged to admit to himself that he "had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her." Once it is firmly established that Darcy is slipping, however reluctantly, the narrator can safely project the point of view to that of the prejudiced heroine; and from then on we rarely desert Elizabeth as the center of vision.

As for Elizabeth's falling in love with Darcy, it is something not accomplished until near the end of the book; but we must feel, surely, that it is something *begun* much earlier than Elizabeth herself realizes. To effect this, we must be able to see Darcy apart from Elizabeth's conscious bias: we must see him, almost from the start, as at least potentially worthy of her love. No doubt we begin to take this view of Darcy early, despite his snobbish behavior, partly because we know he is falling in love with Elizabeth. Since we have begun to like her very much ourselves, this stands to his credit in the face of her prejudice; it shows his discrimination. But, as we have seen, our knowledge that Darcy is falling in love would have been impossible if Elizabeth had become the center of vision too soon. Thus our respect for Darcy, which we must feel before believing that so estimable a heroine could fall in love with him, also depends on keeping the point of view away from Elizabeth for a certain length of time.

And what about Elizabeth's specific prejudices against Darcy? If there is to be an interesting degree of suspense, we must not share them wholeheartedly with her: we must believe, long before she does, that the foundations on which they rest are doubtful, so that we may anticipate her change of heart. There are three things Elizabeth seriously holds against Darcy: she thinks he has spoiled Jane's chances with Bingley; that he has done this because he despises the social position of her family; and that he has ruined Wickham's career without due cause. After she has accused Darcy of these faults and hurled his proposal back in his face, he writes her the long, painstaking letter in which he clears himself of the charges. And it deserves attention

that most of the grounds upon which he clears himself have been objectively established, early in the story—established, that is, in a way that would have been difficult or impossible in a narration primarily from Elizabeth's point of view. We must be left free to observe these grounds independent of Elizabeth, so that the possibility of romance between her and Darcy can beguile us long before it consciously dawns on her.

Darcy says, first, that Jane never displayed any love for Bingley, so to whisk him away to London could not be thought of as injuring Jane's emotions—and if we look back, we find that the narrator has carefully established this in the early chapters. Jane is so excessively demure that even when her heart is fluttering with romantic passion her manner shows only genteel pleasure and politeness. Even Elizabeth admits this, to Charlotte Lucas, in chapter vi; but it does not occur to her (as it may to the reader) that Bingley won't see through Jane's decorous disguise.

Darcy's explanation of why he wants to prevent marriage between Bingley and Jane is that he could not bear to see his friend marry into a family including such uncommonly ill-bred persons as Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, Kitty, and Mary: and we, the readers, have enjoyed generous exhibitions of their behavior, objectively related, from the opening pages of the novel. Although Darcy's disapproval on this score is damaging to the idea of romance between him and Elizabeth, it is not nearly so much so as her false conviction that he considers her family social station hopelessly beneath him.

Finally, Darcy's explanation of his treatment of Wickham, while it relies mostly on family history, brings to Elizabeth's attention certain improprieties in Wickham's behavior toward her—improprieties that were wide open to the reader's view in chapter xvi, even though at that time they were lost on Elizabeth. This chapter, in fact, is a kind of tour de force of narrative perspective: the point of view seems to be that of Elizabeth; yet in spite of many insights into her mental reaction to Wickham, the reader can maintain a certain detachment of judgment because the bulk of the chapter is fully recorded conversation—and what Wickham says constitutes his impropriety.

Thus the eminent part played by narrative perspective in establishing the artistic unity of *Pride and Prejudice* is achieved only by dint of some very skillful modification for the sake of dramatic suspense. Through a delicate balance between objective and subjective, we are given good reason to anticipate, with delicious anxiety, that Darcy and Elizabeth will wind up in each other's arms; yet Elizabeth, from whose point of view the story as a whole is focused, does not begin to perceive this denouement until near the end.

Two other points about Jane Austen's management of narrative perspective repay study. One has to do with what could be called her "kinaesthetics"—the sense of movement imparted by the author to the story, and the way in which this sense is controlled; the other, closely related, is her selectivity.

Much of *Pride and Prejudice* moves at the pace of life itself: the action is rendered with a degree of detail and fullness of dialogue that gives a highly developed dramatic illusion. But note how fast the storyteller can shift to drastic synopsis when it seems desirable to step up the action and move on to a scene essential to the plot. When Elizabeth is waiting at Longbourn for the Gardiners to come and take her on a tour of the Lake district, she is disappointed by a letter saying that they cannot start until two weeks later than planned, and consequently cannot go so far on their trip. Our shrewd narrator, however, has no intention of making us impatient without a purpose, and disposes of a whole month in two swift sentences: "Four weeks were to pass away before her uncle and aunt's arrival. But they did pass away, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner with their four children did at length appear at Longbourn." Geographical setting is dealt with just as jauntily: "It is not the object of this work," we are told a few lines further, "to give a description of Derbyshire, nor of any of the remarkable places through which their route thither lay. Oxford, Blenheim, Warwick, Kenilworth, Birmingham, etc., are sufficiently known." And just two pages later we are treading the plush carpets at Pemberley, ready for the next encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy.

When it comes to selectivity, the filters through which the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* habitually views the action are much more discriminating than those of any photographer, and they positively cut out much that is the stock in trade of the average novelist. What color is Elizabeth's hair? What did she wear at the Netherfield ball? What in the world do these people eat at all the dinners that are mentioned? What do Mr. and Mrs. Bennet look like? But the answers to these and a hundred similar questions it is the narrator's privilege to withhold: we must take what he (or she) chooses to give us. What Jane Austen chooses to give is pretty well summed up in her observation about Darcy and Elizabeth at the happy moment when Elizabeth finally accepts Darcy's hand: "They walked on, without knowing in what direction. There was too much to be thought and felt and said for attention to any other objects." Thought and feeling, and their verbal expression—this is the world of Jane Austen, so beautifully illuminated for us by her artistic control of narrative perspective.

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