To Say Or Not To Say Letters And Letter Writing As Seen In Pride And Prejudice Essay, Research Paper

To Say or Not to Say: Letters and Letter Writing

As Seen in Pride and Prejudice

Quite frequently in her novels, Jane Austen uses letter writing between characters to explain past events and the exact nature of people s roles in them. It is these letters that always offer great insight into a character s true nature; which, often times, is not what it appears to be. It is this tactic that is consistently prevalent in her 1813 novel, Pride and Prejudice.

Throughout the course of the novel, Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Gardiner, and even Mr. Collins all write letters, and each reveal their personalities and sincere thoughts through them. It is in fact the letter writing that initially contributes, and ultimately results, in the union of hero and heroine at the end of the story. For each enlightens the reader to the truth about confused circumstances as well as hidden feelings toward other characters that would otherwise be left unsaid.

The first significant example of letter writing that allows for some conclusions to be made about a specific character s persona occurs when Mr. Bennet receives a foolish letter from the Reverend Mr. Collins, who will inherit Longbourn after Mr. Bennet s death because he is the nearest male relative. In his letter, Mr. Collins proposes a visit to Longbourn and hints at a further proposal of marriage to one of the Bennet daughters. The reader quickly learns of this man s nature because of the contents of his letter as well as Mr. Bennet s reasoning behind his acceptance of the proposal. Mr. Bennet makes fun of his unusual writing style and pomposity, and also makes snide remarks to his family about him. Ultimately, Mr. Bennet agrees to the visit because he wants to laugh at Mr. Bennet s expectations.

Austen s strategy of presenting the qualities of a person by way of indirection is clearly seen here. The odious letter from Mr. Collins prepares the reader to dislike him even before he arrives. Without even meeting this man, his personality is learned by the excessive verbiage, pompous flattery, and self-pride evident in his letter. It is Elizabeth who is extremely perceptive about Mr. Collins letter because (after hearing it ) she immediately wonders if he can be a sensible man. And as the story unfolds, it is Mr. Collins every action that will prove her belief to be true.

Although the letter written by Mr. Collins allows for the reader to form an impression even before seeing him, it is not this letter that provides the reader with the most insight into the nature of its author. It is in fact the letter from Fitzwilliam Darcy, the proud and rich man who falls in love with Elizabeth, and after a time, makes her fall in love with him, that is the most important of the novel. The severity of the letter lies specifically in the reactions that it evokes from Elizabeth. It is only after her completion of Mr. Darcy s letter, that Elizabeth endures a great recognition of her own nature and a self-realization of her own pride and prejudice.

Elizabeth began reading the letter “with a strong prejudice against every thing he might say,” but as she reads the letter a second and third time, one or two things begin to strike her as being true. Once she has brought herself to accept one statement as being true, she then realizes that she must ultimately accept every fact as true or reject them all. As she reevaluates the sequence of events as they unfolded, Elizabeth begins to reevaluate Mr. Darcy himself. Suddenly, she cannot remember anything that Mr. Darcy has ever done which was not honorable and just. Her final realization is that she has been “blind, partial, prejudiced, and absurd.” Elizabeth has thus gained a moral insight into her own character and sees that she too has been blind. And as she gain awareness of others, she gains more and more awareness of herself. Elizabeth admits: “Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind.” Consequently, it is Elizabeth s character that increases in depth as she is able to analyze herself and come to these new and crucial conclusions.

Although it is the reaction by its reader that makes Mr. Darcy s letter so important, it is also the contents of the letter itself that allow for questions about his true nature to be answered. Writing more from injured pride than to renew his marriage proposal, Darcy is nevertheless sensitive and honest while justifying and explaining his actions. His complete acknowledgment of his faults and sincerity are evident throughout. The proud, prejudiced, and arrogant man we were introduced to at the beginning of the novel is nowhere to be found. Mr. Darcy s lack of guile and trickery, perceptive analysis of others, and his honest devotion to those he admires are all present in this letter. All of these are qualities which had never been expressed verbally, and are in fact seen here for the first time. And although he and Elizabeth are indeed both guilty of pride and prejudice, it is in the production of his honest letter where his true feeling are revealed and hers are in fact discovered.

Mrs. Gardiner, the intelligent and cultivated sister-in-law of Mrs. Bennet, has a relatively minor role in relation to that of Mr. Darcy; however, her letter is nevertheless important. It is Mrs. Gardiner s letter that ultimately clears up the confusion that Elizabeth felt towards Mr. Darcy and his involvement in the wedding of her sister , Lydia, as well as results in her realization that Mr. Darcy had done nothing but help the Bennet family.

Elizabeth was intensely curious as to the extent in which Mr. Darcy was involved, and wrote her aunt (Mrs. Gardiner) to demand more information that will enable her to answer the many question she has. Elizabeth also suspected that Mr. Darcy had involved himself because of his concern for her welfare. Indeed it is the reply that provides Elizabeth with those answers she desperately craved.

Mrs. Gardiner is steadfast and intelligent with all of her perception. She shows warmth, hope, understanding, and is also critical, however unbiased. These are all qualities previously seen in her character and they are profoundly illustrated in her thoughtful response to her niece. She writes with glowing praise about Mr. Darcy s character:

“Will you be very angry with me, my dear Lizzy, if I take this opportunity of saying (what I was never bold enough to say before) how much I like him. His behaviour to us has been pleasing as when we were in Derbyshire I thought him very sly.”

She also explains that the entire resolution to the problem concerning Lydia was brought about by him. This is critical because the revelation of Elizabeth concerning Mr. Darcy s role causes her to reconsider the influence she has on him. She is ashamed to think of how much he has done for her family, but she is deeply grateful. Thus, Elizabeth again has some hope for the future, and when Mr. Darcy next appears, she will receive him not as an independent woman but as a person deeply indebted to him.

Elizabeth also realizes from Mrs. Gardiner s letter that Lydia is enjoying the whole melodrama. She realizes again how shallow her younger sister really is, and how lacking she is in morality or social consciousness. Elizabeth s realization emphasizes the importance of Mrs. Gardiner s letter because it proves that the letter not only reveals her aunt s own endearing qualities, all the while enlightening Elizabeth to the truth, but also because it offers insight into the flighty personalities of some of the other members of the family.

In Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen uses letters to reveal the innermost thought of her characters as well as to express their personalities. These letters communicated style, intelligence (or lack there of), and insights into character development. Mr. Collins foolish letter revealed the blatant ridiculousness of his nature, while the letter of Mr. Darcy offered the sincere qualities of his persona that had never before been seen. And Mrs. Gardiner s letter did illustrate traits we had seen before, but also helped Elizabeth to figure out how she felt about Mr. Darcy. Whatever each letter accomplished, they are all critical to the structure of the novel. For without them, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth would have never gotten together, and neither character s pride nor prejudice would ever have been realized.

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