

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
Dr. Aruni Mahapatra
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee
Lecture - 16
Pride and Prejudice: Theme, Form & Style II

Hello learners and welcome to the fifth lecture in the module on *Pride and Prejudice*. In the previous lecture, I discussed briefly the opening sentences of the novel, and I gave a sense of how Jane Austen uses the literary device of irony to describe grave social inequality, specifically the lack of opportunities available to women in 18th and 19th century England regarding owning property and having financial well-being more generally.

The problem of inequality that existed in the society of her [Austen] time was described in a way that was very humorous and very stylish. There was a sentence in which the readers were jokingly told that that when a wealthy man moves into a neighborhood, the families and especially the parents of young single women begin to think of that wealthy young man as the property of one of their daughters. This is an instance of irony at work because the reality that the sentence is referring to is the inability of women and especially those single women to own property. However, despite this inequality and in fact, *because* of this inability of women to own property, they began to view marriage as the only means of securing a safe and sustainable future and therefore it led to a predatory gaze with which single men with wealth were seen as the property or potentially as the property of these families whose daughters might profitably marry this single man. Now, let us continue reading these opening sentences and see how from this opening the novel sets up its action, establishes its characters and generally creates an engaging story for the reader.

Now, the first sentence which I read out in the previous lecture are uttered by the omniscient narrator. Immediately after this sentence, we hear a character's voice. The narrator has mentioned that people think in a certain way that for families in these villages, a single man with fortune appears to be the potential property of their daughters. Immediately after this, the narrator stops, goes silent and lets characters speak. The first character says this, and I'm going to read from Jane Austen's words now:

"My dear Mr. Bennett", said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is", returned she, "for Mrs. Long has just been here and she told me all about it." Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it." [This is Mr. Bennet.]

This was invitation enough, [says the narrator.]

"Why, my dear, you must know Mrs. Long says the Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! single, my dear, to be sure. A single man of large fortune. Four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? How can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennett, how can you be so tiresome? You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design? Nonsense! How can you talk so? But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

So, you can see how in the first page, before the reader has completed reading the first chapter of the novel, the reader gets a sense of the dynamic at stake in this novel. The dynamic may be summarized thus: there is a character, Mrs. Bennett, who is striving, who is hoping fervently and wishing that through a quirk of circumstance, a series of coincidences or accidents or otherwise a chain of events which is not designed or scripted but occurs through the natural order of things. Through some such arrangement this young and wealthy single man who has arrived in the nearabouts of their town, of their place of living, falls in love with one of her daughters. That is her primary goal and

intention. As a parent and especially as a mother, she cares deeply for the well-being of her children and especially her daughters. And she's very aware that as women, as girls, the only way for them to have a secure future is to marry a man with a great deal of wealth. She knows these facts. Therefore, when she hears that a wealthy man is about to move into their neighborhood, she firmly hopes that this event can lead to another event which is his falling in love with one of her daughters.

The interesting thing to note in the scene is that the narrator, the omniscient, all-seeing, third-person narrator whom Jane Austen deploys to convey this information to readers arranges so that we learn about this desire and this somewhat difficult situation in which Mrs. Bennett is from a conversation that she has with Mr. Bennett, her husband. It is also important to note how Mr. Bennett plays ignorant. He *pretends* to be ignorant. He pretends to not understand the source or the reason for his wife's excitement and anxiety and a combination of excitement and anxiety which generally causes her to be in a somewhat agitated state. And he does not do this out of sheer lack of understanding or knowledge. It will become very clear to readers later on that Mr. Bennett is very well aware, shrewd, sharp and very discerning. And he derives some pleasure from Mrs. Bennett, his wife, having to clarify things that she takes for granted and she hopes that others would also take for granted. What are these things? What I just explained, how this situation can turn into a happy ending, can lead to the beginning of a new future for one of her daughters. Mrs. Bennett requests and places a very strong injunction on Mr. Bennett to go and call on this gentleman, whose name is Mr. Bingley. And to ensure that the families begin correspondence, a social intercourse. That they meet for lunch, for evenings out, that they are invited to dances and so on. We are introduced to these characters and this rich, wealthy young man who has just moved into this country village, along with another character in the very next chapter in which there is a ball and a lot of people meet each other. In this chapter, the narrator introduces both this man whose imminent arrival has produced such agitation in Mrs. Bingley and another character, Mr. Darcy. I want to read the paragraph which introduces Darcy because it says something very crucial about how this novel invites us to view individuals and human beings, what kind of demarcations, social factors, economic factors, and generally how this novel identifies human beings as characters. So, at the ball, from the perspective of the reader, for the benefit of the reader who was not there, the narrator describes people. This is what Austen's narrator writes.

Mr. Bingley was good-looking and gentleman-like. He had a pleasant countenance and easy, unaffected manners. His sisters were fine women, with an air of decided fashion. His brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst, merely looked the gentleman; but his friend Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year.

Now, the structure of this last sentence is crucial to understanding a very fundamental truth about the social universe that Jane Austen's novel describes and the universe which lays down the rules for interactions within human beings. The sentence begins by describing qualities of the individual, material qualities of his face, of the shape, of the way he appears, and ends by mentioning a number '10,000 a year'. Two numbers, if one is being specific. The first number is the amount of money that he earns and the second number is the period over which he gets that money. And the combined effect of these two numbers is that they situate this individual in the social and economic hierarchy of 18th century England. And the number '10,000 pounds a year', places Mr. Darcy at the very top of that hierarchy. We have just read a passage in which we learned that Mr. Bingley, the other young man, wealthy, single and wealthy young man who has just moved to this neighborhood, has about four to five thousand a year. So, this is more exciting or *should* be even more exciting and produce more agitation for someone like Mrs. Bennett who was excited enough, and could barely contain it at the knowledge that Mr. Bingley has four or five thousand a year. The signs all point in one direction that Mr. Darcy's arrival as an invitee, as a friend of Mr. Bingley should produce more excitement. However, that is not quite what happens. And as the remainder of this paragraph makes it clear. Let us read to find out what is the consequence of these two kinds of information. On one hand, the appearance of Mr. Darcy, which is quite pleasing and generally very agreeable and on the other hand his economic position which is also very intimidating and I'm sure very exciting for potential suitors.

The gentleman pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity. For he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire

could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.

What we see in this passage is a key introduction and the use of a word which gives the novel its title. That word is 'proud', and I'm sure attentive readers will have noticed how this word produces a very strange and disconcerting effect on readers who have so far been predisposed to admire and appreciate this character. This quality called pride, and the inclination that this person has to be proud counters all the good work that his appearance and his wealth have done so far in producing a favorable reception for him in this country village. Not only is he not liked, but he is especially disliked because despite being a good friend of Mr. Bingley he has exactly the opposite characteristics. And how is Mr. Darcy's pride understood and demonstrated? He seems to be "above his company", above being pleased, and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance.

So, we see something quite contradictory happening here. So far, we have been given to believe that wealth alone determines the value, the pleasantness and the worth that is associated with a man. So far, we've been given to believe that if a single man is wealthy, then that's all he needs to do to attract a legion of single women who will all want to secure his hand in marriage. Here, however, we read something else. We find that it is not enough to be wealthy. In fact, even though Mr. Darcy has a greater amount of wealth and his estate in Derbyshire and it's supposedly a very large estate so far we have not had any direct evidence from the narrator or any of the characters who visited or seen this estate but his reputation has travelled with him and from his reputation, rumours and hearsay, the narrator is able to confirm with some degree of confidence that he has a large estate which ensures that he has that very large income of 10,000 pounds a year. Despite having this very large income, his personal behaviour, his attitude and in particular his pride undoes everything that would make him attractive and he is considered disagreeable, forbidding and generally unworthy.

Immediately after this chapter, we read a chapter in which the daughters of Mrs. Bennet and among these daughters there are two of them on whom the novel focuses our attention in greater detail, they are Jane and Elizabeth. Elizabeth, as we will soon find out, will be the protagonist of the novel and the narrator will provide Elizabeth with a great deal of authority. The narrator will trust Elizabeth's perspective because Elizabeth's perspective will come closest to describing what is objective and what is true. In the chapter immediately after the ball, we witness a conversation between Elizabeth and

Jane. And in this conversation, these two sisters exchanged notes on what they had perceived in the character of these guests. Who are these guests? Mr. Bingley, who is about to move into the neighbourhood, his friend, Mr. Darcy, who's traveled with him and Mr. Bingley's sisters. Now, back home from this ball, Elizabeth and Jane are talking. And Jane has just made a comment about how Mr. Bingley's sisters are quite agreeable women. And in response, this is what Elizabeth has to say and think in the words of Austin's narrator.

Elizabeth listened in silence but was not convinced; their behaviour [that is, Mr Bingley's sister] their behaviour at the assembly had not been calculated to please in general; and with more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister, and with a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself, she was very little disposed to approve them. They were, in fact, very fine ladies, not deficient in good humour when they were pleased, nor in the power of being agreeable where they chose it; but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others. They were of a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade.

This long description of Elizabeth's critical thinking or her ability to weigh a great deal of information, background information, contextual information, before reaching a conclusion or before granting her approval to whether she admired or liked a certain individual, gives us a sense of how the narrator approaches human relationships. The novel is written in a time when there was a great deal of emphasis on propriety, on not being kind or being proper but showing that one was in fact kind. The novel is written when people set a great deal of emphasis on appearances and therefore it becomes even more important for individual observers to use the critical faculty of thinking how much one is displaying and what is truly meaningful or an act of true kindness. Elizabeth is a very discerning observer of human interactions and therefore she observes clearly and analyzes critically what these Bingley sisters were doing. Her conclusion is that the Bingley sisters had everything in their favor. They occupied a material and social position which made it easy for them to display a certain kind of attitude and behavior towards

others. And she calls that 'pride'. The last sentence of the first half of this paragraph, the words proud and conceited are used. Elizabeth understands, she forgives, and accepts that for a certain kind of individual, born and raised in a certain way, a certain kind of behavior comes naturally. And in the case of the Bingley sisters, going to private seminaries, having a fortune of 10,000 pounds, these things necessitated, almost automated, a certain kind of behavior. And so, there was nothing to admire, but of course, there was nothing to dislike in this behavior either. We see how Jane is so much more forgiving and Elizabeth is so much more discerning in this conversation. The last sentence of the summary of Elizabeth's understanding and consideration is important for understanding class in this novel.

In Elizabeth's view, the Bingley sisters came from a respectable family in the north of England and this was a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade. What does this sentence mean? It's a very subtle indication of how attitudes towards class were changing and how different individuals thought in different ways about class. Elizabeth is sharp in observing that for the Bingley sisters, their present circumstance, which is that they were born to a respectable family in the north of England, that is more important or that has come to seem to be more important than another fact. Which is that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade. The word trade here indicates that the wealth that the Bingley's have is new money. It was not inherited through their connection to royalty or by the fact that they inherited land. Rather, they made their fortune through owning businesses. These are the two kinds of ways in which wealth was generated in Austen's England. And there was a very deep-seated social condescension towards new money. As we'll soon find out, the difference between Bingley and Darcy is the difference between new and old money. Darcy's 10,000 pounds a year, about which we've just been told, comes from land that he has inherited. They don't have business interests and that money has not come from trade. So, Elizabeth has discerned a certain desire, a certain inclination in the Bingley sisters to think of themselves in a certain way. Elizabeth does not believe that money or wealth acquired from trade is better or worse than wealth acquired through inheritance. Rather, Elizabeth has noticed that the Bingley sisters are conscious of a social condescension, and they would like to be seen as coming from older money than from newer money. So, it is this discernment, it is this observation that the Bingley sisters not only have a certain amount of wealth but would rather be thought of as having a certain kind of wealth which disposes Elizabeth to think of them in a less than ideal manner. And this is also an indication of how deeply these lines of class division run

through Austen's novels and how different characters become real for us readers in the way in which they perceive these class divisions.

Now, continuing this discussion of very subtle but very real and very deep class divisions in the novel, we are introduced to another family, that is, that of the Lucases, who are the immediate neighbours of the Bennets. The fourth chapter of the novel begins:

Within a short walk of Longbourn lived a family with whom the Bennets were particularly intimate. Sir William Lucas had been formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune and risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the king during his mayoralty. The distinction had perhaps been felt too strongly. It had given him a disgust to his business and to his residence in a small market town; and quitting them both, he had removed with his family to a house about a mile from Meryton denominated from that period Lucas lodge where he could think with pleasure of his own importance, and unshackled by business, occupy himself solely in being civil to all the world. For though elated by his rank, it did not render him supercilious; on the contrary, he was all attention to every body. By nature inoffensive, friendly and obliging, his presentation at St. James's had made him courteous.

In this description of Sir William Lucas, we understand more clearly what Austen's narrator meant when she described Elizabeth's perception of how the Bingley sisters view their wealth as coming from trade. Sir William Lucas is an example of a man who has made his fortune from a kind of trade. But after generating a certain kind of income, he decides to change his occupation and to move away from the associations of trade and to make a certain sacrifice. What is that sacrifice? He decides to unshackle himself from business and occupy himself in being civil to all the world. This is a decision that Mr. Bingley and his ancestors have not made. They have decided to continue to make their income and their wealth from trade, and to accumulate more and more wealth through trade and by that source of income to consolidate their position in this social universe. We see a contrast between William Lucas, who subscribes to a very old way of thinking, in whose view wealth that is produced from trade is not as desirable as wealth that is inherited. And this is the difference between Mr. Lucas and Mr. Bingley. And this is also the difference, or this indicates the sacrifice that Mr. Lucas makes when he decides to hold on to the title of Sir William Lucas, that is after he has been awarded this knighthood by the king, and gives up his financial and material interests in trade.

We will continue the discussion of class and in particular focus on this household of the Lucases, and understand how these different understandings of wealth, class have a very fundamental and defining impact on the women in these two families. And we will continue that discussion in the next lecture.