

The Fools and the Nerds in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

By

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Abstract

In my paper, I would like to present Lydia and Mary Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* as examples of young girls during Jane Austen's time who have taken a personality trait to such an extreme that it affects their social lives equally badly. Book learning and folly, though seemingly opposite, prove to be equally destructive when it comes to a young girl's place in society. I will also suggest that Lydia and Mary Bennet are influenced by a parent-daughter relationship with Mrs. and Mr. Bennet, respectively, and argue that the two daughters have taken that parent's predominant personality trait to such an extreme that they have turned into their parents' parody doubles. I would like to finally prove that Jane Austen encourages moderation in her heroines – a more balanced personality secures a happy ending for a woman during Jane Austen's time, as can be proved by the characters of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet. Keeping in mind the importance of social decorum during that time, I will explore the extreme choices of some of the heroines in the novel and why "the middle way" is the best option for a young girl during Jane Austen's time.

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I. Introduction

The fool, being essentially the embodiment of a single trait, may become an archetypal figure – the only kind possible in realistic comedy like Jane Austen’s.

John Lauber

In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, we can see both examples of foolish and nerdy characters who have taken their predominant personality traits to an excessive point. This excessiveness – in social frivolity, on one hand, and in book learning, on the other – is not only foolish but also a recipe for social outcasts. *Pride and Prejudice* explores the consequences of excessive behavior on both the foolish and the nerdy characters. One social outcast is Lydia Bennet, who only occupies herself in mindless activities, such as gossiping and flirting with officers, and has an unquenchable thirst for loud and active “living” and demonstrative *joie de vivre*. Unfortunately, her behavior goes against social norms at the time, so her folly becomes an extreme that threatens her and her family’s reputation. On the other end of the spectrum, we have Mary Bennet who has no social presence, since her sole occupation is reading; thus, exclusive book learning turns into isolation from society as well.

In my paper, I would like to present Lydia and Mary Bennet as examples of young girls during Jane Austen’s time who have taken a personality trait to such an extreme that it affects their social lives equally badly. Book learning and folly, though seemingly opposite, prove to be equally destructive when it comes to a young girl’s place in society. I will also suggest that Lydia and Mary Bennet are influenced by a parent-daughter relationship with Mrs. and Mr.

Bennet, respectively, and argue that the two daughters have taken that parent's predominant personality trait to such an extreme that they have turned into their parents' parody doubles. I would like to finally prove that Jane Austen encourages moderation in her heroines – a more balanced personality secures a happy ending for a woman during Jane Austen's time, as can be proved by the characters of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet. Keeping in mind the importance of social decorum during that time, I will explore the extreme choices of some of the heroines in the novel and why "the middle way" is the best option for a young girl during Jane Austen's time.

It is important to consider the historical period in which Jane Austen lived and wrote. She was born on 16 December 1775 and died on 18 July 1817, having written *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813. Indeed, all of Austen's novels were published in the early nineteenth century; thus, we may be tempted to call her a nineteenth-century writer. However, most of her life was spent in the eighteenth century, so we are equally justified to call her an eighteenth-century writer. During her life, though young, Austen witnessed two very important historical events – the American Revolution (1775) and the French Revolution (1789), and though "England... managed to avoid a revolution of its own..., it felt the effects of the revolutionary tide: there were riots and other expressions of discontent with the status quo" (Hannon 5). We can notice the traces of war in *Pride and Prejudice*, since Lieutenant Wickham (the man with whom Lydia elopes) and the rest of the militia officers play an important role in the novel. However, Austen did not aim to show us the political history of England through her novels –

Napoleon was still master of most of Western Europe, and... the England of Jane Austen was still engaged in a life-and-death struggle with him. The fact that her novel completely ignores all this is significant. Jane Austen was a great artist, and

she knew very well that her fiction could only be effective if it were kept within certain definite limits. It is all a question of proportion and scale (Priestley 95).

Indeed, Austen seems to remain apolitical in a turbulent historical period. Janet Todd points out:

In her novels and letters, she has little to say about the political personalities and issues of the day such as the threat of Napoleon, the Duke of Wellington or the Battle of Waterloo. The burden of heavy taxation to pay for the war effort goes unmentioned; so do unemployment, poor laws and the role of parish relief; and the vicious punishment involved in military floggings (359).

Of course, we cannot claim that Austen was oblivious to the contemporary political situation or ignorant of her surroundings, because, as mentioned, in *Pride and Prejudice*, we have a strong presence of the army. Issues such as inheritance, increasing wealth and social advancement are also brought up in the novel and can be linked to the political reality at the time. Still, Austen offers these political glimpses of her age but focuses more on the sociological and psychological realm of her characters' world.

The period in which Austen lived and wrote also marked a very interesting junction between the Age of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. During the Enlightenment, reason was seen as the driving force of the intellectual, political, social and cultural spheres of life. By contrast, during Romanticism, there was a stronger emphasis on emotion. Up until the early 1800s, British culture was governed by Neoclassicism, relying heavily on tradition, measure, and control. Romanticism, on the other hand, promoted self-expression, which is reflected in the unique, rebellious and nonconformist nature of the characters. Thus, it is interesting to look at *Pride and Prejudice* through a historical prism. The novel belongs to the years of transition between these movements and is an example of a “paradigm shift,” where the heroines

adequately reflect “the movement of early nineteenth-century British culture from a world that is governed by neoclassical norms... to a Romantic world, one aware of feelings, one that celebrates emotion” (Scott 232). Referring to Austen’s handling of the specific period of time in English history during which she wrote, Curry notes:

All of Austen’s fiction examines the conventions of the novel and contributed to helping Britain to define itself as a cohesive nation in the Eighteenth through the early Nineteenth Century. Narrated from a woman's perspective, her fiction personalizes this process of self-discovery as conflicts between rational and emotional responses.

Of course, this strongly reminds us of Jane Austen’s first novel – *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811. The novel, which was initially titled *Elinor and Marianne*, reflects the duality of the period. The heroine of Elinor Dashwood is very composed and sensible, whereas her younger sister Marianne is spontaneous, excessively sensitive and romantically idealistic. However, many argue that “rather than reading Elinor Dashwood as a spokesperson for Sense, or reason, and Marianne for Sensibility, ... each character grapples with both” (Curry). In other words, the two sisters are not complete opposites, but have to a certain degree both sense and sensibility, so that proportion of one or the other is what distinguishes them. *Sense and Sensibility*, even in its title, presents directly the conflict between reason and emotion, and although some of the sisters may seem more composed than the ones in *Pride and Prejudice*, they too have their extreme moments. Similar to Lydia, Marianne almost ruins her social standing in her extreme reaction to Willoughby. Elinor, on the other hand, shows more restraint in her behavior, yet suffers for it. In *Pride and Prejudice* extreme behaviors are perhaps more

noticeable when it comes to extreme sense and extreme sensibility which can be roughly matched with the folly and book learning of Lydia and Mary Bennet, respectively.

Folly and book learning find their expressions in the numerous fools and nerds in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, particularly in the relationships between Mrs. Bennet and Lydia, and Mr. Bennet and Mary. The sociable and extroverted Lydia, and the nerdy and introverted Mary, being equally foolish and socially unreasonable, stand in sharp contrast with the two eldest Bennet sisters. By the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, we can distinguish Jane Austen's concept of society as a necessity, and happy endings as the reestablishment of the good world order.

II. Fools

Readers have always taken an enormous delight in “literary fools.” There certainly are plenty of fools in *Pride and Prejudice* that can make us feel good about ourselves, but they are each unique: “Jane Austen does not repeat herself in her fools any more than in her heroines” (Lauber 511). These fools not only make us laugh at their misfortunes and feel superior, but they also develop the action in the novel, drive its plot, and emphasize important themes.

In order to understand the potentially catastrophic effects of Lydia’s folly, we need to examine the character of her mother, Mrs. Bennet – not only one of *Pride and Prejudice*’s biggest and most self-imposing fools, but also, according to Amis, “one of the greatest comic nightmares in all literature” (83). She is a foolish and uninformed woman, and the narrator alludes to her unreasonableness early on in the book: “She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (Austen 4). Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley find Mrs. Bennet “intolerable” (14), and, whereas her daughters certainly are her main concern, she often manages to promote herself. When Jane needs to stay at the residence of Mr. Bingley because of sickness and the heavy rain, Mrs. Bennet is ecstatic for her daughter spending more time with such a “single man in possession of a good fortune” – “The rain continued the whole evening without intermission; Jane certainly could not come back. ‘This was a lucky idea of mine, indeed!’ said Mrs. Bennet, more than once, as if the credit of making it rain were all her own” (Austen 1, 22). Other women would be concerned for their daughter’s health; however, Mrs. Bennet’s priority of looking after her daughters is limited to marrying them off.

Fools like to expose themselves by exaggerating their importance, as Lady Catherine does, but also by dramatizing their situation. After Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins' marriage proposal, her mother seems devastated, taking her daughter's refusal as a personal offense: "nobody is on my side, nobody takes part with me, I am cruelly used, nobody feels for my poor nerves... Nobody can tell what I suffer!" (Austen 78,9). The aggrandizement of one's poor circumstances not only selfishly demands the attention of others, but also embarrassingly reveals one's folly. At another social event, the foolish Mrs. Bennet, recognizing no limits at all, loudly expresses her conviction that Jane will soon marry Mr. Bingley, thus causing Elizabeth much shame:

In vain did Elizabeth endeavour to check the rapidity of her mother's words, or persuade her to describe her felicity in a less audible whisper;... Her mother only scolded her for being nonsensical... Elizabeth blushed and blushed again with shame and vexation (Austen 69).

Being greedy and insolent, Mrs. Bennet foolishly discusses with other people something that is not only private but also very uncertain at this point in the novel. Thus, she not only embarrasses herself and her daughters, but also puts off other people, such as Mr. Darcy, who overhears the conversation and is repelled by Mrs. Bennet's presumptuous nature and blatant attempt to secure a wealthy husband for her daughter. Folly often leads to impropriety, and Mrs. Bennet is definitely improper, embarrassing her daughters and unconsciously threatening their chances of finding good husbands – "the general pause which ensued made Elizabeth tremble lest her mother should be exposing herself again" (Austen 31).

Mrs. Bennet believes a person's merit and significance can be measured according to that person's position in society. She firmly believes that by flirting, a woman can find herself a

deserved place in society, since marriage is the ultimate prize her daughters can get. Her persistence permeates the entire novel, but is especially comical when she finds out that Elizabeth, “the least dear to her of all her children” (Austen 72) is marrying Mr. Darcy, for whom she has professed her dislike not once or twice before:

“Oh! My sweetest Lizzy! How rich and how great you will be! What pin money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! ... Oh, my dear Lizzy! Pray apologise for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy. A house in town! Everything that is charming! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me? I shall go distracted!” (Austen 255).

The shallow Mrs. Bennet equals wealth and social status to complete happiness. She is well aware that “life... is conducted almost entirely in the public sphere” (Allen 433). For Mrs. Bennet, socializing can be mathematically measured by the number of families she has dinner with - “as to not meeting with many people in this neighbourhood, I believe there are a few neighbourhoods larger. I know we dine with four and twenty families” (Austen 30). She can also “assess romantic interest by counting proposals to dance” (Allen 440). According to her, social success and success in life are interchangeable. We can say that Lydia is actually a parody of her mom because Mrs. Bennet’s flaws – folly, frivolity, and overstepping social boundaries - multiply in Lydia. The latter has not been properly brought up and taught manners, so her flaws reach the point of dangerous defects. Her folly makes her run away with Mr. Wickham without marrying him, which can be disastrous not only for her own reputation, but also for that of her entire family:

... in Jane Austen's universe, elopement is a tractable delinquency, provided the absconders marry very soon, preferably before nightfall. Should she neglect the wedlock end of it, however, the woman will face an isolation...: "irremediable infamy," ostracism, demimondaindom. Lydia languishes for two whole weeks with Wickham before the affair is patched and pelfed together; thus, Lydia's virtue is precariously and, as it were, retroactively preserved (Amis 87).

Through her folly, Lydia risks being rejected from society.

As mentioned above, one of the reasons Lydia's folly reaches such dangerous proportions is that she has never been given any limitations - "Lydia was a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humoured countenance; a favourite with her mother, whose affection had brought her into public at an early age. She had high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence" (Austen 31). She comes across as spoiled - she is the youngest Bennet daughter and as such, many exceptions are made for her. At the same time, she is the one earliest introduced into society. An excessiveness that we could attribute to Lydia is her living an impulsive life and following her "natural" instincts, without ever referring to books. Lydia's natural recklessness, combined with her inadequate bringing up, leads to her disastrous elopement and marriage. Thus, we cannot simply label her, or any character in the novel for that matter, "stupid" because she is not so much mentally deficient, as a "self-made" fool (Lauber 512). However, in her "self-making," she is also being helped by her "double" - her mother, but also by her father, which I will prove later in my paper.

Mrs. Bennet and Lydia are completely dependent on society - they have the need and desire to belong in it and participate in it as much as possible. That is why social situations and activities define them - Mrs. Bennet's sole purpose in life is to marry off her daughters and thus

achieve social recognition, which is perfectly acceptable to Lydia and her “vacant” mind (Austen 20). Ironically, Mrs. Bennet and Lydia are not well-respected within the “proper” society they long to be a vital part of. Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley also find Lydia, one of the biggest fools in the Bennet family, “not worth speaking to” (Austen 14). Lydia can “talk of nothing but officers” (20) and her obsession with them is amusing – she likes their uniforms and the way they look. The fact that she never mentions being attracted to qualities such as their courage or moral fiber, suggests that these are notions too abstract to reach her mind. Her shallowness and immaturity are also revealed in her inability to concentrate on one person or activity for a longer period of time – “... she was a most determined talker; but being likewise extremely fond of lottery tickets, she soon grew too much interested in the game, too eager in making bets and exclaiming after prizes, to have attention for anyone in particular” (Austen 53). As her mother’s true daughter, the charming Lydia sees marriage as the ultimate goal in her life because this is the only form of social success a woman could achieve back then. Charlotte Lucas’ marrying the pompous and disagreeable Mr. Collins embodies this idea:

Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasant preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it (Austen 85).

For that reason, everything related to marriage involves much time and energy; getting married equals victory. The process of finding a husband involves strategic thinking and tactics, just like hunting, and Mrs. Bennet is the ultimate hunter.

Since the role of society is so important in the world of Jane Austen, it is of little wonder that balls and dancing (a key social activity) are such a vital part of the novel. Balls are an interesting social form in the novel, since they are used in two very different ways by the foolish Lydia and the moderate Jane and Elizabeth. For Lydia, balls are an intensified form of social life; there is glamour, music, flirting, and lots of possibilities for making contacts and solidifying relationships. Balls are a form of pure enjoyment; they exclude serious conversations, as Miss Bingley points out – “It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day” (Austen 38). Balls represent a constant exchange of good impressions. Thus, Lydia feels at her element at a ball, where she can dance, flirt, and be beautiful. When talking to Mr. Wickham at a ball, “at first there seemed a danger of Lydia’s engrossing him entirely, for she was a most determined talker” (Austen 53). She feels at her best in such an environment, where she can verbally and physically express herself in society. Thus, for Lydia, balls and dancing form the arena where she can openly express her emotions, be loud and be noticed. Indeed Lydia thrives in an environment of “crowds and noise (with the difference that she makes much of the noise herself)” (Lauber 518) – “we were so merry all the way home! We talked and laughed so loud that anybody might have heard us ten miles off” (Austen 222). At a ball she can flirt as foolishly and extensively as she wants to, so she’s not ashamed of demanding more opportunities for it –

She was very equal therefore to address Mr. Bingley on the subject of the ball, and abruptly reminded him of his promise; adding that it would be the most shameful thing in the world if he did not keep it. His answer to this sudden attack was delightful to their mother’s ear (Austen 31).

Lydia is very straightforward and determined when it comes to getting what she wants.

However, whereas these qualities are encouraged in our time, during Jane Austen's time she would have come off as spoiled and impertinent, especially compared to her moderate elder sisters.

For Lydia, balls are an opportunity to meet and flirt with officers –

The happiness anticipated by Catherine and Lydia depended less on any single event, or any particular person, for though they each, like Elizabeth, meant to dance half the evening with Mr. Wickham, he was by no means the only partner who could satisfy them, and a ball was, at any rate, a ball (Austen 60).

However, for the more moderate Jane and Elizabeth, who follow social decorum, balls, and dancing in particular, play a more special role. Since Jane Austen shies away from public displays of affection in her novels, her heroines don't have that many opportunities to express their emotions. For Jane and Elizabeth, dancing is a cultural form which polite society sees as one of the "accomplishments" of young women. During a discussion with Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, Miss Bingley mentions dancing as one of the social skills that a truly accomplished young girl should possess. But for Jane and Elizabeth, this is also the social form that allows them to arouse their strong emotions without disturbing the social order and, of course, without reaching such an extreme as Lydia has reached in her elopement. Austen herself admits to the importance of dancing, saying that "to be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love" (7).

Indeed, Jane and Bingley fall in love with each other while dancing. For the moderate and sensible sisters, dancing is a way to awaken their emotions without disturbing social decorum:

As a means of courtship which is also a social skill, dancing serves to constrain such feelings within the social structure... Controlled by etiquette, it nonetheless introduces an element of emotional vertigo, allowing in an ordered setting the eruption of feelings which are normally concealed... Regulating and yet rousing emotion, the dance provides a culturally approved arena in which desire can be expressed and yet controlled (Allen 430, 1).

Thus, one way to see the difference between the foolish Lydia and the moderate Jane and Elizabeth is to observe their different approaches toward the same social event – the ball.

Lydia's behavior at balls and other social situations contributes to her foolish portrait. Her folly, though, culminates with her elopement with the feckless Mr. Wickham. She lives with him without being married to him, which automatically excludes her from society and also threatens her family's reputation. Her elopement is worrying because it shows desire's dangerous effects of leading "an individual to violate cultural rules, to leave willingly the bounds of society and respectability" (Allen 438). Lydia is not just foolish, but dangerously foolish - her folly has gone too far and is now "antithetical to the social order" (438). Lydia is too extreme in her natural impulses and desires for the established social norm. Mrs. Bennet may be perceived as an annoying and foolish woman, but Lydia's folly is her disgrace, which almost leads her to her downfall. Luckily, with Mr. Darcy's help, marriage resurrects Lydia, though this is achieved by bribing Mr. Wickham.

What is worrying about Lydia is that there is a complete absence of rational thought in her impulsive behavior. What is worse is that neither she nor her mother notices society's disapproval. After Lydia's foolish act, Mrs. Bennet excludes herself from society by withdrawing to her room. Once her daughter gets married, however, Mrs. Bennet returns to

society with a great force, perfectly happy in her ignorance. Mrs. Bennet is not capable of distinguishing the worthy from the unworthy when it comes to marriage, because after all, “a marriage is a marriage,” so it doesn’t matter how worthless her daughter’s husband may be (Lauber 517). Thus, after narrowly escaping the social humiliation of her family, Mrs. Bennet is quick to forget the ordeal without learning anything from it, thus proving that “the fool remains a fool” (517). Lydia is the same way: although she has gone through a catastrophic elopement, she has not changed an ounce – “Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless” (Austen 315).

It is important to note that, although Lydia does marry Mr. Wickham and saves herself and her family from social humiliation, she is not fully satisfied at the end of the novel. Her relationship with her husband is not only far from ideal, but it has turned into a mutual apathy – “His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer” (Austen 261). Thus, the expressive Lydia does not really satisfy her emotional thirst. So what is the problem? After all, Lydia does get married and the name of the Bennet family stays untarnished. The problem is that Lydia does not learn from her experience, so her folly carries its consequences. She is faced with a terribly dangerous prospect that she avoids thanks to Mr. Darcy, but instead of learning from her mistake and changing her ways, she stays the same loud and wild girl. She is too eager to satisfy her desires, instead of patiently waiting, like Elizabeth and Jane. Thus, Lydia has been, in a way, punished because of her folly. Lydia is foolish enough to reject “personal repression or cultural restrictions of her desires” (the way Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* does) and spoiled enough to seek instant satisfaction of her emotional needs; thus, “having refused to lack anything, Lydia ends the novel unsatisfied” (Allen 436). Desire is a criterion by which we can judge the folly of the heroines, and conclude that Lydia’s imperfect

picture at the end of the novel is a result of her desire that has been let loose and satisfied too early.

That being said, we should not forget that this not-so-perfect-ending for Lydia is actually the best outcome she could have hoped for. If Mr. Wickham hadn't married her, she would have been completely shunned from society or wasted away, having children out of wedlock, as it happens to many seduced women in Austen's novels – "In each of her novels, a seduced-and-abandoned plot is embedded in the form of an interpolated tale told to the heroine as a monitory image of her own problematic story" (Victorian Web). Indeed, taboo topics such as seduced young women, adultery, and couples who live together out of wedlock, were included in Austen's novels because they were part of the world Austen was living in. Yet again, Jane Austen shows herself as kind even to the fools. She is good enough to restore the order and let Lydia have a "proper" ending, but not necessarily a happy one. She saves her heroine, because, after all, *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel about love and happy endings. However, she reminds us that foolish people who do not learn from their mistakes would never achieve ultimate happiness.

Looking back at Lydia's folly, we cannot help but admitting that it is her worst enemy. Lydia does not seem to deserve the label of a rebel. It is easy to attribute a romantic quality to her folly and call her "rebellious," but folly can never be a form of rebellion. One cannot say that Lydia makes an emotional decision when she runs away with Mr. Wickham – she makes a foolish decision. She doesn't follow her heart; she follows her folly. Jane Austen portrays Lydia not as earthly, natural person who follows her heart, but as a reckless, unreasonable, devil-may-care fool who ruins the accepted social order without realizing. Jane Austen deprives her heroine of the glory and charisma of the rebel by not rewarding her with a happy marriage built on mutual love and appreciation.

Lydia and Mrs. Bennet are only two among a number of fools in *Pride and Prejudice*. There are also Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Sir William Lucas, and even Mary, who is still a fool, despite being a nerd. Mary is the “learned fool” and Lydia is the “noisy fool” (Lauber 516) - a great distinction, considering Mary’s quite, nerdy introversion, and Lydia’s loud and showy cheek. Mr. Collins is perhaps one of the most amusing fools in *Pride and Prejudice*, despite (or because of) his humorless and pedantic nature. His marriage proposal to Elizabeth is so far away from the passion and genuine care usually present in these situations, that it provokes laughter: “And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection” (Austen 74). It also is interesting how one fool gets bored by another fool, as Lydia is the first to give up on listening to Mr. Collins reading Fordyce’s sermons – “Lydia gaped as he opened the volume, and before he had, with very monotonous solemnity, read three pages, she interrupted him” (47). Mr. Collins is attributed characteristics such as “the self-conceit of a weak head” and “a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility” (Austen 48). He also exemplifies the trend that a fool is not simply foolish; he is also proud of his foolishness and insists on exhibiting himself. He does so with his lectures and sermons, thus embarrassing himself with his self-imposing in approaching Mr. Darcy at the Netherfield ball –

“You are not going to introduce yourself to Mr. Darcy?”

“Indeed I am. I shall entreat his pardon for not having done it earlier. I believe him to be Lady Catherine’s *nephew*. It will be in my power to assure him that her ladyship was quite well yesterday se’nnight.”

Elizabeth tried to dissuade him from such a scheme... Mr. Collins listened to her with the determined air of following his own inclination (Austen 67, 8).

Mr. Collins is a very limited man – he is used to a routine, to speaking certain things in a certain way, and getting the same results each time he completes this routine. Thus, he has built a confidence that to us, readers, is amusing, but to himself is very real and well-grounded. That is why he is so surprised at Elizabeth’s refusal to marry him and is self-confident enough to attribute her decision to a role she is expected to play: “I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application” (Austen 108). Mr. Collins, as a typical fool, is oblivious to other people’s feelings and reactions. He is narrow-minded in his understanding of the roles of people in society; for him, “personal feelings are irrelevant, only the ceremony counts; even the identity of the bride does not matter very much” (Lauber 517). He first intends to marry Jane, but upon being informed by Mrs. Bennet that she “was likely to be very soon engaged... Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth – and it was soon done” (Austen 49), only to end up marrying Charlotte Lucas – a change just as easy and abrupt as the previous one. Mr. Collins is foolish because his one-dimensional character does not allow him to see the shades of gray, so for him, the only reality is the practical one, where emotion is just a word, not a real feeling – “The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him farther...” (Austen 73). In his one-dimensionality, Mr. Collins is very literal and predictable, taking out all emotion and genuineness from his reactions to the world around him - “Here, leading the way through every walk and cross walk, and scarcely allowing them an interval to utter the praises he asked for, every view was pointed out with a minuteness which left beauty entirely behind” (Austen 107).

As we can see, the fools in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* are multiple and varied. There is a world of difference between the folly of the insolent Mrs. Bennet and the folly of the

nerdy Mr. Collins. However, we can find a parallel between Mrs. Bennet and Lydia's follies because the folly of the former multiplies and reaches dangerous proportions in the folly of the latter. Mr. Collins, on the other hand, is an example of a socially awkward nerd who, despite his book learning, is ultimately a fool. Another nerd whose book learning has taken a dangerous toll is Mary, the middle Bennet sister.

III. Nerds

To match up the fools in *Pride and Prejudice*, there are a number of well-read characters that we can also call “book worms” or “nerds,” most noticeably Mr. Bennet and his parody double, Mary. As with the relationship between Mrs. Bennet and Lydia, the parent’s flaw here is enhanced to a distorted degree in the character of the daughter, making Mary not just a well-read, intelligent girl, but a typical nerd, so engulfed in endless book learning, that she lags behind in her social skills, and willingly isolates herself from society. Mr. Bennet’s presence in the book is one of the satirical and superior observer who prefers reading in his library, the same way Mary prefers books to social visits and balls. Jane Austen shows us that the path Mary has chosen is as socially damaging as Lydia’s unreasonable behavior, making the nerds another form of fools in *Pride and Prejudice*. In order to fully understand the extremity to which Mary has taken her reading and social isolation, we need to look at her father – Mr. Bennet.

Mr. Bennet is certainly a well-read man who initially amuses the reader with his witty remarks toward his wife and daughters – “Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character” (Austen 4). However, we soon recognize in his remarks a reflection of his condescending nature, and we grow uneasy with the role of the amused philosopher and an observer which he has adopted in his household. He is used to encountering folly all over the house, referring to his youngest daughters as “silly and ignorant” (4) and “uncommonly foolish” (20), and “coolly” observing: “From all that I can collect by your manner of talking, you must be two of the silliest girls in the country. I have suspected it some time, but I am now convinced” (Austen 20).

He distances himself from the responsibility of bringing up his daughters, of educating them, cultivating them and helping them build up their characters. Elizabeth tells Lady Catherine that she and her sisters have never had a systematic education; if any of them displays a sign of interest in anything, such as singing or dancing, their parents find them teachers, but otherwise, they are left to grow and develop on their own –

“Five daughters brought up at home without a governess! – I never heard of such a thing... Without a governess you must have been neglected.”

“Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might.”

(Austen 113).

Thus, Mr. Bennet’s disregard is confirmed indirectly and unconsciously in the words of his favorite daughter. Instead of fulfilling his fatherly duties, he prefers to retreat to his library. He is the philosopher who goes out in the world in order to observe it, and then goes back to his shelter – “In his library he had been always sure of leisure and tranquility; and though prepared, as he told Elizabeth, to meet with folly and conceit in every other room in the house, he was used to be free from them there” (Austen 49).

There is never a healthy conversation or discussion with Mr. Bennet; the only thing he discusses is other people’s folly. When he talks to Elizabeth, his goal is to exchange remarks about other people’s foolishness. Even when he is talking to Mr. Collins, he exchanges furtive glances with his favorite daughter, as an observer of his guest’s folly –

Mr. Bennet’s expectations were fully answered. His cousin was as absurd as he had hoped, and he listened to him with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at the

same time the most resolute composure of countenance, and except in an occasional glance at Elizabeth, requiring no partner in his pleasure (Austen 47).

Mr. Bennet distances himself from folly, as if it has nothing to do with him. Austen tells us that “with a book he was regardless of time” (9) but in fact, he is regardless of his family as well - “Mr. Bennet raised his eyes from his book as [Mrs. Bennet] entered, and fixed them on her face with a calm unconcern which was not in the least altered by her communication” (76).

Therefore, what happens to Lydia is partially his fault – he lets his daughter go to Brighton despite knowing her frivolous behavior too well. In her concern for her younger sister, Elizabeth rationally tries to persuade her father not to let Lydia go to Brighton because of the dangers such place presents to a girl with her frivolous conduct. Yet, his response is completely inadequate – “Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other, and we can never expect her to do it with so little expense or inconvenience to her family as under the present circumstances” (Austen 155). Mr. Bennet’s sense of humor is inappropriate here, because it regards a potentially dangerous situation for his youngest daughter. He should have imposed some limits on Lydia and does not fully grasp the extent of his fault – not only in having some of the most foolish girls in the county, but also having one of them acting on her folly so excessively as to risk her family’s complete social humiliation. Mr. Bennet can to a great degree be blamed for Lydia’s biggest and boldest mistake, since this is not just one misguided decision or wrong move on his part; it is a consistent disregard of his younger daughters and their development. His preference of books over people has its consequences; Lydia’s mistake shows him that he cannot just escape from real life in the library and expect that this distancing from society will go unpunished.

Book learning is defined as “knowledge gained from reading or studying rather than from practical experience” (YourDictionary.com). Mr. Bennet is certainly book smart. Unlike Mary, he does not try to take formulas from books and apply them to real life. For him, books are an escape from reality, whereas his library is like an island. They are also a tool with which he has developed his mind and ability to think on his own, because, indeed, he is an intelligent and perceptive man. Books have strengthened his already good brain. However, for him, books replace people, and this is his biggest mistake.

Mary Bennet can be seen as a parody double of her father. They are both avid readers; however, Mr. Bennet has a brain of his own and he uses it to read books and, in a way, “communicate” with people at his level of intelligence. Mary is certainly not ignorant; she is the most literate among the Bennet daughters, and Miss Bingley calls her “the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood” (Austen 9). However, she lacks true observance, so she compensates for her lack of shrewdness and astute mind with what she reads. She experiences life through the characters on the pages of the books she reads, and memorizes quotes that would work in certain social situations; however, she would face those rarely, as she lives as a typical nerd. For Mary, living life to the fullest is equal to reading about people who live their lives to the fullest. Repeating someone else’s thoughts happens without any emotional participation of her heart.

Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* in fact reminds us of the nerdy Mary, being so engulfed in reading Gothic novels and so inexperienced at reading people. In a way, she also reminds us of Lydia because of her naïveté; her inability to distinguish between life and fiction is what gives away her folly. Similarly to Catherine’s experiencing life through the book pages, Mary readily uses formulas taken from books and tries to apply them to life unsuccessfully, as she shows by her clumsy and too-formal manner of speaking:

“Pride,” observed Mary, who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections, “is a very common failing I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed, that human nature is particularly prone to it, and that there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary. Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us.” (Austen 14)

She not only sounds as if she has memorized definitions from the dictionary, but she also has no real-life experience to compare to what she reads; thus, she only relies on books to teach her about life.

Looking back at Mary’s elaborate definition of “pride,” we cannot help but admit that most of the things she says are spot-on. For some readers she may come off as observant and knowledgeable, since she says the right things in the right situations. However, she still sounds unconvincing and awkward. Her speech is too formal and she sounds like a know-it-all. Her wise reflections on life and her universal conclusions are very unconvincing to readers. Additionally, her always somber tone is comical, since her lack of experience shines through her remarks. Mary’s complex wording obviously aims to attract attention. She often says things that sound like clichés because she doesn’t know better – she is more interested in the ways philosophers and poets express themselves on the pages than in the ways people around her converse (Nugent 93). Mary wants to replace living with reading, and this is her biggest mistake. Mr. Bennet also uses books as a replacement of reality, but he is not as socially awkward as Mary is.

The middle Bennet sister is obviously emotionally and socially inept. She is so awkward in social settings, that she provokes laughter, even from her own sisters. In a difficult time, as when Lydia runs away with Mr. Wickham without marrying him, Mary observes –

“Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson; that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable – that one false step involves her in endless ruin – that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful, - and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behavior toward the undeserving of the other sex.” Elizabeth lifted up her eyes in amazement, but was too much oppressed to make any reply (Austen 193).

She is so nerdy that even her own sister, who in modern terms can be considered a “cool person” (Nugent 91), witty and never excessive in anything, considers Mary’s toffee-nosed remarks unworthy of comment. Mary is discussing her sister Lydia’s possible social humiliation, and what we receive as a reaction is a philosophical remark that lacks any emotional sisterly compassion. Elizabeth does not even bother acknowledging Mary’s speech with anything more than an incredulous look, and the rest of the sisters seem to have similar approaches – Lydia “never attended to Mary at all” (Austen 223). Unfortunately, Mary receives more open ridicule from her father early on in the novel, when he sarcastically says:

“What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts.” Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how. “While Mary is adjusting her ideas,” he continued, “let us return to Mr. Bingley” (Austen 6).

She loses her position in her family not only in the eyes of her father, but also in the eyes of her sisters. That is one of the reasons Mary is perhaps the most punished of all the heroines in the

novel. Her remarks are never met with respect or encouragement by others. As mentioned earlier, she is perhaps the most ambitious and focused of all the Bennet daughters – she works “hard for knowledge and accomplishments“ (Austen 17). She is not shrewd, but she strives for profoundness; she takes notes. However, her father teases her for taking out quotes from books. Early on in the novel, she is demonstrated to fall behind her sisters in piano playing –

Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached. Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well... (Austen 17).

Whereas Elizabeth is content with a simple performance and is heartily accepted – “her performance was pleasing, though by no means capital” (Austen 17) - Mary performs extra elaborate concerts that she either cannot handle or that her audience cannot grasp. Mr. Collins is not the only character with exhibitionist behavior;” Mary, too, feels the need to be noticed – “her voice was weak, and her manner affected” but she “was always impatient for display (17) and “such an opportunity of exhibiting was delightful to her” (101). She seeks praise and recognition outside the family unit in her musical performances. The difference is that Elizabeth has a strongly developed sense of measure and limits, whereas Mary has not found that balance.

At the Netherfield ball, when Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy share a dance, they run out of things to talk about and Mr. Darcy turns to books as a topic that will hopefully save the slow conversation –

“We have tried two or three subjects already without success, and what we are to talk of next I cannot imagine.”

“What think you of books?” said he, smiling...

“No – I cannot talk of books in a ballroom; my head is always full of something else” (Austen 65).

If it were Mary, she would gladly take up the topic; Elizabeth, on the other hand, does not feel the need to discuss books at a social event such as a ball. This does not mean that she is not well-read or that Jane Austen condemns reading in any way; it simply means that there is a time and a place for everything. At a time when Elizabeth is preoccupied with the strong emotions Mr. Darcy provokes in her (though negative, in this case), she does not feel the need to show her accomplishments through book knowledge. Mary, on the other hand, does not fully recognize the correct time and place for things, although she hopes to come across as a temperate young lady. She is too devoted to her books; she does not go to morning visits, because she is too tired from reading. Ironically, when discussing the Netherfield ball, she claims:

“While I can have my mornings to myself,” said she, “it is enough. – I think it no sacrifice to join occasionally in evening engagements. Society has claims on us all; and I profess myself one of those who consider intervals of recreation and amusement as desirable for everybody” (Austen 60).

Apart from the pompous, know-it-all manner in which she states this, it is humorous to hear her promote such a balanced way of living, considering how imbalanced hers is. Although what she says usually makes sense and is true most of the time, we simply cannot bring ourselves to be convinced by someone who sounds like she is reading rather than speaking to us. Thus, Mary’s mistake consists in the fact that she willingly detaches herself from society by ignoring it and focusing on book learning too much.

A reason Mary is probably the most punished of all the heroines in the novel is that she lags behind her sisters in her looks. “Being the only plain one in the family” (Austen 17), she cannot compete in the same field as her sisters – physical beauty. It is interesting that it is explicitly said in the novel that she is the most physically deprived sister out of the five Bennet girls. Jane is universally acknowledged to be the prettiest of the sisters, but Elizabeth is still considered pretty, and so are Catherine and Lydia. Mary is the only one who is directly described as “plain.” Thus, she tries to compensate for the lack of natural charm by escaping to books. It is important to note that, whereas Lydia excludes herself from the society that she so much wants to be a part of by foolishly breaking the norms and running away with Mr. Wickham, Mary excludes herself knowingly (as her father does) because of her physical deprivation. She escapes to books in search of a field of expression and recognition. Thus, Mary isolates herself to protect herself, but also to arm herself. In society, she can be “the smart one” – she “hopes that if she shows off her learning – both her piano technique and her knowledge of books – it will make up for her plainness” (Nugent 93).

Etcoff argues that physical beauty seems to be one of the traits most valued by the Bennet parents in their daughters. In fact, “psychologists have noted that parents consistently respond with extra affection and give more loving attention to their attractive offspring” (qtd. in Eddleman 2). Mrs. Bennet brings up Jane’s beauty numerous times throughout the novel, even in front of the rest of her daughters, making statements such as: “Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane” (Austen 4) and “I do not like to boast of my own child, but to be sure, Jane – one does not often see anybody better looking” (Austen 31). Eddleman argues that “competition may be encouraged, albeit unconsciously, by the

parents, for in Austen's novels many do play favorites" (2). The way parents see their children is crucial in the development of the self-esteem of the latter –

How a child is defined by the parents, how it is classified by its siblings, and how a child sees himself or herself in relation to his or her siblings all work together to form a self-concept, a sense of self that shapes character over a lifetime (Eddleman 3).

Thus, the ones that are considered "plain" by their family and society's standards not only are at a disadvantage when it comes to marriage prospects, but they also feel deprived and hurt. Not being able to be one of the pretty sisters, Mary tries to shine in another domain – knowledge. Since her mother's affection is greater toward the prettier daughters – Jane, Elizabeth, Lydia – Mary hopes to win her father's approval. However, having "neither genius nor taste," she is not able to impress her father either, and even becomes the object of his sly remarks, as noted above. Mary provokes laughter: a form of social rejection.

Josephine Ross suggests that Jane Austen herself "was outshone in looks" by her sister Cassandra and was "insecure enough about her own looks to record the occasional compliments she received" (qtd. in Eddleman 6). It is interesting because we as readers would never associate the wise and witty Austen with the pedantic and conceited Mary. In fact, it has been often suggested that Austen resembles Elizabeth most – "Elizabeth Bennet is Jane Austen with added spirit, with subversive passion, and, above all, with looks" (Amis 85). However, we do know that Austen and her sister were very close, so beauty does not necessarily separate sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* (Eddleman 6). For example, Jane and Elizabeth are very close, and Lydia and Kitty also get along very well. Thus, Mary seems to be the only one excluded from these sister pairings. However, it is so not because of her plain looks, but because of her personality.

Mary seems insensitive and full of moralizations, whereas Jane and Elizabeth are more human, more real and more balanced. The two eldest sisters are interested in each other's thoughts and feelings, and they keep each other's secrets. However, it is hard to picture Mary as a compassionate and understanding secret sharer. Although beauty was certainly important during Austen's time, her heroines would not be half so interesting if beauty was all they had. Jane Bennet matches her beauty with a kind, sensible and loving personality. Mary, on the other hand, though "plain," is unattractive because of her pedantic and dull personality. Good looks are certainly no recipe for a happy marriage, either, as Mr. Bennet's choice of a wife proves. Mrs. Bennet's physical beauty is unable to compensate for her foolish, impertinent and narrow-minded personality:

Captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, [he] married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished forever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown (Austen 159).

Mr. Bennet's marriage, together with Lydia's marriage, demonstrates "the unhappy results when individuals marry in consequence of a blind and foolish infatuation with the wrong traits" (Hannon 156).

It is interesting how some readers and critics of *Pride and Prejudice* see Mary's "nerdiness" as a positive trait which sets her apart from her sisters. Steven D. Scott actually makes the argument that Mary is

a young woman who pursues "accomplishments," not for the goal of catching a husband, as most of the young women in this novel do, from the opening sentence

onward, but for the activity itself and for the personal satisfaction it offers. Mary pursues accomplishments apparently for the purpose of personal growth (227).

However, we don't see Jane or Elizabeth actively pursuing a husband either, and they are the heroines in the novel who most successfully manage to balance their reasonableness and emotionality. Additionally, Mary seems to pursue accomplishments on one hand, for the sake of exhibiting herself, and on the other hand, as an escape from her lack of social skills. It is true that Mary's remarks are valid and, ironically, she proclaims a very relevant truth - "every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason... and... exertion should always be in proportion to what is required" (Austen 22) – advice to which Lydia could have listened. However, for Mary, these remarks are "eternal verities to be accepted without question" which prove to be "general truths... [and] empty and meaningless clichés" (Bonaparte 147).

Whereas Mr. Bennet and Mary are certainly two of the biggest nerds in *Pride and Prejudice*, we also have Mr. Collins who can be considered both a fool and a nerd in this novel. He is nerdy in his boring pedantry, "reading aloud Fordyce's sermons to the Bennets and heaping praise upon his noble benefactor, Lady Catherine" (Nugent 93). He so desperately wants to be liked and admired, that he doesn't even consider bothersome his complete lack of spontaneity and truthfulness. He is also nerdy in his poor emotional intelligence and misdirected feelings – he quickly transfers his affections from Jane through Elizabeth to Charlotte Lucas, reminding us of the interchangeable objects of desire of Olivia, Orsino and the rest of the characters in Shakespeare's romantic comedy *Twelfth Night* (Belsey 203).

It is interesting to point out that Jane Austen does not seem to regard books as the sources of all the answers to life's questions. Thus, what is problematic with Mary is not the fact that she likes reading. Austen does not condemn reading and does not mean to suggest that self-

improvement is a bad thing. However, any trait taken to an extreme becomes an obstacle to a fulfilling living. Additionally, such self-isolation from society during Austen's time is considered unreasonable, because marriage or no marriage, people are supposed to live and function in a society.

IV. Austen's Sense

Jane and Elizabeth Bennet can be seen as the “balanced” sisters, who take nothing to an extreme, but embrace moderation. They are largely admired by others because of their manners and respectable behavior, unlike Lydia who is perceived as “always unguarded and often uncivil,” “self-willed and careless” (Austen 126) and “ignorant, idle and vain” (Austen 213). When we compare Jane and Elizabeth to Mary, we see that the eldest sisters care deeply about each other and show it through their relationship of confidantes, whereas Mary cannot supply this “loving correction” to anyone. Additionally, they “check and balance each other” by questioning each other’s attitudes and being interested in each other’s thoughts (Eddleman 7). Pennington argues that they actually are an accurate example of the type of friendship encouraged in conduct books during the eighteenth century – a friend should be “steady in the correction, but mild in the reproof of your faults – like a guardian angel ever watchful to warn you of unforeseen danger, and, by timely admonitions, to prevent the mistakes incident to human frailty and to self-partiality (qtd. in Eddleman 7). Elizabeth and Jane are also united in the fact that they are the ones who most often suffer from their family’s exhibitionist behavior –

To Elizabeth it appeared, that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit or finer success; and happy did she think it for Bingley and her sister that some of the exhibition had escaped his notice, and that his feelings were not of a sort to be much distressed by the folly which he must have witnessed (Austen 71).

Lauber points out that “the fool has no hesitation in displaying himself or in prolonging the exhibition as far as possible,” and is thus “unaware of the feelings and responses” of the reasonable, “balanced” characters (516).

There are a number of extreme choices present in the novel, against which we can justify the two eldest sisters’ happy endings. The marriage between Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas is a form of extreme “sense” – “[Elizabeth] had always felt that Charlotte’s opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it possible that when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage” (Austen 87). When it comes to securing themselves good positions in society through marrying wealthy men, we would not find Jane and Elizabeth mercenary. Jane, who usually conceals her emotions well, seems sad, hurt and confused at Mr. Bingley’s sudden departure to London, thus revealing her feelings for him. Elizabeth turns down Mr. Darcy’s first proposal, which proves she does not value him for his wealth. Her attitude is further exposed in her regard of Lady Catherine – “She had heard nothing of Lady Catherine that spoke her awful from any extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue, and the mere stateliness of money and rank, she thought she could witness without trepidation” (Austen 110). In other words, “while Jane Austen certainly understood the value of money and knew what it had to do with happiness, she – and all her heroines – clearly held other things in much greater esteem” (Hannon 113).

Lydia’s marriage is another extreme – the one of “all love, or at least all passion, or at any rate no prudence (and certainly no money)” (Amis 87). In contrast, Jane and Elizabeth are deserving of their happy endings because of their moderate personalities, compared to Lydia’s extreme folly. The two eldest sisters “control their emotions, expressing only those feelings which are compatible with decorum, the rules of polite society” (Allen 425). Hence, their

temperate behavior pays off at the end when they marry the men they love. Because Jane and Elizabeth suppress their passions and desires at the beginning of their courting by Bingley and Darcy, they are able to surrender themselves to them later in marriage –

Desire, Austen suggests, can only be directly acknowledged and satisfied after it has been repressed and any expectation of its fulfillment given up. Only when Jane has accepted Bingley's defection does he return and renew his addresses. Only when Elizabeth decides that 'connubial felicity' with Darcy is impossible because of Lydia's misalliance does he propose again. If Jane and Bingley or Elizabeth and Darcy finally achieve complete satisfaction, a bliss which marks the end of all desire, this is because they have already suffered (Allen 437).

Hence, those two couples' happy endings prove that desire can be perfectly compatible with the established social order. By contrast, Lydia is too impatient and wants her happy ending immediately. Since she throws caution to the wind and ignores social decorum, she denies herself ultimate happiness. Ironically, her impulsiveness and her desire to experience romantic love as soon as possible deprive her of a happy ending.

Compared to Lydia and Mary, Jane and Elizabeth are certainly more balanced and moderate in their behavior. However, they are not flawless. We may say that Jane is a little too indecisive and passive in her pursuits – "whatever she felt, she was desirous of concealing" (Austen 90). Elizabeth, on the other hand, is sometimes too harsh or quick to judge, allowing her first impression of Mr. Darcy to influence her opinion of him for so long. We must not forget that both pride and prejudice are vices that threaten the heroines' happiness. However, we must not forget that no heroine in Jane Austen's novels is perfect. Jane and Elizabeth seem to be among those who have not allowed their flaws to turn into destructive forces in theirs and their

family's lives. We gain an idea of the concept of the perfect woman in England during Jane Austen's time early on in the novel when Elizabeth stays at Netherfield to attend to Jane who is sick. Elizabeth takes part in a discussion with Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley. The latter, as a member of "polite society," points out the skills that a woman must possess:

"no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved."

"All this she must possess," added Darcy, "and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (Austen 27).

As we can see, young girls were encouraged to be overly concerned with completing a checklist of skills and behavior points that will show them "accomplished" and will advance them in life, that is, advance them in the arms of a wealthy and successful husband. However, Jane Austen's heroines are far from perfect, and we seem to sense her endorsement of imperfection in Elizabeth's response to the long list of requirements – "I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*... I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united" (Austen 27). Austen's heroines "interest, excite, move, and amuse us with all their imperfections in ways that 'pictures of perfection' never could" (Hannon 162). What attracts us in Jane Austen's characters is that they don't seem to be copy-pasted – they are unique in their

viewpoints in life, and, most importantly, they are not women or men, rich or poor, sensible or sensitive, but human.

Though not perfect, the heroines in *Pride and Prejudice* who choose moderation as their life path benefit the most out of everyone else from the specific social circumstances that mark the historical period of transition during which the novel was written –

“It was generally evident whenever they met, that he *did* admire her; and to *her* it was equally evident that Jane was yielding to the preference which she had begun to entertain for him from the first, and was in a way to be very much in love; but she considered with pleasure that it was not likely to be discovered by the world in general, since Jane united with great strength of feeling, a composure of temper and a uniform cheerfulness of manner, which would guard her from the suspicions of the impertinent” (Austen 15).

Finding the balance between emotion and reason is in a way equated to achieving a balance between the individual and society.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Jane seem to be the two heroines who choose the “middle road” – the one of reasonableness and self-control, where they are allowed to keep their individuality without going against social decorum. They are both cheerful and intelligent, having the best of both worlds through moderation. According to Jane Austen, reason should be balanced with emotion, resulting in a life-perspective that comes from observation, but also from thought and participation in life itself.

V. Conclusion

It is not a coincidence that most of Jane Austen's novels end with weddings, because they suggest that the world of her novels strives for harmony and reestablishment of a universally accepted order. Her heroines may have their little or not-so-little rebellions, but eventually their rational choices involve stability and balance. Here, rebellions and extremes are not glorified. In fact, Austen's novels punish excessiveness, because it ruins the good order. Jane Austen's world is one of harmony and balance – not one lacking human flaws.

The reasonable people in Austen's world register human flaws, such as folly, but they don't reproach them, because they are not gullible enough to believe such human and social flaws can be fixed. Jane Austen looks at human flaws with an ironic but understanding smile, endorsing moderation. In spite of the attitude that Austen adopts, "not asking for too much of anything, insisting upon moderation," she never moralizes – "she directs on people and events a keen but quick light glance, and, following her, we have to have our wits about us, or we are liable to miss point after point, flashing stroke after stroke" (Priestley 97). Her novels' purpose is not to reform society, to rebel against it or to recommend any form of exclusion from it as necessary or useful. As an observer and connoisseur of human nature, Austen registers all of human flaws, accepts them philosophically, but does not try to change them. As Lauber puts it, "Jane Austen's fools are not Society, as a satirist might imply; rather, they constitute a sub-society of their own which sensible people avoid when possible" (518).

Human nature in *Pride and Prejudice* does not involve some dramatic vice, a dark passion or a tormenting dilemma. Jane Austen's characters are simply driven by their desire to be happy and successful. There are no excessive ambitions or desires that put them in conflict

with the rest of society, as rebels or criminals. Even the most interesting and sensible characters are not completely deprived of pride, prejudice, vanity and other flaws. However, a reasonable person accepts society's flaws and superficiality in a philosophical manner. A reasonable, "balanced" person does not endorse isolation but, on the contrary, is a vital part of society, recognizing it as the only true form of living.

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