



## Literature as a Key to Understanding People, Society and Life

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### Abstract

*This article uses Jane Austen's 19<sup>th</sup> century novel Pride and Prejudice to illustrate the power of literature as a source of knowledge that transcends the insights of history, sociology, psychology, philosophy and conventional literary criticism. Pride and Prejudice shows how England avoided a French Revolution of its own. The story depicts the process of social integration that resulted in the harmonious integration of different classes in the country. Through every character and incident in the story, Austen depicts the rising aspiration among the lower classes, and the reluctant willingness of those above to accommodate this aspiration. The English aristocrats sacrificed their egoistic pride and prestige to save their heads. In the marriage of Mrs. and Mr. Bennet, in the friendship between Darcy and Bingley, in the rise of Collins, the fall of Lady Catherine and the exploits of Wickham, Austen portrays a society that is giving up the old world order and embracing change. Pride and Prejudice is also a profound study of human psychology. Austen portrays five very different characters in the five Bennet girls, all from the same stock, but at the same time shows us with mathematical precision how each of the girls is a unique combination of the various characteristics of Mrs. and Mr. Bennet. The story is full of profound insights into human nature that cannot be obtained from studies of psychology or biography. It shows how the constant altercations between Mrs. and Mr. Bennet are more than an expression of the underlying rivalry between the couple. They are also an outcome of a marriage between two different classes. The role of a well developed individual in spearheading a revolution or social movement is seen in the changes Darcy and Elizabeth are able to bring about with their strong individuality. Austen's in-depth knowledge of human nature creates men and women with characteristics that are perfectly true to life. Pride and Prejudice goes beyond a study of the individual and the society. It is pervaded with a deeper knowledge of the character of life itself. Some or perhaps all of these great truths were known to the ancients but forgotten or rejected by the modern mind so preoccupied with the external appearances of things. But Austen has consciously or subconsciously exquisitely captured many of these truths of life with the apparent effortlessness of a true master. Do our words come true? Can our thoughts and attitudes determine the events in our lives? What is the science behind coincidence? Is there such a thing as chance? Through Pride and Prejudice, Austen gives us the answers and illustrates the precise laws according to which life works. She even possesses insights into life missed by the renowned Shakespearean critic A.C. Bradley. Literature entertains and educates us. It can teach us about the past, help us understand the present and empower us to*

*create the future. Read with this insight, Pride and Prejudice, as all great works of literature, offers us all the knowledge required to promote individual accomplishment and human welfare. New canons of literary criticism need to be evolved that discover the knowledge of life in literature.*

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*“Life is the raw material from which the creative imagination of great writers generates works of fiction that are truer than life—truer because they probe and reveal more deeply its real character.”*

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## 1. Understanding the Character of Life

Entertaining literature enralls us with suspense, humor and the intense action of an engaging plot. Superior literature transcends mere action. It presents to the reader the author’s insights into human character and reveals the complex ways in which human character, action and circumstance interrelate to generate chains of consequences and results. Still finer literature reveals the complex interactions between action, individual character and the evolving character of the society in which the action takes place. The greatest literature goes still further. It reveals not only insights of individual and social character but of the character of Life itself. A new genre of literary criticism that studies literature as a mirror of life and draws from it deeper insights into the character of Life will open up a window to the profound wisdom that resides in our vast repository of world literature. Even personal experience cannot match its value, for in our own lives we are but half-conscious and too involved in the action to truly decipher its significance. Only the knowledge that comes from direct spiritual experience can exceed the intuitive perceptions of great literature. And like the scientist who in recent centuries has acquired more and more powerful instruments to delve more deeply into the mysteries of the infinitesimal and the infinite, we shall find that great literature offers an unending revelation both of the minute details revealed by critical analysis and the integral knowledge offered by a synthesis that exceeds the limitations of mental logic to reveal the logic of the infinite.

## 2. The True Purpose of Literary Criticism

‘Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on’, Austen advised her niece in a letter, and her novel *Pride and Prejudice* seems to be just such a story. It is about the Bennets and their neighbours the Lucases in the village of Longbourn. The story follows the lives of the members of the two families, their relatives and friends over a period of a year. In the little bit of ivory on which she worked with a fine brush, as she described her own work, there are plenty of dances and dinners, disappointments and heartaches, engagements and weddings. Many have criticized Austen for her commonplace stories with fairy tale endings. Raymond Williams, author and critic, uses her own classic opening line to summarize his criticism of her work: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that Austen

chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time.’ But Austen did not ignore anything. It was her critics who have missed the point for over two centuries. In her works, Austen writes about the condition of the church, the decline of aristocracy, the treatment of the poor, greater rights for women, the rising aspirations of people and the French Revolution. She shows us how England managed to avoid a similar revolution. Her books, as all great literature, offer insights into human psychology. They go further and reveal the great truths by which society and life function. They analyze the science behind chance happenings and lucky coincidences. They offer us all the knowledge required to promote individual accomplishment and human welfare.

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“The more subtle the message, the more powerful it comes across.”

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Austen ignores neither the historical events of her time, nor the social conditions of her land. She was born during the American Revolution, and England was at war throughout her life. She wrote her six novels during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. She had two brothers in the navy, and one in the army. Her cousin married a French nobleman who was later sent to the guillotine. Unlike other European countries, England had not imposed a ban on newspaper reports about the Revolution initially. Groups that were loyal to varying degrees to the principle of the Revolution found support in England. Their meetings and pamphlets received wide attention. As a result of all this, Austen was clearly aware of and touched by the socio-political movements of the period. So when a fierce war was raging in a neighbouring country, and aristocrats were being beheaded, how could she be engrossed in a tale of country girls, their dresses and dances, their affairs of love and marriage?

To this, there is a simple, incontrovertible response, that contrary to the generally held belief, and in spite of her own advice to her niece, Austen was not writing simply about three or four families in a country village. It is not possible for any writer, especially one of Austen’s stature, to create something that is not true to life. Great writers consciously or subconsciously reflect truths of life and the happenings in society in their writing. No creativity, not even in a tale of fantasy or science fiction, can describe something that is untouched by the trends and values of society, either current or pertaining to some period in history. Life is the raw material from which the creative imagination of great writers generates works of fiction that are truer than life—truer because they probe and reveal more deeply its real character. Life, no matter how disguised as fiction, is the reality they portray in people and events. Some writers describe them explicitly. They weave historical events into their story, the very plot is based on these events. In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo devotes entire chapters to the Napoleonic Wars and the 1832 June Rebellion. Other writers describe historical movements more implicitly. In Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, the Industrial Revolution and its impact on Britain form the backdrop of the protagonist David’s life. There are yet other writers whose works capture social changes more subtly. This is where Austen fits. The more subtle the message, the more powerful it comes across. Moreover, she had a compulsion to be subtle.

Mindless violence rapidly replaced the ideals of the Revolution across the English Channel. Then England became engaged in prolonged wars with Napoleonic France. The

English government that had not gagged the press initially became stringent. Any pro-Revolution sentiment became treasonous. Not only the views challenging the monarchy, but any view that seemed to question the status quo in society, be it the social structure, law, government policy, or the power of the church was considered treasonous. The climate of fear, insecurity and uncertainty that prevailed in the country induced as well as provided an opportunity for the government to crush any revolutionary and reformist ideas. In order to limit the spread of ideas and information, the government imposed a substantial stamp duty on newspapers, which the working class press was unable to afford. This restricted the spread of ideas among people of the working class. Authors, printers and publishers could be prosecuted for seditious libel, a tactic used by the government to silence criticism and quell any demand for reform. In 1789, discussion and comment on the Revolution were prohibited on theater stages. Even fiction could not broach on a radical idea. At such a time, Austen could not but be subtle in her critical social commentary.

*Pride and Prejudice*, to which we limit our focus here, is about the French Revolution, and the peaceful social evolution in England as a response to it. Through the characters and events in the story, Austen makes a critical social statement in an atmosphere that does not permit her to state her case more explicitly. She portrays what is happening around her in so subtle a manner that we almost miss it. But in every dialogue and description, Austen captures truths of society. All the characters' aspirations, attitudes and acts reveal them. Their friendships and relationships are determined by them. The success and failure of their initiatives echo universal truths. There is no mention of war or revolution in *Pride and Prejudice*. However, when we look beneath the surface of the story, we find the clear impact of the movement across the Channel on British society.

Helena Kelly, in her book *Jane Austen, The Secret Radical*,<sup>1</sup> analyzes in great detail every line of Austen, and shows how the author reveals views on political and social issues of the day when one reads between the lines. Living and writing at a time when any criticism of the status quo was seen as disloyal to the country, Austen had to write warily. Kelly argues that Austen's conscious or subconscious attitudes are depicted through her characterizations—such as in a comic clergyman and a boorish aristocrat. But Kelly has stopped short of taking the analysis to its logical conclusion. For the artist's intention is only of relative importance. What is more important is the nature of reality revealed in and through her works. That is the true purpose of literary criticism and of all art.

England had seen its own revolution a century earlier. It did not need such a violent uprooting of its social values. It had subconsciously imbibed the principles that formed the basis of the French Revolution. In fact, this was the reason its own version of the revolution, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, had been of a very different nature from the French. It had been bloodless and paved the way for the modern English parliamentary democracy. England was thus spared a revolution because it adopted a peaceful evolution.

The British society was stratified and class distinctions were present. But unlike in France, the distinctions were not rigid. With every century and then every decade, it became more and more easy to cross these boundaries. Birth was not the sole determinant of a person's

destiny. One could be born in the working class, and find a way up the social hierarchy, to the trading, middle, landed, and even the aristocratic classes. Work, income, fortune, marriage, valour, ambition, enterprise and talent were different paths that could take one into the highest circles of British society. Whereas in France, birth quite determined everything in life from the beginning till the end. This absolute rigidity resulted in the French aristocrats losing their heads to the guillotine. The contrasting flexibility in British society, giving a thought to others below, lending a hand to those in the lower rungs, and accepting new entrants into their circles saved the aristocrats their heads. They were not always done voluntarily or willingly, but the social progression followed that general direction.

The English historian G. M. Trevelyan said that if the French nobility had been capable of playing cricket with their peasants, their chateaux would never have been burnt. It is on the record that on that July day in 1789 when the Bastille was stormed, some 300 miles away in Hampshire, the Earl of Winchelsea was playing cricket, and was bowled out before he could score a single run, by an untitled man named William Bullen. Whether it was playing cricket with a commoner that saved the Earl's castle or not, it was definitely embracing other classes that saved the English nobleman his future. Cricket, football, or any other sport would have served the purpose, it was the underlying principle. The British played without segregation, aristocracy, gentry, traders, workers and all. This interplay across classes allowed integration in society. This silent evolution that saved England its revolution is captured in Austen's romance of Elizabeth and Darcy, who hail from different echelons of society. Every page of Austen's writing is an alternative social treatise.

### **3. The Process of Social Development**

*Pride and Prejudice* begins with news of the arrival of a wealthy bachelor, Charles Bingley, at Netherfield Hall in Hertfordshire. But actually, the story begins much earlier. Twenty-five years ago, Mr. Bennet had been a young gentleman with an estate that provided him a comfortable 2000 pounds a year. Mrs. Bennet's father had been an attorney in the nearby town of Meryton. He had been fairly successful and left his daughter with 4000 pounds. Her sister had married their father's clerk who had succeeded him in business. Her brother was employed in trade in London. Mrs. Bennet had however set her sights higher. She was silly and foolish, but also very beautiful and vivacious. She wished to rise in society. Work and the trading class were not for her. Neighborhood dances and parties brought her and Mr. Bennet, the landlord of Longbourn estate, together. The charm of her youth and beauty, combined with the indiscretion of his own youth, led to their marriage. The first seed of social evolution that harmoniously wedded the landed upper class and the rising middle class was sown. Mrs. Bennet is now the mistress of Longbourn, and of the most prominent family in the neighborhood. Her sister, brother and their families are welcome at Longbourn, and her own daughters visit them in Meryton and London regularly. The girls have among their friends daughters of tradesmen and wives of soldiers. They are particularly close to the family of a neighboring knight. This union of one man and one woman symbolizes the larger union of two classes. It results at a macro level, in a gradual merging of various diverse sections of people and social groups.

Mrs. Bennet's aspiration for social rise continues and intensifies. Having become the mistress of Longbourn and found a foothold in the upper class, she sets about the task of having her daughters elevated further. When Bingley, with an income of four or five thousand pounds a year, occupies the neighboring estate of Netherfield, she exclaims, '*If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield... and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for.*' This young man has recently inherited the fortune his father made in trade. Colonization and expanding trade were beginning to change the economic climate of the country. People were no longer dependent on the farmland for sustenance. Colonies supplied raw materials and served as vast new markets; railroad and shipping industries were developing; factories were coming up; and towns and cities were developing and expanding. Anyone with enterprise and diligence could improve his fortune. A new middle class was formed, that constantly sought to imitate and eventually join the wealthy classes. The social climate sanctioned this aspiration. Thus, Bingley, with his father's money that had been earned in trade, is trying to join the higher ranks. He has given up trade since the wealthy did not work or need to earn a living. He spends all his time hunting, riding and in such leisure activities. He keeps a house in London and an estate in the country. His friends are from circles that are more suited to his new life style. His closest friend, Fitzwilliam Darcy, belongs to an old, landed family. Bingley looks up to Darcy, is almost subservient to him, and brings him along to his new country home near the Bennet family. Darcy accepts Bingley's friendship and his invitation, and almost takes responsibility for the new entrant to his class. Just like the marriage between Mrs. and Mr. Bennet, the friendship between Bingley and Darcy is another facet of the social evolution that Austen captures in her story. Britain provided the opportunity for people to work their way up from the lower classes in one generation. The next generation found acceptance, sometimes readily, sometimes reluctantly, in the social circles above.

Darcy follows Bingley readily enough to his new estate, Netherfield Hall. However, he is more reluctant to accompany Bingley to the dances and dinners in the country. Bingley's rise is recent, and unlike some *nouveau riche* who are impatient to disown their humble roots, he is just as comfortable with the unsophisticated villagers as he is with the aristocrats. However, Darcy refuses to mix with the people of Hertfordshire. They are not exclusive enough for his taste. He is affronted when they speak to him. He finds their manners and values vulgar. He is eager to maintain his distance and distinction socially, if not physically. He comes to the first ball and is haughty and aloof. He does not find any girl good enough to dance with. To do so would be a punishment, he says, within earshot of the second Bennet girl, Elizabeth. Finally, it is this same girl to whom he proposes marriage, not once but twice. When his second attempt is successful, and his 'dearest, loveliest Elizabeth' accepts him, he feels a happiness that he has never felt before. His friend Bingley becomes engaged to the eldest Bennet girl, Jane, and the story concludes with the double weddings of the two friends with the two sisters. This 'fairy tale' ending for which Austen has been criticized is yet another symbolic step in the direction British society was taking. The highest levels of the landed gentry forged lasting relationships with the lower levels, erasing social boundaries. Darcy who was among the first circles in the land marries a girl without a fortune, the daughter of a



modest landowner, with ties to the working class in the country and tradespeople in London. Bingley and Jane's wedding too bridges a similar but narrower gap.

Austen captures this same movement in numerous events in the story. Collins, the Bennet girls' cousin, has very humble beginnings. He finds employment in the church in Rosings Park, Lady Catherine's estate. The Lady is Darcy's aunt, and belongs to one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the country. Collins' family is of the most modest means. But the new social atmosphere sees Collins invited frequently to tea and dinner at the Lady's estate. He enjoys his social elevation; she needs his sycophancy for her own self-aggrandizement. In this symbiotic relationship between two classes, Austen deftly paints many pictures. The merging of two ends of the classes is reflected again here. The Lady's foolish and boorish ways show the decadence that is set in the upper classes. The parson's servility shows the lack of divinity and values in the Church.

Collins' father-in-law, Sir William Lucas, had been a trader in Meryton, the town neighboring Longbourn. He had happened to receive a knighthood, and promptly closed shop to retire in the country and enjoy his knighthood. A trader could find entry into the king's court, and become a knight! His daughter, Charlotte, is an unmarried twenty seven year old girl without beauty or fortune. Austen takes this girl who has been visiting Longbourn estate for many years to meet her friends the Bennets, and makes her its mistress. After her marriage to Collins, who is the heir to the Longbourn estate, Charlotte is set to succeed Mrs. Bennet in the position of prominence in the locality. Sir Lucas' knighthood and Charlotte's elevation through marriage to Collins are again Austen's portrayal of the social changes taking place in the country. Lowly people are raised to heights they have never imagined, and find entry into circles they had earlier admired from a distance.

Wickham, the son of Darcy's estate steward, had not stopped with simply admiring, he had coveted Darcy's lofty position all his growing years. Where his father had been happy to serve, Wickham wants to be master. He connives with the family governess to convince Darcy's sister Georgiana to elope with him. This will gain him Georgiana's fortune of thirty thousand pounds, as well as entry into the house, he need no longer be restricted to the employees' quarters. Two employees of the Darcy estate daring to breach the social boundaries violently and commit this act of social violence on Miss Darcy shows the daring in the lower classes, and the weakness in the upper. An unexpected visit by Darcy results in the detection and prevention of the scheme. Later, Wickham carries out something similar with Lydia, the youngest Bennet girl. Darcy has all his life disliked Wickham, with very good reason. In his brief acquaintance with Lydia, he has seen no reason to think well of her. He belongs to a wealthy, distinguished family, and used to consider contact with anyone outside his social sphere a pollution. But the changing conditions, aided by his love for Elizabeth, make Darcy go in search of Wickham and Lydia, in areas he would otherwise not visit, with the assistance of people he would much rather avoid. He gets the two married, repays Wickham's debts, procures him a job, and salvages the Bennet family's reputation. The highest in the land stoops to save, for a number of reasons, a low scoundrel, a thoughtless girl and a family he initially considered unfit to relate to.

Whereas the earlier generation among the lower classes was happy to be at the service of aristocrats, the next generation is no longer content to be in the subservient position. Forgetting for a moment Wickham's morals and values, one sees in his attitude the resentment of the lower classes to remain where they are. They want to rise, and what comes out as servile fawning in Collins' case expresses as devious stratagem in Wickham. The social climate permits Wickham his ambition. He is not called out to a duel by Lydia's family, he is not murdered or sent to jail. The Bennets and Darceys continue to support him and his wife, and grudgingly accept him into their family circle. It takes Austen's genius to make Darcy and the son of his former steward both sons-in-law and hence, in some regard, equal in the Bennet family.

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The shades of Pemberley, the Darcy estate would be polluted, fears Lady Catherine de Bourgh, because of her nephew Darcy's connections with the Bennet family. She is titled, and even higher than Darcy in the social order. She is forced by circumstances to go to Longbourn, to attempt to bully and coerce Elizabeth into giving up Darcy. When her threats fail to have any impact on Elizabeth, Lady Catherine is unable to comprehend it! She is steeped in class consciousness, and tries to maintain the old order. She is unable to understand, let alone accept, change. But her attitudes and beliefs are fast losing ground, and in the face of the powerful changes taking place in society, she and her opinions are swept aside.

The stratification of society was in fact based on real differences in cultural attainment. A class that owned vast acres of land and great wealth had the leisure and means to improve itself culturally and intellectually. This further widened the social differences between itself and the rest of the population, and raised real barriers to compatibility and harmony between the classes. These differences were self-reinforcing. The barriers which egalitarian modern society today tends to dismiss as mere prejudice did exist, as Lady Catherine insists. The long gradual decline of aristocracy leads us to overlook the real cultural attainments which characterized their ascendancy and long period of social dominance. However, the barriers were fast becoming flexible, thanks to developments in science, trade, travel, empire building, education and economic progress. That is how the sons of traders are able to enter higher social circles and daughters of country attorneys can marry the landed gentry. To Lady Catherine's great indignation, Elizabeth does marry Darcy and enter Pemberley. She declares she will have nothing to do with the couple anymore. But eventually, she responds to her nephew and his wife's reconciliatory invitation, and visits them. In the story, she represents the last citadel of the old world order that crumbles, giving way to a more integrated and inclusive society. Austen shows how those who bowed to change, gracefully or otherwise, survive. Pemberley that had been the seat of the distinguished family of the Darceys is now open to the relations of Elizabeth. The runaway sister and her soldier husband visit.



Elizabeth's mother and aunt, the daughters of a town attorney, can come. Most welcome are her uncle and aunt, the Gardiners. This uncle in trade who lives in an unprestigious locality in London has impressed Darcy with his culture, refinement, intelligence and fine values. He makes Darcy renounce the stereotypes he had formed of people outside his social sphere. A young man from one of the highest levels in the land receives an important lesson from a city tradesman, and is thankful for it. The English aristocrat gave up his superiority, and saved his head, unlike his French counterparts who absolutely refused to bow down, and ultimately lost all.

The British government had banned any mention of the French Revolution in fiction, and even if Austen had wanted to talk about it, she could not have. But instead, she depicted without commentary the changes that were taking place in British society, changes that had prevented a similar revolution there. *Pride and Prejudice* is the story of romance in the Bennet household, and Elizabeth and Darcy are its hero and heroine. But at the same time, *Pride and Prejudice* is also the story of the peaceful social evolution that took place in Britain, as a subconscious reaction to the movement across the Channel. Upward social mobility replaced the relatively static barriers that prevented social movement between the classes. Whereas in France, the impenetrable walls of class compelled violent revolution. This is one of the profound insights that can be drawn from the book about the social process that was taking place at that time, and about the process of social evolution in general. If one novel can provide us such a perspective of human history, what would a deeper understanding of all literature give us? And this perspective is only a fraction of what *Pride and Prejudice* itself can offer. The genius of Austen goes far beyond tracing social processes.

#### 4. Human Psychology and the Individual

Literature that is true to life offers intuitive knowledge about human nature, rarely found in textbooks on psychology, history or biography. Is everything that comes to us related to us in one way or another? Do we sanction, subconsciously, every act in our lives? Do aspects of the non-physical plane, such as our words, thoughts, emotions and attitudes have the power to manifest themselves in the physical plane? Does every outer event reflect the inner state of our consciousness? In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen shows the unmistakable connections between the inner and outer worlds. She depicts five unique characters in the five Bennet girls, but at the same time shows us with mathematical precision how each of the five girls is a combination of the various characteristics of Mrs. and Mr. Bennet.

Mr. Bennet belongs to the landed gentry. He is an educated and well-bred gentleman, with an estate and a comfortable income. He has high values and principles. He is not mercenary. On hearing that Elizabeth is engaged to Darcy, he warns her against marrying for money. Later when he learns the truth about the man, he respects Darcy's character, not his wealth or status. He has been born and brought up in plenty, and has no petty traits. He is also intelligent. From just reading Collins' letter, he can make out that the man is an absurd mixture of servility and self-importance. He is perhaps the one person in Meryton who sees through Wickham from day one. His daughters are immensely relieved, and his wife wildly happy on receiving the news of Lydia's marriage. But Mr. Bennet sees the truth behind the

development. He realises that a huge amount of money must have changed hands before this can be brought about. He declares “Wickham’s a fool if he takes her with a farthing less than ten thousand pounds”. If he can see through Wickham, then why does he not stop his daughter Lydia from going to Brighton? Mr. Bennet does not because he cannot be bothered to take the trouble. Having erred in his choice of wife, he prefers to distance himself from her ambitions and schemes, taking refuge in books in the solitude of his library rather than facing her in open combat for supremacy in the daily life of the family. Mr. Bennet is content with watching and being amused, he does not act. Be it Mrs. Bennet’s lack of sense, Lydia’s wild behavior, Jane’s disappointment, or Elizabeth’s concerns, he is a bystander, laughing silently. He has failed to provide for his family. He does not attempt to control his wife or discipline his daughters. He refuses to exert himself. He lacks the energy and mental will for the task. His wife is a quite perfect contrast to him.

Mrs. Bennet, the beautiful daughter of a country attorney, has married a land owning gentleman and risen in society. She wants her five daughters to rise further. She relentlessly pursues the task of finding suitable—that is wealthy—husbands for her girls. Her aspiration is so great she simply seems to draw eligible men from all parts of England towards Longbourn. While her husband thinks and understands more, and talks and acts less, Mrs. Bennet wastes no time in exercising her mind. She believes only in taking initiative. She is strong, seems to have infinite energy, and never gives up. When Bingley arrives in town, she plans and schemes to make him fall in love with Jane. Her constant mood swings and irrational behavior are beyond others’ understanding. She has no sense of social propriety. She is only aware of what she wants.

The five Bennet girls are all unique, each with her own characteristics. Jane is pleasant, beautiful, and thinks well of everyone. Elizabeth is a strong individual, intelligent and with positive values. Mary is dull and lacks energy. Kitty is petulant and irresponsible. Lydia is foolish, strong willed and full of energy. But none of them have even a single aspect of their nature that cannot be traced to one or the other of their parents. Jane receives all her beauty from her mother. Like her, she is also without keen intelligence. She gets her natural goodness from her father. Like him, she is also without much energy or initiative. As a reaction to her mother’s boorishness, she develops the opposite, a pleasing social behaviour. Next is Elizabeth who owes her strength of will and energy to her mother, and intelligence, positive values and pleasant manners to her father. If Elizabeth has got the best combination from her parents, the exact opposite seems to have been reserved for the next daughter. Mary’s foolishness is her mother’s; her lack of energy is her father’s. Kitty knows about Lydia’s planned elopement, but does not bother to inform her parents. Such irresponsible behaviour is from the father. She finds nothing wrong in eloping, her sense of right and wrong coming from her mother. Lydia is irresponsible in not giving a thought either to her own or her sisters’ future before eloping. This again is like her father. All the rest of her nature, the impulsiveness, initiative, foolishness and wild energy, are from the mother.

Austen goes further in her analysis of human character. One likes the child who is most like oneself. Of Mrs. Bennet’s two great characteristics, her beauty and foolish impulsiveness, she has passed on one to her eldest daughter Jane, and the other to the youngest, Lydia.

Jane and Lydia happen to be her favourite children. Mr. Bennet is endowed with values and intellect that he has passed on to Elizabeth, sparing a little for Jane. Not surprisingly, his two favourite daughters are Elizabeth and Jane, in that order. Just as parents are able to identify most with the children who are like themselves, they seem to identify least with the children who are most like the partner, especially in a not so harmonious partnership as in the case of the Bennets. Elizabeth is the least favorite of Mrs. Bennet's, and Mr. Bennet is glad to keep a distance from Lydia.

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There is a constant tension, sometimes humorous, sometimes bitter, between Mrs. and Mr. Bennet. When Mrs. Bennet and her daughters return from the assembly where they meet Bingley for the first time, Mr. Bennet is unusually awake late in the night, waiting for their return. With an astonishing insight for a young unmarried woman to perceive in parental relations, Austen tells us that Mr. Bennet stays up hoping to hear that his wife is disappointed in Bingley. A good marriage for one of his daughters would be welcome, and he shares his wife's concern for their future. But the rivalry with the wife is so intense that it overrides even his goodwill for his daughters. He would like to see his wife's plans stymied even if that means disappointment for the girls. So he would like to hear that Bingley turned out to be a disappointment, there is no chance of one of his daughters profiting by the new connection, and Mrs. Bennet has no reason to celebrate. He displays the same behaviour when Elizabeth rejects Collins' proposal. Charlotte gets engaged to Collins instead, leaving Mrs. Bennet disappointed and enraged. Mr. Bennet has five unmarried daughters on his hands, the estate is entailed to cousin Collins, neighbour Charlotte Lucas is to become its mistress. But all that Mr. Bennet cares for is to enjoy his wife's disappointment. Apart from the rivalry between Mrs. and Mr. Bennet, this tension is also an outcome of the marriage between the two classes to which they belong, the working class that is striving to rise and the upper class that is struggling to accept the new world order.

Austen has captured such minute elements of human psychology in her portrayal of the Bennet family. Shakespeare critic A.C. Bradley talks about Jane Austen's “*surpassing excellence within that comparatively narrow sphere whose limits she never tried to overpass... which... gives her in that sphere the position held by Shakespeare in his.*” If such knowledge of human psychology can be learnt from one of the six novels written in Austen's narrow sphere, then what is the learning potential from Shakespeare and other great writers! Such knowledge is impossible to obtain from a textbook of psychology for the simple reason that experiential, subjective truths that touch the emotions have a greater learning impact than abstract scientific knowledge in a textbook. Such knowledge that touches the human emotions can be found only in literature. Take the first assembly at Meryton for instance. Bingley and Darcy have newly arrived in the neighbourhood. Bingley has just taken a house

of his own. He has been invited to a ball. Everyone seems to take an interest in him. He is dancing with the prettiest girl present, Jane. All these make a usually tractable person who waits for Darcy's approval before taking a step actually give Darcy an order. He finds Darcy standing by himself, and says he will not have him stand in a "stupid" manner. *You had much better dance*, he orders his friend, offering to introduce Jane's sister to him. This is the one occasion in the entire story spanning a year where we find Bingley speaking in this way to Darcy. Darcy usually takes decisions, and Bingley complies, even in matters such as whom Bingley should fall in love with, and whom he can marry. But this temporary aberration, which Austen's genius captures with the alertness and clarity of an expert photographer, results from the momentary reversal of their fortunes. Darcy stands alone, while Bingley is clearly adored by the crowd and has a very pleasant and beautiful girl for a dance partner.

Darcy gives an uncharacteristic response in return. In a voice loud enough to be overheard by Elizabeth, he curtly describes her as just 'tolerable' to look at, and dismisses Bingley's offer saying dancing with her would be a punishment to him. An educated, well-bred gentleman from a wealthy and distinguished family speaks ill of a country girl in her hearing, and insults her in public. It appears inexplicable, unless Darcy is really as boorish as Elizabeth comes to believe. The truth is that Darcy is attracted to Elizabeth. The attraction is subconscious and therefore not under his control. The dislike of Meryton's common vulgarity is a well-formed conscious attitude which he is proud to proclaim. The ungentlemanly act of expressing his opinion so loudly that Elizabeth could overhear it, is not in his character—at least the conscious part of it—but beyond his control. This initial act at their indirect contact announces the inner conflict that will possess him and compel him to propose to her at Hunsford almost against his will and it anticipates in the beginning the final outcome of the story. But why? The rude act is reflective of the internal turmoil in Darcy. He hates to move in social circles outside his own. But he makes Bingley his friend and accepts the invitation to go to Hertfordshire. He claims that he does not enjoy the company of the country people, yet he accompanies Bingley to the dance. He believes in the superiority of his class, but he finds in Elizabeth and some of her friends and family qualities that he can admire. He does not want to fall in love with Elizabeth, but he is unable to stop himself. He cannot embrace change, although he knows he has to. This internal conflict in Darcy results in the insulting words. He does not intend to hurt or offend her, but the jarring words are an echo of the inner clash between his mind and emotions. He thinks he should not marry her for her family and her class, although he loves her. This is not mere story telling or artistry. It is intuitive perception of human character and life.

As almost universally proclaimed, Darcy is Austen's best hero. Austen has a deep and mature insight into human nature that is far from romantic fantasy. It may or may not reflect her own personal experience in romance as some critics conclude. However, it expresses a clear dispassionate knowledge of the complexity of human character that exceeds in its subtle complexity the superficiality of most prevailing psychological theories. A deep study of literature, be it Austen, Shakespeare or any other writer, can make real and concrete to our experience what scholarly articles only theoretically describe.

## 5. A New Science of the Arts

Every story has a beginning. ‘Once upon a time’, ‘In the year 1856’, ‘There once lived in a village’, ‘In the kingdom of’, ‘It was a sunny morning’, and so on. We accept that as the beginning of the story. We read it from that point and do not ask what happened before that time, why does the story start in that year and not a year earlier, why is it set in this city and not that, why is the protagonist given that name and not any other, or why does this family have exactly this number of children, and not one more or one less. We accept the given conditions as the beginning of the story and go on to trace the causality of subsequent events from that point onwards. We do not question why the story begins where it does.

Science does not know why there was a Big Bang. Physicists extrapolate backwards in time to one picosecond, a trillionth of a second after the Big Bang, and explain the universe, the development of its electronuclear force and magnetism, the formation of all matter from the hydrogen nuclei to the stars and planets, up to the evolution of plant and animal life. But they still do not know why there was a Big Bang, or what existed before that.

Biologists try to explain everything from the advent of the first living cell onwards: when and where life first appeared, how the plant kingdom became diversified, how animal life first appeared in the sea and then spread and evolved into complex species, how some species became extinct and others adapted and survived. But any effort to explain how that first carbon compound came to life as a living cell is purely speculative imagination.

Even an infinitesimal difference in the atomic bonding of an element such as Hydrogen or Carbon would have left Earth without life as we know it today. So what determined those right conditions? Physics starts with constants and explains matter. Biology starts from the first living cell and describes life. But Science does not have an answer to the question, ‘How and why did it all begin in the first place?’. Science describes these phenomena as singularities, but description is not explanation. Naming phenomena is not knowledge.

All physical science is based on the past determining the future, but today, a new science has emerged, the science of Anticipation<sup>2</sup>. The future is being studied to determine the present. It is now recognized that the future can shape and determine the present, whether consciously through our values, ideas, dreams and aspirations or subconsciously through our deepest fears and biological conditioning. If we take this science to study the arts, then, instead of beginning a story by implicitly accepting the initial conditions, a new and intriguing question arises: what happened before the beginning, before the Big Bang!

Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* begins with the arrival of the friends Bingley and Darcy in Hertfordshire. As we saw earlier, the characters reveal great insights into human psychology. Their actions and experiences also reflect the emerging social process. We can go further.

Countless are the lovers of this lively romance, yet few are those who have delved beneath its superficial charm, delightful humor, entrancing energy and emotional intensity to uncover the profundity of wisdom it contains. To the occidental intellect, society is an empty space, a playing field in which the separate and independent lives act and interact with one another.

But to the Asian mind, society is a living organism of which every individual member is an inseparable part, a universal unified existence, as real in itself as any living, breathing, feeling individual.

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*“We need to delve deeper into the context, circumstances and individual character of the players to discover principles and forces that are concealed by the veil of chance and accident.”*

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Literary criticism is an Occidental science, an attempt to apply the analytic mental faculty to the comprehension of that which cannot be divided, for Life is an integrated whole that can only be understood in totality and in context. The limitations of analysis can be found even in the most profound works of literary criticism. Some great critics sense its importance but struggle to reconcile it with a rational view of life.

In Act IV of *Hamlet*, Hamlet's uncle, King Claudius, dispatches the young prince to England as a representative to the English king accompanied by two courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have been secretly missioned by Claudius to ensure that Hamlet never returns alive to Denmark. Claudius' sealed letter to the English monarch denounces Hamlet as a traitor and threat to his realm and calls on the English king to remove the threat. On the ship to England, Hamlet awakes restless during the night. An intuitive suspicion prompts him to sneak into the cabin of the two courtiers, unseals the king's missive and discover the fate that is awaiting him. He reseals the letter using the signet ring he bears as Prince of Denmark and replaces it.

So far, the story conveys the high drama and passion one would expect from great tragedy. But then something remarkable occurs. The following morning, the ship conveying Hamlet to England is attacked by pirates. In the intense combat that ensues, Hamlet boldly jumps into the pirates' ship demonstrating his leadership as prince of the realm. Surprised by the intensity of resistance they meet, the pirates withdraw to their own ship and the ships separate. Hamlet finds himself alone with the pirates, their prisoner. But once he reveals his identity and offers them a reward, he readily secures swift transport back to Denmark where he pursues his confrontation with Claudius that ultimately ends tragically in the death of Claudius, the queen, Laertes and the prince himself.

Commenting on this incident, A.C. Bradley<sup>3</sup> acknowledges the right of the dramatist to employ dramatic device reflecting the admission of chance in the course of tragedy. Bradley's profound insight into human nature exceeds that of all but the greatest psychologists and sometimes seems to rival that of Shakespeare himself. But his view, like our own, is obscured by the narrow perspective of early 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific material culture. He never considers another explanation because he lives in an age in which knowledge of life has been reduced to a philosophical abstraction rather than a living vision of reality. He acknowledges accidents as a prominent fact of human life. He never considers the possibility that Shakespeare has perceived and is either consciously or subconsciously pointing to a deeper truth of life that can



attract our attention only when it occurs in circumstances that appear inexplicable according to any normal conception of causality. A cursory review of the great literature of the world reveals that these works are replete with such inexplicable incidents, unnecessary and avoidable to the logical mind, irrational and implausible to the scientific intellect, other than as expressions of the inherent uncertainty and randomness of life, but natural and extremely common to the vision of those who perceive the deeper workings of life in its integral reality.

If the determining influences of fate, chance and accident are all we can learn from such incidents in great works of literature, we may well have grounds for questioning their greatness. But it is not. For awakening to the reality of the unexpected and inexplicable is only the first step in the revelation of the character of life and the greatness of the author's vision of it. We need to delve deeper into the context, circumstances and individual character of the players to discover principles and forces that are concealed by the veil of chance and accident. *Pride and Prejudice* can be used as raw material for that inquiry. Without psychology, philosophy, or intellectuality, it reveals a relationship between our subjective thoughts and feelings and the response of life around us. Not only *Pride and Prejudice*, any of Shakespeare's plays or the works of Hugo, Dumas, Trollope, Hardy, Tolstoy or the great Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* suffice for the purpose of discovering the character of life and its ruling principles. Literature has amassed vast volumes of experiential knowledge of human nature acting in life. It is a great field for studying not only human psychology and sociology, but also understanding the relationship between our inner thoughts and the external acts in life.

Of course, without the arrival of Bingley and Darcy at this place and time, there is no story, no *Pride and Prejudice*. We can give a plausible explanation in hindsight, much as by looking in the rear view mirror, we can tell where we have been. Bingley has come into a considerable fortune. He enjoys the respectability that comes from being a wealthy gentleman, and would like to take on the trappings of that class. He would like to go to the country for the summer, to a place not too far away from the attractions of London. He would like to rent a large house, until he is ready to buy an estate of his own. He needs to cultivate friendship with a man from the highest circles in the land, as Darcy is. He wishes to own a carriage, indulge in shooting and have a life style appropriate to his newly found status. He happens to receive a recommendation about a place in the country at a short distance from London. But none of these reasons distinguishes Bingley's coming to Hertfordshire, selecting the estate of Netherfield, when Jane, twenty-three years of age, beautiful and good natured, is waiting to find a suitable man she can love and marry. Science, in such a situation, assumes it is singularity or chance. But is it possible that the key to the whole story of *Pride and Prejudice*, and similarly, to many stories including those of our own lives, is in understanding why that first step was taken? And then go on to understand the next step, and the next step?

Early in the story, the Bennet girls go out for a walk and have an interesting encounter. Their cousin Collins, who is on a two-week long visit, accompanies them. The youngest Bennet girl, Lydia, seeks news about one of the soldiers who have just been posted in the nearby town of Meryton. Their father is eager to be rid of the annoying company of Collins. So he encourages all the girls to go out, taking their cousin with them. Meanwhile, Bingley and Darcy set out towards Longbourn to call on the Bennets. Bingley particularly wants to

meet Jane, who has just recovered from an illness. As the girls enter Meryton, their attention is caught by the good looking and charming soldier, Wickham. Just as they exchange greetings, Bingley and Darcy ride into town and come upon this group. Here are three parties, comprised of people who have been acquainted for periods ranging from a few weeks to a few minutes. Darcy and Wickham alone have known each other since childhood. They have always had a turbulent relationship, and would like to avoid each other. The Bennet girls did not know of Wickham until they meet him in town. They did not expect to meet Bingley, and do not care to meet Darcy. Collins is without any other expectation than to marry one of the elder Bennet girls. Life brings this disparate group together as they all walk or ride into Meryton at the same time. At the end of the story, they have all become interconnected through marriage. Bingley and Jane are married. So are Darcy and Elizabeth. Collins marries his cousin Elizabeth's friend Charlotte, and through his cousin, becomes related to Darcy. The soldier ends up married to Lydia. Wickham who tried and failed to become Darcy's brother-in-law by eloping with Georgiana ends up as his brother-in-law through Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy. Seven of the eight people who are to become related thus, are brought together by life a year earlier, without their conscious will or intention. A chance event? An amazing coincidence? A dramatic literary technique used by the author? Luck? Or is there another explanation? Does life indicate the end subtly in the beginning?

In saying Austen wrote fairytale endings, critics mean she gives everyone, or almost everyone what they want at the end of the story. In dismissing the outcome as romantic fantasy, we fail to recognize what every high achiever intuitively perceives—the power of aspiration for self-realization in life. In *Pride and Prejudice*, we definitely see that almost all get what they aspire for. Jane and Bingley wish to marry pleasant, mild mannered people, and they find each other. Elizabeth and Darcy wish to marry those they can respect and love. Their longings are fulfilled. Lydia gets a more than dashing husband, and adventure too in ample measure. Wickham wants to become Darcy's brother. He hopes and fails to do so by marrying Georgiana, but succeeds through another path when he and Darcy marry sisters! Collins wants to be at the feet of aristocracy. He firmly establishes himself near it, first by acquiring Lady Catherine as his patroness, then when his cousin marries Darcy. Charlotte wants physical and social security, and she gets just that in her marriage to Collins. Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters married, and gets three of her five girls married in a single year. Mr. Bennet wants some peace and quiet, and the best for Jane and Elizabeth. Life grants him all these. Everyone's true aspiration is fulfilled. Are all our deep, intense aspirations similarly fulfilled in life? Even Lady Catherine, who claims that she loves to be useful, succeeds at least in this measure. In her attempts to prevent Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage, she unintentionally plays the role of a messenger and prompts Darcy to propose to Elizabeth. She has, indeed, been very useful, though not in the manner she intended!

When news of Bingley's arrival comes and the Bennet family is excited at the thought of a marriage, Lydia exclaims that she would like to be the first in her family to get married. And she becomes the first! After her elopement with Wickham, the two are caught and a marriage is hastily arranged. Do all our words come true? We see an instance of the same phenomenon in the author's life. Austen wrote in a letter to her sister Cassandra, "I write only

for fame.” This was in 1796, fifteen years before she was to have a book published. Till the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811, her readership was limited to her own family members and friends. So her mention of fame was more a facetious remark. 222 years on, life has obediently given Austen spectacular fame. And just as she implied that she was not writing for profit, she was granted about 600 pounds from the publication of four novels in her lifetime, nothing more. But numerous stage and movie adaptations, sequels and spin-offs, museums that enshrine her life and societies dedicated to her works have given her just what she asked for, fame!

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*“Reconciling art and science, the subjective and objective views of reality through literary criticism may well provide a means to transcend the limitations of a purely material life science and discover a true science of life.”*

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Bingley’s sister Caroline teases Darcy over his future mother-in-law Mrs. Bennet, all the while hoping to marry Darcy herself. Unfortunately for her, the hypothetical joke comes true. Does life have a sense of humour? At the first ball, Bingley chooses Charlotte for the first dance. The choice turns out to be a subtle indication. Charlotte is the first in the story to be married, though not to Bingley! Does life always throw out such pointers? When Charlotte announces her engagement to Collins, Elizabeth responds with an unthinking, insensitive ‘Impossible!’ When she informs her family of her own engagement to Darcy, the same word is echoed. When we say history repeats, we have in mind large scale political happenings, mass movements, and events based on great ideals. Do even our little, individual acts repeat in our day to day lives? Is there a pattern to the repetition? Can literature give us the knowledge to make sense of apparent coincidences?

When Elizabeth is on a holiday with her aunt and uncle the Gardiners, she is persuaded by Mrs. Gardiner to visit the Darcy estate at Pemberley. Elizabeth last met Darcy at Hunsford when he proposed to her boorishly, she turned him down, and the encounter ended in a heated argument. Both of them had parted, wishing never to meet each other. But gradually, subconsciously their feelings have undergone many changes over the past few months. Elizabeth reluctantly agrees to go to Pemberley only after she learns that Darcy is not in town. However, once she sees the place, she is greatly impressed by the beauty and elegance of the house and the grounds surrounding it. She feels a twinge of regret for having turned down such magnificence. After hearing a glowing description of the master by Darcy’s old housekeeper, Elizabeth is filled with a gentle sensation towards him, and a deep sentiment of gratitude for what he had offered in proposing to her six months earlier. After leaving the house, as Elizabeth is walking in the grounds, Darcy suddenly comes into view. He has returned a day earlier than planned. He is also a changed man now, and renews his relationship with Elizabeth after a long abrupt hiatus. Her recent change of attitude is immediately followed by a sudden change of circumstances. Does life respond to our deepest thoughts and feelings?

Literature is filled with such curious incidents and ironies, seeming coincidences and lucky or unlucky meetings. Life is full of them too. Literature reflects life. Early societies and ancient wisdom from around the world claim to have discovered relationships between human consciousness and life events which the modern mind summarily dismisses as superstition. Science studies objective external facts and regards subjective inner experiences as secondary or incidental, rather than causal factors. Literature revives the debate which science ignores or dismisses as unscientific. It intuitively points to a knowledge which rational thinking overlooks, ignores or dismisses. Reconciling art and science, the subjective and objective views of reality through literary criticism may well provide a means to transcend the limitations of a purely material life science and discover a true science of life.

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## **Notes**

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