



Pride and Prejudice: A Bildungsroman

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has previously been situated as a romance novel. Critics such as Pamela Regis support reading the novel as a romance: She states that the novel shows the most characteristic features of the genre, as it focuses on a female protagonist and the goal of marriage. However, the romance genre does not embrace the individual character development of the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, which I find central to the novel. I therefore argue that this development justifies reading the novel in terms of the *Bildungsroman* genre. This article will examine the central features of the *Bildungsroman* genre and how these are expressed in Elizabeth's mental and behavioural development throughout the novel. Consequently, the presence of these genre features situates *Pride and Prejudice* as a *Bildungsroman*.

Keywords: romance novel, Bildungsroman, alienation, agency, reintegration, maturation

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Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is often referred to by critics as a romance novel. Romance novels are defined by Abrams and Harpham as 'love stories that focus on the heroine rather than the hero, in which, after diverse obstacles have been overcome, the plots end happily with the betrothal or marriage of the lovers' (351). In addition, they place all of Austen's novels within this genre. One of the critics, who also situates *Pride and Prejudice* within this genre, is Pamela Regis. She states that the novel 'fulfils the requirements of the basic definition' because of the female protagonist and the focus on marriage (Regis 37). Moreover, the reader is presented with various characters, for instance Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Wickham, who serve as 'obstacles' that prevent the union of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy (Regis 101). However, I argue that Elizabeth shows a psychological development through this romantic plot, which justifies placing the text in a different literary category, namely the *Bildungsroman* genre.

A *Bildungsroman* is a novel of formation focusing on the development of a specific character. According to Maier, the literary style began in Germany in the eighteenth century, and the term was first coined by the German philologist Karl Morgenstern who introduced the *Bildungsroman* in 1819/1820 (317). Wilhem Dilthey gave further description of the term in 1870 in *Das Leben Schleiermachers*. In this work Dilthey states that a *Bildungsroman* 'examines a regular course of development in the life of the individual... The dissonance and conflicts of life appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony'. Another defining element is the journeys. As Maier states, the protagonist leaves his or her familiar environment and faces different surroundings that hold new experiences and acquaintances but also personal conflicts. The meeting with this new environment shapes the protagonist's character and influences his or her "'becoming" as an individual in society with a secure, self-formulated identity' (Maier 318).

When discussing literary works from the Romantic period in terms of the *Bildungsroman* genre, it is relevant to take the gender of the protagonist into consideration. The gender binary of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was strong, and thus there were different expectations of male and female development. Whereas boys were taught independence, girls were taught the opposite: their role was situated in the home, where they would acquire accomplishments that would help them in becoming successful wives. Consequently, the different goals of male and female development must be considered when analysing *Pride and Prejudice* as a female *Bildungsroman*. However, according to Ellis, these differences do not situate the male and female *Bildungsroman* in separate literary spheres. She argues that the male and female *Bildungsroman* both contain three issues that are central to the genre, and that *Pride and Prejudice* fits into this: '1) the protagonist's agency, which shows that he or she is actively involved in his or her own development, 2) self-reflection, which shows the protagonist's ability to learn and grow from his or her experiences, and 3) the protagonist's eventual

reintegration with society, which demonstrates the fundamentally conservative nature of the genre' (Ellis 11). In my subsequent analysis and discussion, I will seek to investigate how these elements of agency, self-reflection and reintegration are present in the novel, and how Austen prioritises issues of Elizabeth's development over the eventual marriage with Mr. Darcy.

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The first introduction to Elizabeth's character is made by Mr. Bennet. He seems to have a special preference for her compared to his other daughters because of her wits: 'Elizabeth has more of quickness than her sisters' (Austen 4). Thus, the reader is made aware of Elizabeth being different opposed to the other women in the novel from the very beginning of the text. She is described as having a 'lively playful disposition' and she does not hold back when feeling the urge to mock others for their silliness (Austen 9). For example, she teasingly exposes how Mr. Darcy was reluctant to dance at the ball at Netherfield Hall: 'He danced only four dances! I am sorry to pain you – but so it was' (Austen 122). The language of this phrase expresses the self-confident attitude of Elizabeth's character. The exclamation mark shows her expressive manner of talking, and the final four monosyllabic words give further emphasis to her opinion and mark the assertiveness of her disposition.

The description of Elizabeth's sister, Jane, contributes further to an understanding of Elizabeth's character. Jane represents a contrast and thus makes Elizabeth's difference of manner more visible. The two sisters differ in both appearance and temper. Jane gains a lot of attention because of her appearance whereas Elizabeth is considered less pretty (Austen 9). Jane is very careful of not making strong judgements and she always speaks in a mild tone: 'I would wish not to be hasty in censuring any one' (Austen 11). Completely the opposite, Elizabeth has a rougher and more direct language, and she makes much harder and quicker judgements. This is seen in her conversation with Mr. Wickham. She willingly adds this new information about Mr. Darcy's misdeeds to her existing impression and strongly declares her disregard to Mr. Wickham, as she says 'this is quite shocking! – He deserves to be publicly disgraced' (Austen 58). Furthermore, she tends to express her opinion in a sarcastic and rather provocative manner. This is made clear in her comment on Mr. Darcy's opinion of female accomplishments: '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' (Austen 29). The italicisation of the three words in this phrase makes Elizabeth's opinion come across in a very provocative and slightly aggressive way. This further emphasises the assertiveness of her character and makes her stand in sharp contrast to the more traditional and passive female character that Jane represents.

Another significant aspect of Elizabeth's disposition is her opinion of the importance of her appearance. The reader is made aware of this opinion when she decides to walk to Netherfield Hall through the dust. Her mother says, 'You will not be fit to be seen when you get there', to which she responds, 'I shall be very fit to see Jane – which is all I want' (Austen 24). She refuses to acknowledge that her sex situates her in a specific sphere that holds particular expectations to her behaviour and appearance. This opinion, I argue, shows the independent nature of her character, but it also places her in constant opposition to the expectations of her environment and causes her to be mentally alienated from society. This argument is supported by Ellis who states that Elizabeth refuses to accept 'the role of object of the gaze', and that through her attitude she 'demonstrates alienation from the social expectation that she should always consider herself the potential object of courtship and thus of the male gaze' (116). Thus, society dictates a passive female nature, which is subjected to the active nature of men. Elizabeth finds herself in opposition to this convention: she insists on being active rather than passive, as we see it in the examples hitherto discussed. This results in alienation and conflict in her character, which corresponds to the dissonance Dilthey mentions as a defining element of the *Bildungsroman*.

When Elizabeth receives Mr. Darcy's letter, the reader witnesses a transition in her development. She realizes that she has allowed herself to be fooled by Mr. Wickham's character even though there has been evidence of his falseness: 'She was *now* struck with the impropriety of such communication to a stranger, and wondered how it had escaped her before. She saw the indelicacy of putting himself forward as he had done, and the inconsistency of his professions with his conduct' (Austen 143). Being confronted with her own blindness and prejudice, she must acknowledge her flaws in character: 'She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. – Of neither Mr. Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without the feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd' (Austen 144). This acknowledgement motivates a change of behaviour and perspective. It is clearly marked as a point of self-reflection in her developmental process as she declares, 'Till this moment, I never knew myself' (Austen 144). Moreover, it is implied that she has been motivated to alter her attitude and behaviour from this point: 'and how much I shall have to conceal'. Ellis supports this interpretation in stating that Elizabeth at this point realizes 'that she cannot be as open as she was' (118).

Elizabeth is visiting Charlotte in Hunsford when she receives Darcy's letter (Austen 106). She is thus in a new and different environment as she is struck with self-recognition. This supports the idea of *Pride and Prejudice* being a *Bildungsroman* and is linked to Maier's emphasis on the development happening as the character finds herself in a new setting when facing inner conflicts (318). It is visible that the journey has altered Elizabeth as she returns home. She shows a new concern for what others might think of her family and herself and thus displays a newfound self-consciousness: 'It should not be said, that the Miss Bennet's could not be home half a day before they were in pursuit of the officers' (Austen 153). This quotation illustrates how she is slowly beginning

to accept the expectations of society. As opposed to before her transition, she shows that she is now affected by other people's opinions of her, which also marks that she is starting to accept her role as object of the gaze.

Elizabeth's development continues on her next journey, where she visits Pemberley and shows a growing concern of what Mr. Darcy might think of her up till the point where she realizes her true affection: 'never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be in vain' (Austen 189). Later, after accepting Mr. Darcy, she again shows how the realizations of these past journeys have caused her to modify her behaviour. She has not lost her direct and teasing language, but she has learned to adjust to what is expected of her. As Ellis notes: 'Elizabeth has learned how to regulate her own appearance' (119). This is apparent when she feels tempted to tease Mr. Darcy, but holds back as she 'remembered that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin' (Austen 254). This ability to regulate herself according to the context shows that she is now reaching maturity – the goal of development. Indeed, a significant symbol of Elizabeth reaching maturity is her acceptance of Mr. Darcy's second proposal. Marriage symbolises a rite of transition where she goes from a state of alienation and opposition to reintegration with society. Elizabeth does not only accept Mr. Darcy, she also fulfils her societal role as a female. Ellis supports this claim as she states that Elizabeth learns to "work within the limits of the system" and not work against it (5). Thus, harmony has replaced dissonance, and she is now at the end of her formation process.

According to Ellis, agency must also be a present element in the female *Bildungsroman*, but in her analysis of the present novel, this issue is not discussed. This might be because *Pride and Prejudice* does not provide the clearest example when it comes to agency. In *Jane Eyre*, another novel of the genre, the agency of the protagonist is more obvious as the plot is character driven. The heroine, Jane Eyre, makes active choices which shape the course of the plot. For instance, she shows agency when she advertises for a job as governess with the aim of creating a new life away from Lowood School (Brontë 74). Opposed to this, *Pride and Prejudice* is characterized by chance and is thus more plot driven. An example of this element of chance is the aforementioned journeys. Elizabeth does not actively initiate the eye opening journeys as Jane Eyre does. These are offered to her by others, for instance by the Gardiners, who happen to decide that Mr. Darcy's home is to be a destination on their tour (Austen 165). However, I argue that Elizabeth does display an agency that is linked to mental process, rather than to physical action. When receiving Mr. Darcy's letter, Elizabeth chooses to acknowledge that she has been biased. She actively chooses to consider this new knowledge instead of ignoring it, which motivates a change of manner, influences her way of thinking and thus drives her personal development.

Parallel to Elizabeth's progressing self-formation, which is expressed in her change of behaviour and developing view of Mr. Darcy, lies another internal conflict. I argue that her challenge

in adapting to society's expectations also connects to an inner dissonance involving her two fundamental role models – Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. As previously mentioned, Elizabeth is Mr. Bennet's favourite daughter, perhaps because of their likeness in character. Just like Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet has a tendency to speak in a sarcastic tone, and he mocks his wife because of her lack of wit and the schemes she plans with the aim of getting her daughters married. For instance, when Jane has to stay at Netherfield Hall because of illness, he says, 'if your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, it would be a comfort to know it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley' (Austen 23). He seems to take very little interest in getting his daughters married, and thus he remains passive in the process of helping them to adapt to societal conventions. Consequently, he comes to represent a resistance to the expectations of society, which is a central conflict in Elizabeth's character development. On the other hand is Mrs. Bennet, who is fully preoccupied with adjusting her children to the conventions of society, illustrated by her wish for Elizabeth to be 'fit to be seen' (Austen 24). Mrs. Bennet thus represents the need to fulfil the societal role, and this creates a distance between mother and daughter, which is expressed in Elizabeth refusing to take her mother's advice. This complicates Elizabeth's developmental challenge even more, as she lacks identification with a female role model. The contrasting positions of her mother and father thus become a manifestation of her internal as well as social conflict. When Elizabeth marries Mr. Darcy, the tension and dissonance between the different positions that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet represent dissolves. As previously mentioned, she accepts her role as a female and learns to adjust her appearance but without losing her witty language and sharp tongue. This corresponds to Maier's claim that 'successful development will integrate several roles which meet the demands placed upon a mature woman in society' (333). Elizabeth succeeds in integrating the conflicting positions or roles of her mother and father in herself, which contributes to her reintegration into society.

Indeed, when she has settled in the role as wife and mistress of Pemberley, we see that this reintegration has not resulted in her giving up on her independent and outspoken nature. This is illustrated by Georgiana's reflections on Elizabeth's behaviour: 'at first she often listened with astonishment bordering on alarm, at her lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother...By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband' (Austen 265). This quotation also illustrates how Elizabeth, after reaching maturity, has become a role model herself, and how she is now guiding Georgiana in her development. Thus, it is implied that the story of female development has not ended with Elizabeth. It continues with other young women attempting to find their place in society.

In conclusion, several elements of the *Bildungsroman* genre are represented in *Pride and Prejudice*. The starting point of Elizabeth's development is characterized by dissonance. She is mentally alienated from society as a result of her resistance to adapt to her societal role as a woman. This is expressed in her sarcastic attitude, in her refusal to consider herself as object of the gaze of

others, and in the tension between her parents, whose difference of opinion represents her inner conflict. The elements of self-reflection and agency are present when Elizabeth receives Mr. Darcy's letter, and she is confronted with her blindness. She chooses to be open to the knowledge that has been presented to her, which gives rise to reflection on her previous behaviour. From this point, she begins to alter her attitude, and thus this is a transit point in her development. When she finally accepts Mr. Darcy, the dissonance is dissolved. The marriage symbolizes her mental reintegration in society and acceptance of the expectations of her environment. Consequently, the presence of these elements situates the novel as a *Bildungsroman*. Reading *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of this genre therefore reveals that the development of the romance between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy is not necessarily the primary focus of the novel. Elizabeth's challenge in finding her place in society plays a predominant role, and thus suggests that Austen's happy ending entails more than just a marriage; it advocates the importance of women being able maintain their personal qualities and individuality in a social system that otherwise works to oppress them.

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