

**Pater Familias in *Pride and Prejudice*: Disfunctionality  
in the Bennet Family and in the British Monarchy**

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## Abstract

The end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was an era of change that gave rise to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Jane Austen's world was deeply affected by those events. Not only was the French invasion a threat, but there were also inner conflicts between Jacobins and anti Jacobins (British supporters and opponents, respectively, of the French Revolution) that put the British social system at stake. Austen's novels were long thought to be apolitical due to their lack of overt references to the nation's situation. This paper aims to contradict this critical perspective by pointing out why and how Austen reflected Britain's political and social life within the domestic settings of her plots. Focusing on *Pride and Prejudice*, close reading and interpretation of different sources lead to the establishment of a parallelism between the dysfunctional family in the novel and the impropriety of the British Regency: while the Bennets' failures as parents affect the future of their children, the Prince Regent misruled a country in pressing need of change. A further purpose of this argument is to detect and interpret the nature of related changes in society that seem to be suggested in *Pride and Prejudice*, in light of my discussion.

Key words: Regency, dysfunctional family, class division, Jacobinism

## **Abbreviations**

PP: *Pride and Prejudice* (used in citations)

## 1. Introduction

Gary Kelly completes D. D. Devling's declaration that "All Jane Austen novels, and many of her minor works, unfinished works and juvenilia, are about education".<sup>1</sup> by saying that they are so "in critical and complex ways" (Kelly: 252). She lived in a time of social, economic and political change in Britain that gave rise to a war of ideas where most late-eighteenth-century writers and philosophers were involved.<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen was an avid reader. She knew the literary tradition and was aware of the colliding forces in her world. That knowledge enabled her to create works of fiction with a clear didactic objective: in her novels heroines reach success through personal evolution.

But her works are "about education" "in critical and complex ways" because they not only served to support individual improvement. They could also be read as conveying a covert critical message only decodable through close reading and interpretation. Nicholas Roe declares that:

Austen's novels present an England of small rural communities, farmers and the landed gentry, but this is never a sleepy, pastoral setting and the organisation of society (hotly debated in national politics throughout her lifetime) is always at issue. [...] Austen's novels focussing on domestic authority reflected urgent debates on the national political scene. (Roe: 360)

Roe's observation is in line with more recent critical ideas that refute the consideration of Austen as a non-political author. The lack of explicit opinions in her works made scholars believe that she did not wish to participate in the political debates

<sup>1</sup> D. D. Devling, *Jane Austen and Education* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of the French Revolution, the hierarchical society of England was threatened. Changes in the social structure were necessary and authors such as Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth or Samuel Coleridge overtly defended their ideas at that respect.

seen in many authors of that period.<sup>3</sup> As an example of such views, it is worth considering the ideas of critics such as Roger Gard:

She is remarkably unpolitical for a novelist—except, of course, in the rather tiresome sense, which modern critical theorists are eager to point up on almost any occasion, that everything is in a wider way implicitly political” (Gard: 15-16)

Gard does not take plot, character profile or narrative as indicators of a political stand. But, as he mentions himself, “modern political theorists” ‘point up’ “that everything is in a wider way implicitly political”. Austen appears to have had two reasons to conceal her own opinions. First of all, she was probably aware of the issues she had to avoid if she wanted her novels to be published. Second, she presumably thought that a subtle didactic method would be more effective:

Jane Austen [...] aims to educate her readers, again indirectly, through novel form. Her use of the recently developed narrative technique of free indirect discourse, or reported inward speech and thought, encourages readers to sympathise, identify and agree with the heroine; when Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse realises her error in reading her world, readers are forced to recognise theirs in reading her. (Kelly: 260)

However, Jane Austen’s use of subliminal messages makes it very difficult to define her actual political ideology, which scholars interpret very differently:

If few go so far as Butler in seeing Austen as a propagandist for the reaction, most do agree that she is a “conservative”. Yet when we scrutinize the bases on which this opinion rests, we find the question almost entirely begged. Assertions about her “Tory conservatism” are based not on statements by or about Austen in her novels or letters – no such statements exist- but rather on the belief that because she was a member of a certain class she reflexively accorded with all its values and interests. (Johnson: xviii)

Difficult as interpreting Austen’s intentions might be, it is interesting to extrapolate

<sup>3</sup> See for example J. Steven Watson and Elie Halévy.

the domestic conflicts in her novels to a national level. By doing so, a parallelism can be established between the didactic purpose her narrator seems to have had for her characters, and the social evolution that the reading of her novels seems to be suggesting about the nation.

In light of what I see as Austen's "indirect" didacticism, the aim of this paper is to analyse the dysfunctionality of the Bennet family and the repercussions of the Regency in Britain, in order to answer this question: To what extent are the effects of bad parenting in *Pride and Prejudice* comparable to those of the monarchy's instability?

I attempt to highlight the importance of child misguidance as a determining factor in the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. I will argue that social criticism in this novel was aimed at parents who have not grown up as proper adults and who neglect their children's education for the sake of their own well-being. This will lead me to assess the figure of the Prince Regent (the future George IV) and to point out that due to his self-concern he was far from being a dutiful monarch. I will also establish a parallelism between the danger that Wickham represents to the Bennet family and the risk of social revolution that threatened Britain at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I will justify my interpretation of Jane Austen's political ideology by considering the solution the narrator gives to the conflict in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth's family is saved by Mr Darcy's intervention and his collaboration with the Gardiners. I believe that Jane Austen feared social revolution and suggested an evolution of the class system to solve the political divisions facing her society. In my opinion, she was not completely conservative or revolutionary. She defended a recalibration between the upper and the middle-class, as Jane Spencer observed, Austen's personal political views represent "the progressive element within the tradition of conformity" (Spencer: 169).

## 2. Literature Review

My paper will engage with a variety of political, social and literary issues in Austen, each of which will be treated separately where relevant. However, as a general observation, I would like to briefly review the most relevant critical works in the ambit of the author's political stand.

In the introduction of *Jane Austen Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Claudia Johnson reports the different opinions critics and reviewers have had about Austen's political attitude since the nineteenth century. Johnson mentions Richard Simpson and George Lewes as representatives of the early conception of Austen as a non-political author.

Richard Simpson insists repeatedly that Austen, "always the lady," had the good sense to avoid getting out of her depth: she "never deeply studied" the "organization of society", she had "no conception of society itself" [...]<sup>4</sup>

Victorian readers posit an Austen whose mind was without what Lewes called "literary or philosophic culture",<sup>5</sup> so destitute of ideas that she had no choice but to ply the miniaturist's deft but inferior art for its own sake. (Johnson, xv-xvi)

Johnson continues by commenting that R.W. Chapman's editions of Austen's novels appear "to preserve the novels in a museumlike world situated somewhere between fiction and real life. As such, *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*<sup>6</sup> is a graceful monument to country life in Regency England, a time which twentieth-century readers have been prone to idealize into graciousness and tranquillity" (Johnson, xvii). This

<sup>4</sup> In his review of the *Memoir of Jane Austen* in the *North British Review* (April 1870), reprinted in Southam, *Critical Heritage*, pp. 257-250.

<sup>5</sup> From "The Novels of Jane Austen," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1859), reprinted in Southam, *Critical Heritage*, p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*. Chapman, R.W. Ed. Oxford. Oxford University Press: 1923.

interpretation of Austen's novels as portraying a calm and prosperous society has long persisted. An example of this is Winston Churchill's idea of Austen's works:

What calm lives they had, those people! No worries about the French Revolution, or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic Wars. Only manners controlling natural passion so far as they could, together with cultured explanations of any mischances. (Churchill: 425)

However, other scholars have detected a political message in Jane Austen's novels. Their interpretation of this message, though, is not unitarian. While Marilyn Butler<sup>7</sup> sees Austen as a "propagandist for the reaction" (Johnson, xviii), Claudia Johnson reads her as liberal. And many scholars, like Jane Spencer<sup>8</sup>, Warren Roberts<sup>9</sup> or Tony Tanner perceive Austen's concern for the need of evolution in society to preserve her world as it is:

Decorum, morality and good manners – in a word, "propriety" – were equally indispensable. The one without the other could prove helpless to prevent a possible revolution in society. This is one reason why Jane Austen constantly sought to establish and demonstrate what was the necessary proper conduct in all areas of social behaviour, why she scrutinised so carefully any possible deviance from, or neglect of, true property – in her own writing as well as in the behaviour and speech of her characters. To secure the proper relationship between property and propriety in her novels was thus not the wish-fulfilment of a genteel spinster but a matter of vital social – and political – importance. That is why it is in many ways irrelevant to argue whether she was a relatively mindless reactionary or an incipient Marxist. She did believe in the values of her society; but she saw that those values had to be authentically embodied and enacted if that society was to survive – or deserved to survive. She indeed saw her society threatened, but mainly from inside: by the failures and derelictions of those very figures who should be responsibly upholding, renewing and regenerating that social order. (Tanner, 1986: 18)

The debate on what Austen's real political stand might have been far from being solved, as Gene Koppel argues:

<sup>7</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> See introduction, page 6.

<sup>9</sup> Later referred to in this paper (page 20).

How can Claudia Johnson present Jane Austen's works as basically liberal – for example: “*Pride and Prejudice* is a passionate novel which vindicates personal happiness as a liberal moral category” (77) – while I argue that these same works are basically conservative, that Christianity and natural moral law permeate all of Austen's fiction, without one of us being dreadfully wrong? [...] any representation of a work, or any interpretation of it, both partakes of the nature of the work itself and also necessarily changes and distorts it. Even so, the work itself always remains at the centre of things, its presence always available to help others judge each representation. Marilyn Butler, Claudia Johnson, Mollie Sandock<sup>10</sup> and I are all deeply involved in “playing” the game of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. We are all, so to speak, on the same field, playing by the same basic set of rules. But just as the players of a physical game bring their own various abilities, backgrounds, and styles of play to that game [...] so each of Jane Austen's readers brings his or her own background, her own point of view, and her own interpretive skills to *Pride and Prejudice*. (Koppel, 1989: 132-139)

So, as Gene Koppel suggests, there is no unique valid interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice*, but reading it means to get involved in a “game” where we need to adopt a style of play, with the objective of forwarding an argumentation that is as supported and plausible as the sources allow.

<sup>10</sup> Sandock, Mollie. “Jane Austen and the Political Passions,” *Persuasions* 10 (1988): 83-89

### **3. Development**

#### **3.1. Method**

Close reading and critical analysis of primary and secondary sources will provide justification for the arguments that I am presenting in this paper. My discussion is developed in four steps. In the first place, a revision of absent father figures in the mid-eighteenth-century English novel leads to an assessment of the role parents have in Jane Austen's novels. Second, an analysis of Mr and Mrs Bennet's characters bring out their influence in the development of the plot and the need for other characters to assume their responsibilities. In the third place, I provide information on Jane Austen's publishing chronology and professional interests to justify the historical context of the novel and the need to interpret her political ideas. Finally, I assess the role of the future George IV in the first decade of the nineteenth century and compare the risks entailed by the disastrous attitudes and behaviour of the monarch to the downfall threatening the Bennet girls.

#### **3.2. Parent-Child Relationship in Literary Tradition and in Jane Austen's Novels**

Bad parents have been a focus of narrative interest since the early novels of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> However, initially scenarios with orphans, abandoned or runaway children accounted largely for an interest in creating dramatic tension and in placing a focus on the protagonists' evolution when facing their fate.

<sup>11</sup> Renowned examples of this are *Clarissa*, by Samuel Richardson (1748); *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding (1749) and *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, by Eliza Haywood (1751). These three novels are analysed by David B. Paxman in "Imagining the Child": Bad Parents in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century English Novel.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, novelists became aware of the important role of parents in their characters' lives, in their personal development and in the creation of the world they inhabited. This new interest in child upbringing coincided with a moment when the parent-child relationship was changing. Children started being regarded as individuals with their own personality and opinions that were valuable for the family.

[...] the novels were asking: What about parents as parents, including their ability to respond to children in ways appropriate to their developing needs as individuals regardless of economic circumstances, and what about children as children, as the most vulnerable segment of society requiring cognitive, intellectual, cultural and moral nurturance to prepare them to replace their parents and in turn replace themselves? (Paxman: 136)

Doctor Johnson's *Cruelty of Parental Tyranny* (1751) denounced physical punishment and started an era of awareness of children's needs. Authors knew the importance of good parental guidance for children to face challenges in life, to deal correctly with intimacy or identity problems and to reach adulthood successfully so that they could give a good education to their own children. Paxman points out that novelists depict bad parents that are so because they have failed to become mature beings. He also argues that:

[t]he dramatic rise in novel scenarios featuring missing or failed parents is symptomatic of a society that was rethinking how to replace itself. As Ruth Perry demonstrates in *Novel Relations*, family structures and values were adapting to changing economic realities. As Richard Barney demonstrates in *Plots of Enlightenment*, writers were fashioning links between new pedagogical theories (such as Locke's<sup>12</sup>) and narrative structure. (Paxman: 136)

<sup>12</sup> John Locke wrote *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in 1693. It became a very important work on education and its influence lasted for over a century.

Jane Nardin uses the term *absent-parent syndrome* when talking about Jane Austen's heroines.<sup>13</sup> All of them suffer the effects of their parents' physical absence or failure in educating them.

In *Northanger Abbey*,<sup>14</sup> Mr Morland entrusts his daughter to negligent guardians and even allows her to visit the Tilneys, who are strangers to the family. In *Sense and Sensibility*,<sup>15</sup> Eleanor and Marianne Dashwood's delicate situation derives from their father's death. In *Pride and Prejudice*,<sup>16</sup> the Bennet sisters grow up with the indifference of their father (which sometimes turns into ironic disdain), while Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*<sup>17</sup> must accept her uncle's 'hospitality' because of her father's incapability of providing for her. But Sir Thomas Bertram is also a failed father, since he intends to educate his children by exercising his authority over them and by ignoring the value of affection. For her part, the protagonist in *Emma*<sup>18</sup> is a spoiled child who must take care of a hypochondriac father. Finally, in *Persuasion*,<sup>19</sup> Anne Elliot suffers the effects of her father's self-concern and grows up into a mature woman with a set of values that are in complete opposition to those of Sir Walter's.

It is difficult to establish a chronology of the writing and revision of the novels due to the time lapse between the finishing and the publication of some of them. However, it is possible to perceive a hardening of Austen's attitude towards the protagonists' fathers in her works.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Nardin, "Children and their Families in Jane Austen's Novels" in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, Janet Todd, ed. (Homes & Meier, 1983), p 79.

<sup>14</sup> Written in 1798-99 under the title of *Susan*. later retitled *Catherine* and published as *Northanger Abbey* in 1817.

<sup>15</sup> Written in 1795 as *Elinor and Marianne* and published in 1811 as *Sense and Sensibility*.

<sup>16</sup> Written in 1796-1797 as *First Impressions* and published in 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*.

<sup>17</sup> Begun in 1811. Published in 1814.

<sup>18</sup> Begun in 1814. Published in 1815.

<sup>19</sup> Completed in 1816. Published in 1817.

This hardening of attitude [...] must certainly reflect changes in Jane Austen's own thinking, but it seems not to have been the consequence of any increase in radicalism on her part. Rather the opposite; she requires that they should do the job which conscientious, conservative fathers of her day might rationally be expected to do- namely, guide, protect educate and love their daughters. Not one of the fathers in the novels measures up to this standard, in fact the father image steadily worsens, while Jane Austen increasingly shows her faith in the ability of the neglected daughters to meet the challenge. (Gibbs: 49)

So her heroines are increasingly forced to reach maturity following their own criteria:

Parental faults or limitations affect every one of Austen's heroines but Austen shows them as refusing to be determined by the dysfunctionality of others and as developing into happy women. (Sturrock: 13)

And in some cases, fathers' attitudes and actions harm their daughters and cause problems that they have to solve. The most relevant example of this is Mr Bennet's attitude, which is the subject of the current study. Other instances are found in *Persuasion*, where Anne Elliot has to cope with her father's ill management of their fortune.

In the end, all Austen's female protagonists find a paternal figure in the man they marry. All of her heroes are ultimately good, respectable and reliable men, some of whom even educate their future wives, but also learn from them. This is the case with Henry Tilney or Mr Knightley. Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, help each other correct their former prejudices or attitudes.

Austen's mothers, on the other hand, are more absent in nature. Although Emma and Anne Elliot are the only characters whose mothers are literally absent, the other mother figures are rather silenced and set apart from the main action. As June Sturrock observes:

Jan Fergus reads Austen's tendency to subtract the mother either through death or through absence as a narrative device in the tradition of the eighteenth-century novel of self-education, noting that the presence of an affective mother "would prevent the heroine from error and thus from forming herself". (Sturrock: 47)

It is true that Mrs Bennet's presence in *Pride and Prejudice* is strongly felt, but I consider her a silenced character. Her constant chattering and her impertinence embarrass her daughter to the extent of causing Elizabeth to ignore her as much as possible. She often wishes her mother would not speak on social occasions and never willingly takes her advice. Moreover, she contradicts most of her decisions, some of which are very relevant to the plot. Examples of this are Mrs Bennet's plan to have Jane staying at Netherfield, Elizabeth's refusal of Mr Collins' proposition and Lydia's permission to go to Brighton.

All in all, Austen's female characters are forced to face their destiny without any useful parental guidance. This circumstance often leads them to make mistakes, but they learn from experience and become worthy women whose merit is appreciated by the men they marry. These marriages guarantee the heroines a prosperous future that will bring a new generation of well-educated children.

### **3.3. Mr and Mrs Bennet's Influence in the Plot of *Pride and Prejudice***

As previously mentioned, failed parents in literature are often failed adults. Mr Bennet was an intelligent and educated man, but he married a beautiful woman who was no more than that. Their unhappy marriage influenced their evolution as adults:

Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort.

Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had 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 for ever, and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. But Mr Bennet was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which his own imprudence had brought on, in any of those pleasures which too often console the unfortunate for their folly or their vice. He was fond of the country and of books; and from these tastes had arisen his principal enjoyments. To his wife he was very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement. This is not the sort of happiness which a man would in general wish to owe to his wife; but where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such as are given. (PP: 154)

Although Mr Bennet's discontent is never expressed in hard words and Mrs Bennet would never dare to openly criticize her husband, there is an underlying confrontation between them that emerges in the predilection of each of them for one of the girls. Whereas Mr Bennet praises Elizabeth's wit, Mrs Bennet admires Lydia's cheerfulness. The counterpart of this is a marked disdain for the same girls on the part of the other parent. The reason for all this is that Elizabeth takes after her father and Lydia, after her mother. So each parent fosters his or her own qualities in the preferred child and despises the traits that remind him or her of the spouse in the other child.

"I dare say Mr Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chuses of the girls: though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy."

"I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving *her* the preference"

"They have none of them much to recommend them," replied he, "they are all silly and ignorant, like other girls, but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters." (PP: 4)

Both parents tend to ignore the children they do not like and support the qualities they detect as their own in the children they do like. Thus, the education of the Bennet

girls is polarised in two extremes. Elizabeth and Jane are mainly sensible and concerned about their education, while Kitty and Lydia think only of clothes and marriage. Mary, for her part, relies on conduct books for guidance, since none of her parents seem to take an interest in her.

... (Mary) in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments [...] 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. (PP: 17)

The most direct effect of Mr and Mrs Bennet's unhappy marriage on Elizabeth is that she cannot conceive of getting married without feeling love or respect for her fiancé. That makes it difficult for her to find a good match. Not only does she take after her father because of her intelligence, he has also taught her to look down on people who do not possess her quickness of mind. This circumstance makes her refuse Mr Collins' marriage proposal. Although her cousin is obviously a bad partner for her, she does not think rationally of the consequences of her unmarried state and her real options of getting married. Her self-esteem and her need to love her partner lead her to refuse Mr Darcy initial proposal as well. This is not to ignore the strong justification that Elizabeth has in rejecting Mr Collins and Mr Darcy. It is simply to underline the fact that Elizabeth's rejections are motivated by issues other than those of personal dignity.

Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. (PP: 155)

But the dysfunctionality of the Bennet family has greater consequences. First, the behaviour of the parents and the three younger sisters at the Netherfield ball highlights the inconvenience of Mr Bingley's establishing connections to that family by marrying Jane. Second, and most importantly, when Lydia is granted permission to go to Brighton. Mrs Bennet can only see this trip as an opportunity for Lydia to get married, in her monothematic mind she cannot foresee the risk it entails, especially because she is not aware of the bad example she has given her younger daughter. Little can the poor woman imagine that all the cheerfulness and unconsciousness of Lydia's personality will lead her to fall blindly in love and run away with a man of doubtful honour.

Mr Bennet is warned of the danger by Elizabeth. He is intelligent enough to understand the situation, but allows Lydia to go to Brighton for the sake of his own tranquillity.

“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.”

[...] Our importance, our respectability in the world must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia's character. Excuse me, -for I must speak plainly. If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. Her character will be fixed, and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous;

[...] “Do not make yourself uneasy, my love. Wherever you and Jane are known you must be respected and valued; and you will not appear to less advantage for having a couple of – or I may say, three very silly sisters. We shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton.” (PP: 151-152)

When Elizabeth's worst prospects prove to be true, Mr Bennet tries to solve the problem, but, failing to do so, he goes back to Longbourn. There he admits his share in

the development of events, but he cannot stand his wife constantly complaining about her bad fate and demanding her daughters' attention and care. She blames Colonel Foster for neglecting Lydia and does not think for a moment that she is the first person to hold responsibility for what has happened. Mr Bennet criticizes her for not doing anything other than feeling sorry for herself.

“This is a parade,” cried he, “which does one good; it gives such an elegance to misfortune! Another day I will do the same; I will sit in my library, in my nightcap and powdering gown, and give as much trouble as I can;” (PP: 194)

That is the end of Mr Bennet's intervention in the affair. The rest of the work that has to bring Lydia back home is done by Mr Darcy in collaboration with Mr Gardiner. Neither Mr Bennet nor his wife experience the slightest evolution after the event that has put their family at stake. Mrs Bennet rejoices in her daughter's prospects as a married woman and is even proud of her, while Mr Bennet disengages himself from family affairs again:

That it would be done with such trifling exertion on his side, too, was another very welcome surprise; for his wish at present was to have as little trouble in the business as possible. When the first transports of rage which had produced his activity in seeking her were over, he naturally returned to all his former indolence. (PP: 200)

He goes on eluding his parental task and does not interfere in his daughters' lives, even when he is aware of some troubles they are about to face. Such is the case with Jane, whose marriage he foresees as a happy one, except for the domestic problems that can arise from the young couple's naivety. He comments on it, not as something he can help avoiding, but as a fact he can laugh at.

Moreover he is not resentful at Wickham. Although he has put his family at risk, Mr Bennet continues talking ironically about him. He belittles the danger that his son-in-law has represented for his daughters:

“I admire all my sons-in-law”, said he. “Wickham, perhaps, is my favourite; but I think I shall like your husband quite as well as Jane’s. (PP: 248)

So Elizabeth’s parents are not granted the possibility of correcting their attitudes. None of Austen’s parental figures are. They are flat characters with a specific role in the plot, which is forcing the heroine to mature without or even in spite of them.

### **3.4. Mr Darcy and the Gardiners vs Wickham**

It was not only Mr Gardiner who played an important role in the solution of the plot in *Pride and Prejudice*, his wife, also, was Elizabeth’s counselor throughout the crisis, and she had previously acted as a true mother by advising her to be careful with regards to Wickham.

“I have nothing to say against *him*, he is a most interesting young man; and if he had the fortune he ought to have, I should think you could do no better. But as it is, you must not let your fancy run away with you. You have sense, and we all expect you to use it. (PP: 96)

It is clear that Mrs Gardiner mistrusts Wickham while Mr and Mrs Bennet regard him as a good match for their daughter. It has to be her aunt who warns her against an inconvenient acquaintance and prevents her from encouraging his attentions:

My father, however, is partial to Mr Wickham. In short, my dear aunt, I should be very sorry to be the means of making any of you unhappy; but since we see every day that where there is affection, young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune from entering into engagements with each other, how can I promise to be wiser than so many of my fellow-creatures if I am tempted, or how am I even to know that it would be wisdom to resist? [...]

Perhaps it will be as well if you discourage his coming here so very often. At least, you should not *remind* your mother of inviting him. (PP: 97)

Mr Wickham has repeatedly been described as a charming young man who succeeds at making everyone like him. By spreading his sad story, the whole community stands on his side and condemns Mr Darcy. But as the course of events prove, he was lying all the time and taking advantage of the people who trusted him. He is a negative character, but Elizabeth likes him, and through Elizabeth, the readers like him too. In making everyone fall into Wickham's trap, a valuable lesson is taught: charm and superficial manners must be mistrusted.

In *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* Warren Roberts describes some of Jane Austen's characters in terms of an "English-French dichotomy" (35). Roberts identifies Edmund Price (*Mansfield Park*) and Mr Knightley (*Emma*) as examples of the English type: "one who was not polished, refined, clever, urbane, and cosmopolitan, but serious, introspective, stolid, direct and forthright" (Roberts: 35). Their opposites are Henry Crawford and Frank Churchill respectively. Both are charming gentlemen who appear very pleasant, but who are also superficial and insincere. Wickham's manners are similar to those of these latter characters. He can be identified with the Jacobin<sup>20</sup> ideology and therefore, with the French revolution. He is a member of the lower classes defending his right to social promotion and his conflict with Mr Darcy can be read as an echo of the revolution against English social hierarchy. My interpretation is that by depicting these qualities as evil and praising Darcy's loyalty and trustworthiness, readers are expected to value the necessity of trusting the landed gentry. The nation

<sup>20</sup> Jacobins were revolutionaries that defended the social advancement and parliamentary reforms following the French example.

depended on their participation in politics and economy, and the revolutionary ideas against class distinction were a threat to social stability. I see in the Darcy-Gardiner alliance a hint of Jane Austen's opinion of the conflict. She might be in favour of an improvement of the relationship between the upper and the middle classes. Collaboration and mutual acceptance between both social classes seem to be what Austen suggests through her narrative.

This theory is justified by the final union of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. Coming from a lower social background she would be able to reinforce future generations.

It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both: by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (PP: 202)

### **3.5. Austen's Hidden Political and Didactic Message**

Jane Austen aimed to be a professional writer in a time when politics were reserved for men to the extent that political issues were not discussed in the presence of a woman. As Jan Fergus (13; 14) indicates: "Publishing her own writing could threaten a woman's reputation as well as her social position". "Women were attacked for having the temerity to write without having the necessary learning and taste". Austen was aware of the restrictions imposed by the literary market, so it is reasonable to think that she avoided showing an ideological tendency in her works. She did so by not directly or explicitly mentioning any of the political questions that were subject to debate in her days. Her stories talk about little communities with common interactions and familiar plots. Those families are presented in a closed rural environment and seem unaware of the Revolutionary Age in which they are living.

The absence of explicit political references in her novels and in her personal documents seems to have misled historians and literary critics who considered her “ignorant of the brutal and unclean aspects of life”<sup>21</sup> and saw in her novels “an atmosphere of stability and security and also a certain complacent shortsightedness”<sup>22</sup>. More recent critical studies, however, hold that even her choice of characters, plots and dialogues was a means to represent her perception of the reality she was experiencing:

For me, much of Austen’s fascination is that she made a deliberate choice not to discuss directly the events that so disturbed her world, and yet incorporated many of her responses to those events into her writing.

[...] Her way of doing so was not that of an active propagandist in the war of ideas, of a Burke, Fox or Wordsworth, but a person who, as she experienced change, worked out her responses to it in her novels.

[...] she also evokes that change through a careful choice of themes and a highly diverse set of *dramatis personae*, whose dialogue and actions reveal Austen’s own stand on some key contemporary issues. So her novels are an invaluable way to have a sense of what it was like to go through a critical period of social change, and they tell us what one highly perceptive member of English society thought about it. (Roberts: 7-8)

Jane Austen had to face another prejudice against her works, and that was the extended idea that novels were mere products of entertainment. But she also turned that problem into an advantage for her purposes:

Austen knew that her chosen literary form was itself considered an article of fashionable consumption and condemned not only as such but also for glamorously representing conspicuous consumption and thereby stimulating desire to participate in it. In response, Jane Austen not only makes novel reading, and reading generally, an index of education and thus of character in her novels, but she makes her novels into a process of education for the reader. (Kelly: 255)

<sup>21</sup> Elie Halévy in *England in 1815*. p. 514

<sup>22</sup> Arnold Kettle in *An Introduction to the English Novel*. p. 25

So leaving aside a fruitless search for an explicit expression of her political ideas, it is more meaningful and effective to look for a covert didactic message in Austen's novels. She was familiar with the conduct books Mary Bennet so often referred to, but preferred teaching by means of examples, not by lecturing her readers. She succeeded in her purpose by means of a precise literary technique. The astute use of an omniscient narrator enabled her to make readers sympathise with the characters and understand their perspectives. They experience the action in the same way as the heroines and are led by the narrator through the exploration of their feelings and the interpretation of their reality. This exploration is a journey through self-knowledge where readers, who have been presented with a positive image of the heroine, discover she has been mistaken in some way and acknowledge the same errors of judgement as her.

That is the case of Elizabeth Bennet and the rest of the Meryton community who, together with the readers of *Pride and Prejudice*, considered Wickham a perfectly agreeable man and believed his version of the story while despising Mr Darcy for his pride, self-importance and cruelty.

(Mr Darcy) was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud; to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend. (PP: 8)

She danced next with an officer, and had the refreshment of talking of Wickham, and of hearing that he was universally liked. (PP: 62)

At the beginning, both the reader and the heroine are strongly ill-disposed against Mr Darcy and are very partial to Wickham. This preconception will change gradually. Some hints of their misjudgement are shown throughout the story. First, Caroline Bingley tries to make Elizabeth see Wickham's true character. But her opinion is not

valued by the heroine or the public due to Caroline's negative characterization in the novel. :

They had not long separated, when Miss Bingley came towards her, and with an expression of civil disdain thus accosted her: - "So, Miss Eliza, I hear you are quite delighted with George Wickham! [...] Let me recommend you, however, as a friend, not to give implicit confidence to all his assertions; for as to Mr Darcy's using him ill, it is perfectly false; for, on the contrary, he has been always remarkably kind to him, though George Wickham has treated Mr Darcy in a most infamous manner. (PP: 64)

Mr Darcy corrects Elizabeth's opinions about himself on many occasions with the same result:

"We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition" (said Elizabeth)

"This is no very striking resemblance of your own character, I am sure", said he. "How near it may be to mine, I cannot pretend to say. You think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly." (PP: 63)

Finally, the course of events show Elizabeth how mistaken she was. Readers understand her feelings and learn the same lesson because through narrative "identification" with Elizabeth they had fallen into the same trap as her.

The narrator's didactic purpose is clearly deduced from the title of the novel: Pride has made Mr Darcy the target of the community's disdain, while prejudice has led Elizabeth to an ill-judgement of the gentleman's personality. Also, prejudice against lower classes prevents Mr Darcy from getting successfully acquainted with them, and pride feeds Elizabeth's hostility towards Mr Darcy. As for the political message expressed in this work, it has been a subject of debate among scholars of very different opinions, but as Warren Robert argues:

According to one school of thought, Austen was a subversive, hostile to her class although not its declared enemy, while another school regards her as a pillar of the Establishment and even a reactionary.

In fact, she was neither, but a person who was deeply affected by the historical impulses of her age and at the same time sought to understand change and its consequences for her class. As she lived through the Revolutionary Age she hoped, as a member of the gentry, of traditional landed society, to see the members of her class adjust to a world that was changing before her, but also she was aware of their shortcomings. Neither attacking nor defending her class, she examined its chances of survival. (Roberts: 8)

*Pride and Prejudice* sets the problem of a divided society that needs to adapt to the new situation in order to avoid ruin. The landed gentry can no longer survive at a distance from the emerging trading class and their failure in coming to terms with each other might very well mean a French-style revolution. All those forces are masterfully incarnated in a set of characters that inspire the reader's sympathy or condemnation, according to the narrator's interest.

The whole novel flows towards the evolution of the characters' personality and the vision they have of each other. Moreover, the narrator guides the reader's change of attitude regarding the social classes represented in the story. Departing from a preconceived image of the landed gentry, the trading and the middle classes, the narrative technique enables readers to understand each character's perspective so that they can value the merit of their personal improvement and condemn the failure of those who stick to convention.

### **3.6. The novel's historical context**

The first version of *Pride and Prejudice* was entitled *First Impressions* and it is thought to have been finished in 1797 and offered to a publisher called Thomas Cadell who refused to publish it. From that moment, the manuscript would have been subject to private reading in Austen's household at Steventon and to continuous discussion and modification.

We can see that habits of confidential manuscript circulation continued throughout Austen's career even after conventional print became her dominant method [...] Given the long gestation, rejection for publication and subsequent rewriting of early versions [...] there is no seamless division into early, middle and late writing, but instead a vital and unexpected revision of material over a considerable period. (Sutherland: 14-15)

So we can establish the novel's historical context as being the beginning of the 1810s, very close to the date of its publication. I argue that, with respect to the criticism of parental misguidance, this historical context is strongly significant. The end of the eighteenth century had been a revolutionary period that started with the American Revolution and shortly afterwards, the French Revolution. British personalities such as Thomas Paine, William Wordsworth, William Blake or Percy Shelley were enthusiastic about the airs of liberty that were arriving from the other side of the channel. But other protagonists of the British political scene were not so optimistic. Edmund Burke predicted the massacre that would occur, and Robespierre's Terror (1793-94), together with the recently declared war against France, made the British government more repressive.

Following the arrest of leading reformers in London in May 1794, the political scene in Britain became more sharply divided and it seemed as if the Prime Minister, William Pitt, was about to introduce his own system of "British Terror" patterned on Robespierre's. It was this time that inspired Jane Austen's scene in *Northanger Abbey* in which Catherine Morland's solemn announcement of "something very shocking indeed" [that] will soon come out in London" is understood by Eleanor as a reference to "politics", "the state of nation", "murder" and "dreadful riot". (Roe: 359)

The fear of such terrible events as those that had occurred in France drew the British government into developing an information system that is also mentioned in *Northanger Abbey*. When Catherine Morland fancies General Tilney murdered his wife, Henry scolds her for her silliness and assures her such a horrible secret would not have passed unnoticed in a community of "voluntary spies". Later on, the threat of an

imminent French invasion made most sectors of British public opinion join forces against a common enemy. But in the first decade of the nineteenth century George III definitively succumbed to the mental illness that made him unable to rule. His elder son, the Prince of Wales<sup>23</sup>, became Prince Regent on 5 February 1811 and, from that moment, the British monarchy entered into a crisis due to the Regent's dissipation, his luxurious habits and his lack of authority.

### **3.7. George IV**

At the beginning of the second decade of the 1800s, social unease and severe economic problems threatened Britain while the Regent systematically neglected his responsibilities. George IV was not respected by a significant proportion of his subjects, who considered him as little more than an expense for the country.<sup>24</sup> He gained much aversion because of his personal problems when he tried unsuccessfully to divorce Caroline of Brunswick. Theirs had been a miserable marriage from the very beginning. It was George III who forbade his son's illegal marriage to Maria Fitzherbert and forced him to marry a woman of his choice as a condition for paying the prince's debts.

George spent the better part of twenty-five years trying to disentangle himself from this marriage and his insistence upon a divorce, after Caroline had decided to return and claim a share to the throne, led to a series of events that made him the subject of huge derision. (Baker: 30)

He was discredited by the excesses of his personal life and his lack of interest in political matters. He did not stand for any clear political position and used to change his

<sup>23</sup> Regent 1811-1820. King 1820-1830

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Baker, J. Steven Watson, Nicholas Roe.

mind on crucial issues. It was said that he could not keep his attention in a matter for a long time. He would listen to the last person who had spoken to him and used to take the advice of those who expressed their ideas with the most vehemence. His vacillations and lack of authority were a threat to the governability of the country.<sup>25</sup>

William Thackeray later in that century said about him that “This George was nothing but a coat, and a wig, and a mask smiling below it – nothing but a big simulacrum but a bow and a grin”.<sup>26</sup> And Kenneth Baker adds that:

[t]here was little mourning for George and within three weeks of his death *The Times* [a markedly conservative newspaper] thundered out its verdict: “There never was an individual less regretted by his fellow creatures than the deceased King... an inveterate voluptuary... of all known beings the most selfish.” (Baker, 30)

George IV ended his days isolated from public life, having reluctantly contributed to the development of a constitutional monarchy. His successors, William IV and Queen Victoria took a series of measures which I interpret as being intended to modify the idea of the British monarchy that the subjects had. This was achieved by erasing all traces of George IV’s actions. His building projects, the one valuable contribution he had made to the country, were cancelled; his items of decoration, furniture and cloth were sold in auction; his servants were dismissed and his art collection was forgotten.

Culturally, however, George IV was a great connoisseur of art and promoted English literature. He admired Jane Austen and had a set of her novels in each of his residences. But the authoress held him in low esteem. In a letter to Martha Lloyd<sup>27</sup> she declared that:

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Baker in *George IV: A Sketch*

<sup>26</sup> Lecture on “The four Georges” 1855

<sup>27</sup> 16 February 1813.

I suppose all the World is sitting in Judgement upon the Princess of Wales's Letter. Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman, & because I hate her Husband—but I can hardly forgive her for calling herself “attached & affectionate” to a Man whom she must detest— & the intimacy said to subsist between her & Lady Oxford is bad.— I do not know what to do about it;— but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had behaved only tolerably by her at first.

Even though she consented to dedicate *Emma* to the Prince, her plain phrase was: “*Emma*, Dedicated by Permission to H.R.H. The Prince Regent”. John Murray, the editor had to modify this to the more suitable: “To his Royal Highness, the Prince Regent, this work is, by His Royal Highness's permission, most respectfully dedicated, by His Royal Highness's dutiful and obedient humble servant, the author”.<sup>28</sup>

I assume that Austen had certainly not wished to dedicate her novel to the monarch. Colleen Sheehan<sup>29</sup> explains that the whole affair was a matter of coincidence. Austen was spending some days with her brother Henry whose health condition required the intervention of Dr Baillie, the Prince's physician. The doctor was aware of the monarch's admiration for her novels and by means of him, Austen received an invitation by the Prince's librarian, James Stanier Clarke. Following that visit, Clarke suggested she include a dedication to the Prince in the work she was about to publish. Sheehan provides fuller details of Austen's opinion of George IV and interprets certain passages of *Emma* as conveying hidden criticisms of the Prince.

One of Austen's gibes aimed at the Prince involved his extravagant urban scheme for the part of London now called the West End. In chapter 12 of *Emma* the gentlemanly Mr Knightley, in an attempt to turn a conversation between his brother and Mr Woodhouse away from its dangerous path about the merits of vacationing in Southend versus Cromer, interrupts and changes the subject:

<sup>28</sup> From the correspondence between Jane Austen and John Murray in December 1815.

<sup>29</sup> Colleen A. Sheehan *Jane Austen's "Tribute" to the Prince Regent: A Gentleman Riddled with Difficulty* (Jane Austen Society of North America, *Persuasions on-line* V.27, No.1 Winter 2006)

“True, true,” cried Mr Knightley, with most ready interposition—“very true. That’s a consideration indeed.—But John, as to what I was telling you of my idea of moving the path to Langham, of turning it more to the right that it may not cut through the home meadows, I cannot conceive any difficulty. I should not attempt it, if it were to be the means of inconvenience to the Highbury people, but if you call to mind exactly the present line of the path. . . .” (*Emma*: 106-07)<sup>30</sup>

Of the two resorts, Southend was the much less fashionable, and, as it happens, the place the Prince sent his despised wife, Caroline, to get her out of his way, particularly when he was engaged with his long-time paramour and possibly legitimate first wife, the actress Maria Fitzherbert, at the tonier resort of Brighton. But the primary linkage to the Prince in this seemingly innocuous passage from *Emma* turns not on a battle of watering holes, but on the name “Langham,” coupled with plans for improvements to transportation. (Sheehan: 1)

Such was the person at the head of the British government at the time of *Pride and Prejudice’s* publication and such was Austen’s opinion of him at the time when she wrote this novel.

### **3.8. George IV and Mr Bennet**

In section 3.5 (*Austen’s hidden political and didactic message*) I argued that *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a representation of the English nation at a domestic scale, where each character represents a stratus of society. If Mr Darcy and Lady Catherine de Bourg incarnate the upper class, Mr Bingley and Sir William Lucas embody the trading class that has acceded to the gentry, whereas the Gardiners are still in trade and the Bennets belong to the lower gentry. Wickham, for his part, represents the revolutionary sector of society, against hierarchical social order and with aims to destroy it.

The Bennet family are influenced by all these characters, who will each play an important role in their future. The Bennets’ feelings towards these individuals mark their position in the social debate, and the direction of their preferences towards Mr

<sup>30</sup> Austen, Jane. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933-1969.

Darcy or Wickham will be decisive to their happiness. As head of the family, Mr Bennet should take an interest in his daughter's suitors and provide the girls with the convenient guidance for them to make the right decision as regards these men. Instead of that, he lets events flow, even when he is gifted with enough good sense and wit to perceive things clearly. It is his self-indulgence that makes him neglect his duty. After Lydia's elopement, Elizabeth denounces her father's attitude when she imagines Wickham's plans:

Lydia has no brothers to step forward; and he might imagine, from my father's behaviour, from his indolence and the little attention he has ever seemed to give to what was going forward in his family, that *he* would do as little, and think as little about it, as any father could do, in such a matter. (PP: 183)

We can argue that Mr Bennet does not fulfil the requirements of a dutiful father, just as George IV neglected the responsibilities of the throne, even though he was entirely capable of coping with them, had he chosen to do so. Kenneth Baker exposes the consequences of the monarch's attitude:

George's critics have argued that he stumbled into these decisions through laziness; he prevaricated, delayed and wriggled, nor did he have the energy or the political guile to organize an alternative; he vacillated, changing his views daily; and he made the life of his senior ministers a complete misery by hectoring them. (Baker: 30)

The failure in their guiding role of both men, Mr Bennet and the king, entail serious dangers. In the case of the novel, the downfall of the family is provoked by Wickham's bad influence. He is the personification of the Jacobin ideas that also threatened the stability of the nation at a time when the consequences of the French Revolution were still noticeable in society's unease. During the Napoleonic wars, a common enemy had united the divergent forces in the nation, but peace and economic changes brought through the emergence of a new social class that was fighting to reach the upper

spheres of power. No satisfactory place for the newly rich in the British hierarchy was available, and class struggle was on the point of exploding. The evident need for social reform made many voices blame the upper classes' rigidity for causing confrontation. Far from solving the crisis, the Regent's own lack of coherent criteria slowed down the political processes. Moreover, his luxurious way of life, his expensive building projects and his reprehensible private life set the trading classes against both him and his government.<sup>31</sup>

The absence of monarchic authority obliged the whole of the society to deal with the conflict on their own. Consequently, the social fabric that had been woven during the years of economic change provided a departing point for the reform.

The economic conditions [...] produced a society which was stable and in which the landed interest was dominant. [...] Many landed proprietors, more particularly the wealthiest, had interest in the city of London or in the trade of their particular locality. [...] squires' families could often be enriched by a judicious marriage with a city alderman's daughter [...] The class structure was more fixed than has sometimes been supposed. The squire looked upon his business acquaintances in town [...] as members of a different order with whom it was possible to be on good terms because they knew and did not question their places.

Even though the busy merchants of the towns might affect to despise the lording in silks they were content to accept his leadership. Most Englishmen still lived in villages or very small towns. [...] The multitude of small producers – blacksmiths, clockmakers, furniture-makers, and so on- who added to the variety of life would find their best patron in the local lord or squire. To offend him was desperately bad for business. The squire was the centre of authority and culture. [...] If improvement was going forward in the fields then he would be its leader. (Watson: 36-37)

From these premises I can infer that every British stratum needed to assess the convenience of working together for the sake of the nation's stability. This is the solution I detect as suggested in *Pride and Prejudice*, in which two members of

<sup>31</sup> See Steven Watson and Nicholas Roe.

different social classes, Mr Darcy and Mr Gardiner, work together to save the Bennet family. But that is only the happy conclusion of the affair. In order to consolidate that achievement, there had been an evolution through the acknowledgement of their own faults, the need to recognise each other's virtues and the advantages of their alliance. Mr Darcy is not just a saviour, he benefits from the connexion with Elizabeth, who lessens the rigidity of his position in society.

Precisely because she came from a different social stratum than Darcy and belonged to a family line that was running out, she was all the more capable of appreciating the tradition of Darcy's family and helping to maintain it. Darcy stood for permanence, while Elizabeth represented an energy that could translate into improvement. Through marriage the two were synthesised.

As represented by Darcy, the aristocracy was not a close caste, but open to infusions of life from below. Not only did he marry down in the social sense, but also related easily and successfully to people of different classes than his own. (Roberts: 49)

Austen's narrative technique allows readers to accompany the characters in their evolution. An attentive reading reveals the narrator's intention of highlighting how necessary it is for Austen's characters to overcome their social differences. A critical interpretation of that intention has led me to think that, in the same way as the novel praises the collaboration between Mr Darcy and Mr Gardiner, its author could plausibly be in favour of conciliation between the social strata of her time. At all events, in the case of readers preferring a more 'superficial' interpretation, they probably enjoy a romantic comedy with no other implications. Nevertheless, they still end up thinking how fortunate it is that Mr Darcy has become more sociable and that Elizabeth has realised he was not as severe as she thought.

Once more, this impression is made available to readers through a consciously designed presentation of the characters. The Gardiners are described very positively.

They supply the Bennets' defects as parents by offering their nieces advice, good company and hospitality when they need to distance themselves from Longbourn. Moreover, they possess the maturity and stability that Mr and Mrs Bennet fail to instil in their children.

Mr Gardiner was a sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister, as well by nature as education. The Netherfield ladies would have had difficulty in believing that a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses, could have been so well bred and agreeable.

Mrs Gardiner, who was several years younger than Mrs Bennet and Mrs Philips, was an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman. (PP: 93)

Their characterisation promotes a positive vision of the trading class and of their acceptance by the gentry. Elizabeth is genuinely happy with the good impression her aunt and uncle made on Mr Darcy when they first met at Pemberley:

Mrs Gardiner was standing a little behind; and on her pausing, he asked her if she would do him the honour of introducing him to her friends. This was a stroke of civility for which she was unprepared; and she could hardly suppress a smile at his being now seeking the acquaintance of some of those very people against whom his pride had revolted in his offer to herself. "What will be his surprise," thought she, "when he knows who they are? He takes them now for people of fashion".

Elizabeth could not but be pleased, could not but triumph. It was consoling that he should know she had some relations for whom there was no need to blush. She listened most attentively to all that passed between them, and gloried in every expression, every sentence of her (PP: 165)

The Gardiners and Elizabeth herself, for their part, also start to see Mr Darcy in a very different light after their visit to Pemberley. The fondness for her master shown by Mrs Reynolds (Darcy's housekeeper at Pemberley) touches Elizabeth who starts to think very differently of him.

What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship! – how much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! – how much of good and evil must be done by him!

Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude that it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression. (PP: 162)

In the course of that visit, Elizabeth imagines how her life would had she accepted Mr Darcy's proposal. But she immediately rejects that prospect when she thinks of her uncle and aunt.

“But no,” – recollecting herself, – “that would never be; my uncle and aunt would have been lost to me; I should not have been allowed to invite them”. (PP: 159)

Little does she imagine the change of attitude Mr Darcy will undergo. Mr and Mrs Gardiner's virtues work in favour of complicity with their niece's suitor, and their latter collaboration to save the reputation of the Bennet family strengthens this bond. This connexion is so favourable that the reader approves it and sees the distance between the two social stratum from a new perspective.

Once Lydia's future is secured and the family's honour restored, the narrator presents us with a new social confrontation. Lady Catherine de Bourg, who stands for conservatism and the rigidity of the British upper hierarchy, tries to prevent Elizabeth from accepting her nephew's alleged proposal. The discussion that follows places the reader totally in favour of the heroine and the legitimacy of her engagement to Mr Darcy by means of a strong defence of her class. Lady Catherine's is a negative character and the reader has not empathised with her for a moment. Her authority is abusive and her manners clearly reproachable. After such a difficult debate, the reader is convinced of the benefits of the protagonists' marriage.

Elizabeth's and Darcy's defiance of Lady Catherine exemplifies the balancing act everywhere in evidence in *Pride and Prejudice* and indicates the advantages as well as the limitations of complying, even critically with conservative myths about the gentry as Austen does in this novel. The figure of Lady Catherine invites as well as dispels a critique of authority, for she receives all of the opprobrium we are never permitted to aim directly at Darcy or his parents, or at great gentry families in general. (Johnson: 89)

All these arguments taken into consideration lead me to conclude that the danger faced by the Bennet family's lack of clear parental authority was successfully overcome by the intervention of characters allied in spite of their social differences. In equal terms, the misguidance of the nation on the part of its monarch also required the conjunction of forces from different quarters of British society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Several questions were set out at the beginning of this paper. Is the dysfunctionality of the Bennet family at the core of the plot in *Pride and Prejudice*? Is it comparable to the historical situation undergone by Britain at the time of the novel's publication? Is it possible to deduce a political ideology from this novel? If so, how is this to be interpreted? A close analysis of the primary source and its critical studies has allowed me to answer the first questions in the affirmative. The issue of bad parenting, in my view, triggers the conflict which the heroine has to face. Plausible parallelisms between the figure of the 'absent' parent and the 'absent' monarch have been found, and a political attitude has been interpreted within the novel by assessing the social conflict present in the narrative.

A critical reading of the text has been carried out to decode the author's message and posited objectives. *Pride and Prejudice* is not a conduct book, nor is it a political pamphlet. That is why this work and all Austen's other mature novels have been

considered apolitical for such a long time. However, in this novel, Jane Austen conveys a didactic and political message by means of a masterful writing technique that leads the readers through the story and makes them participants in the plot. Together with the heroine, they discover the dangers of a neglectful education and a prejudiced vision of the world, as well as the benefits of social evolution. Closely sharing Elizabeth Bennet's circumstances, many readers of the time could plausibly extrapolate the protagonist's worries to their own situation and see how their country was immersed in a revolutionary era whose implications risked disaster unless new policies were applied.

Finally, Jane Austen's political attitude, which scholars have interpreted so differently since the nineteenth century, seems to me a conciliatory one. She was neither for revolution nor for rigidly conservative approaches. She simply perceived the need for reform as a way to guarantee the survival of her own class, and by extension, of her nation.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's narrator shows us the significant consequences of an unsatisfactory answer to the social changes that were taking place in her time. And also, she suggests a solution to the crisis that was affecting her country. That solution was collaborative, constructive and egalitarian. But most tellingly, it totally ignores the Pater Familias.

## 5. Further Research

In the development of this paper I have encountered some issues which I consider worth analysing in future discussions - though considerable research has already been done in many of these fields-, and which I have not been able to focus on further within the scope of this current discussion.

Regarding the family plot in Jane Austen, I think that it would be of interest to analyse more fully and more generally across all six major novels the figures of the absent mother, the spoilt child and the 'man-who-would-understand' within the context of sibling relationships.

A further topic of interest to me would be to consider Austen as a professional woman writer, in the process of conceiving a work through to its publication, an issue that would allow far deeper reflexion on the nature of personal response to her own cultural context.

Finally, and perhaps more relevant to my current project, the multiple characteristics of what we refer for convenience to as 'British society' offers an excellent subject for study. Social rank, manners and comportment, ascension or decline on the social ladder and, broadly, social evolution as opposed to threat of revolution are issues touched on my study, but which merit far fuller attention.

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