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Pride and Prejudice: Jumping Over the Fence of Class and Gender

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of wife.” This first sentence of *“Pride and Prejudice”* stands as one of the most celebrated first lines in literature nowadays, for marrying a wealthy spouse is not just the pursuit by ladies in the past. True love should be the only and primary force behind one’s decision on marriage, but as a matter of fact money and fame easily tempt one to get a loveless marriage, especially when he or she was raised in a poor, socially inferior family. The young protagonist of *“Pride and Prejudice,”* however, advocates that money should not be the driving force in marriage. Although the most apparent and fundamental focus of the story is romantic love, courtship illustrated in Joe Wright’s adaptation of *“Pride and Prejudice”* was accomplished only after overcoming the obstacles of classism and feudal marriage customs in the 18th century England. **Therefore, the film can be read as a critique of 18th century English society, and this criticism against class and gender oppression during the era is delicately demonstrated through several literary elements, including the plot, characters, settings, symbolism, the point of view and director’s tone.**

To start with, in the film, the plot primarily focuses on the unfolding of pride and prejudices of Darcy and Elizabeth. The story begins with the arrival of Mr. Bingley, a single man of large fortune, at a neighborhood town. His arrival instantly fires Mrs. Bennet’s obsessive efforts to get her eldest daughters married to suitable husbands and brings about a series of social gatherings, like balls and teas, where the two major couples meet and share their first impressions. In the introduction, Jane and Bingley fall into an immediate love

whereas proud Darcy and prejudiced Elizabeth make harsh comments on each other, implying that their love will proceed with difficulty. The story further advances as their misunderstandings deepen. Despite his contempt toward her uneducated mom and sisters, Darcy is already allured by Elizabeth's ready wit and frankness. Unluckily, Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy causes her to misinterpret what he says or does. While her misunderstanding of Darcy deepens, Mr. Wickham's conceit, Mr. Collins's proposal to Elizabeth and her denial, and Bingley's sudden leaving of Jane establish even higher fences that Elizabeth laid against Darcy. The climax of the story is when Darcy proposes to Elizabeth after suffering an internal conflict between his pride in his noble, upper-class family and her lower socioeconomic status, "I have fought against my better judgement, my family's expectation, the inferiority of your birth, my rank and circumstance. I'm willing to put them aside and to end my agony. I love you," says Darcy with a sincere look, but Elizabeth can still feel his condescending manner from his proposal and thus refuses his love. Her flat refusal jolts Darcy's pride, and the refusal forces Darcy to reflect on himself and lose some of his pomposity. Then, this breaking down of his arrogance is what resolves the conflict and moves the plot toward the end. Under the warmth of Darcy's genuine effort to save the reputation of her family by convincing Wickham to marry Lydia, Elizabeth's prejudice thaws, making Elizabeth realize her own blindness. Eventually, the story ends with happy marriage of this young couple. At this point, Darcy's second proposal does not show his arrogance anymore, as he says "you have bewitched my body and soul, and I love, love, and love you," which suggests the possibility of true love. By using a plot in which true love surmounts socioeconomic barriers that were common in pre-modern society, the film indicates the emergence of the concept of free love during the transitional period of the late 18th century England.

Next, if the plot is an engine of whole story, the major operators of the engine are

indeed characters, as their behavior, thoughts and feelings make or resolve conflicts that move the plot forward. In "*Pride and Prejudice*," the relationship between the two main protagonists, Darcy and Elizabeth, functions as the backbone of the entire story. Not only do they have very complex characteristics, but also their attitudes toward each other change according to the plot development. Darcy is a fine example of male privilege. He is the nephew of Lady Catherine and the owner of half of Derbyshire. He is rich, handsome, famous, and possesses all the traits that would make him an ideal lover, but at the same time he is also class conscious and proud. Thus, he avoids dancing with anyone from inferior birth and does not think Elizabeth worthy of him due to her family of no consequence. His obnoxious remark on Elizabeth that she is "perfectly tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt him" represents his haughtiness. On the contrary, Elizabeth is an amiable, vivacious lady from a middle-class family. Unlike her little sisters, she is intelligent and witty, and she loathes snobbishness and feels deeply ashamed of her mother's vulgar hunting of rich husbands for her daughters. Elizabeth, however, tends to judge others by herself. Therefore, she depicts the upper-class men at the ball as "humorless poppy cocks," and she makes a biased remark on Darcy that "he looks miserable, poor soul." Due to their opposite social status and personality, ranging from their arguments over attributes of perfectly accomplished women to the quarrel over Jane's marriage to Bingley, Darcy and Elizabeth find it difficult to understand each other. Nonetheless, when Elizabeth points out his false arrogance and selfish disdain, Darcy finally realizes that belonging to an upper-class family does not necessarily make one superior and gives up his loftiness to show genuine affection for Elizabeth, who dares not to flatter him but challenges him in a candid, honest manner. Elizabeth, who had initially dismissed Darcy as an arrogant misanthropist, also discovers that there is more behind his supercilious demeanor, as he saves her family from scandalous disgrace. As a result, the accomplished true love of Darcy and Elizabeth, who each represent the upper and

middle-class, refers to the decline of the highly stratified society segregated by class in 18th century England.

The decline of the old society is also evidently shown through the comparison of Elizabeth and other female characters. As mentioned earlier, unlike most of the minor female characters including her mother, little sisters and Charlotte, Elizabeth reproaches class snobbery and does not bow to the need for economic survival. Therefore, she turns down Mr. Collin's suggestion and denies Darcy's first proposal of marriage since she believes in marrying for romantic love. Elizabeth's anti-stereotypical aspect stands out the most when she is compared with Jane, who is described as an ideal woman that has all the good qualities, such as being calm, innocent, sweet, friendly, and not flirty. Jane behaves exactly as she is supposed to do in English feudal society: women should not show their interest; they should be servile and dependent, and should always wait for men to propose. In stark contrast to Jane, Elizabeth is rendered as a new type of woman who possesses an independent mind. She is never the stereotype of typical 18th century women in that she is forthright, keenly intellectual, and does not hesitate to address her opinions or emotions. Thus, by daring to draw Elizabeth in such perspective, the film defies the social stereotypes of subservient women during the era. Furthermore, the ironic ending of the story, in which Elizabeth herself marries a rich, noble man in spite of her hatred toward the aristocratic upper-class, adds satiric tone to the story that criticizes a society where marriage was the only way to social mobility for women.

Besides, the film's delicate depiction of settings using imagery renders the story's atmosphere more vivid and intensifies the character's emotions. First, the story basically takes place in Longbourne Estate in Hertfordshire and sometimes in the nearby estates, such as Pemberley. In the opening scene, the long shot of the lush, green landscape as the sun is brilliantly rising on the horizon indicates that Longbourne is a rural town, filled with landed gentry and oblivious to the shifting changes in the city. The estate is entailed, which means

that the wealth can be bequeathed only through male heirs. Such regional background explains Mrs. Bennet's intense eagerness to find rich spouses for her daughters because none of the Bennet girls will inherit Mr. Bennet's property. Pemberley, meanwhile, is Darcy's well-ordered home, where Elizabeth goes through a lot of emotional changes. For example, only after arriving at Pemberley does she recognize her own prejudice against Darcy since Pemberley symbolizes Darcy's actual character as he feels most comfortable in his own domain. Only in this elegant, beautiful place, Darcy smiles and shows his unconditional love for Elizabeth as well as his compassion for her family. Meanwhile, the historical background of the film should be one of the most transformative eras in England: the late 18th century and the early 19th century. Despite industrialization and urbanization in London, the most essential sector of society during the era was the landed gentry. However, due to the entailment law, people had a common conception that the role of women within family is accumulating money through advantageous marriages. Therefore, most women in the story have a highly increased dependence on marriage for financial survival, and show their obsession with finding wealthy spouses. In the film, the obsession is vividly demonstrated through a series of balls and parties, where all the women dress up and adorn themselves with embroidery lace to catch the eyes of soldiers or noble men.

Although not as explicit as in the use of plot or characters, the use of symbolism and the point of view also implies the film's satirical view of classism and advantageous marriage during the pre-modern period. Symbolism has most distinctively been used in the scene in which Elizabeth learns about her best friend Charlotte's engagement with Mr. Collins. Charlotte has not married for love or companionship but for advancing her status. When Charlotte tells Elizabeth the news Elizabeth is playing on the swings, and as the twisted swing ropes come untied, her body turns round and round. In her eye-view, the world seems to spin around too, just as if society is going crazy. Using this imagery of twisted

swing, the director pokes fun at the tendency of getting loveless marriage as a means of climbing the social ladder at that time. Moreover, the third-person limited omniscient point of view enables the movie to show its audience the perspectives of multiple people in different social classes. The story has no explicit narrator to interpret the inner mind and thought of the characters, so the audience should infer the characters' personalities from what they say or do. While the story mostly focuses on the perspective of Elizabeth, multiple events occur when she is not around. The third-person omniscient point of view thus lends a cold dimension to the story since Elizabeth's attitude toward true love and marriage starkly contrasts to the snobbishness of typical young ladies in the era.

Indeed, in his adaptation of "*Pride and Prejudice*," Joe Wright delivers his acerbic tone regarding the story's theme: advantageous marriage and classism in the English patriarchal society of the late 18th century. The director makes fun of the aristocratic attitudes of the upper-class characters, including Mr. Collins, Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine, by rendering their appearance or behavior in comic ways. For example, Mr. Collins in the story is a horrible looking man; his short stature and dull speech raise hatred towards him. Also, Lady Catherine chastises Elizabeth for her lack of education, while Lady Catherine herself has had every advantage of education and connections. However, the one who is depicted as having bad manners is not Elizabeth but Lady Catherine, as she imposes on Elizabeth and insists she promise not to marry Darcy. Similarly, Joe Wright describes Mrs. Bennet and her youngest daughters as silly characters; they talk too much, laugh in a flippant manner and frequently give foolish remarks. By portraying their lack of virtue and social graces in a facetious tone, the director remains scornful of the social atmosphere in which women were forced to struggle to succeed within the oppressive patriarchy.

In conclusion, through this literary interpretation of Joe Wright's "*Pride and Prejudice*" (2005), one can get a profound understanding of class differences and gender

injustices during the Regency period in England. Joe Wright used the comparison of the female protagonist and the other minor characters, settings, symbolism and the point of view to criticize gender oppression, particularly as perpetrated by the institution of marriage. At the same time, his illustration of the plot, settings and the pride and prejudice of the two main characters substantiate the absurdity of classism. Therefore, Joe Wright's adaption of "*Pride and Prejudice*" proves the value of literary devices in enriching the story. In literary interpretation, "*Pride and Prejudice*" is no more a common love story, but it is a bitter yet compelling satire of the social follies of late 18th English society.