

Critically analyse the character of Darcy in Pride and Prejudice.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, generally referred to as Mr Darcy, is one of the two central characters in Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, the other being the person of his romantic interest, Elizabeth. He is the archetype of the aloof romantic hero. The narration of the story is almost exclusively from Elizabeth's point of view. The reader is given a one-sided view of Darcy throughout the length of the novel: but hints are given throughout that there is much more to his character than meets the eye. The reader gets a healthy dose of dramatic irony. This is because Elizabeth for the most part holds a much prejudiced view against Darcy: despite the other characters's observations that Darcy is really a noble character at heart: though he is externally somewhat proud. Usually referred to only as 'Darcy' by the other characters and the narrator: his Christian name is mentioned twice in the novel. Darcy is a wealthy gentleman, with an annual income exceeding 10,000 pounds and the proprietor of a large estate, Pemberley, in Derbyshire, England. Darcy first meets Elizabeth at a ball at the nearby town of Meryton. Here he makes a rather demeaning remark about Elizabeth who is within earshot; "She is tolerable: but not handsome enough to tempt me." Gradually he becomes attracted to her and later proposes to her: where he mentions that he is proposing to her despite his being conscious of the class and cultural superiority of his family over hers. It is this attitude of social superiority which makes him snobbish. It also accounts for his unacceptability in society. Darcy disapproves Bingley's development of a serious attachment for Elizabeth's elder sister, Jane, and subtly persuades Bingley that Jane is not upto his standard; which Darcy honestly believes. He later explains his hypocrisy (he breaks off Bingley's relationship, while he himself proposes to Elizabeth, although in a very objectionable manner) by asserting; 'I was kinder to (Bingley) than to myself'.

Eventually Darcy declares his love for Elizabeth and asks for her hand: but in a manner as if he is doing her a favour. He reminds her of the large gap in their social status. He is proposing to her despite his being the superior; this is more of an insult than a genuine proposal. Elizabeth is naturally offended and vehemently rejects his proposal: giving her reasons for disliking him. These reasons include her knowledge of his interference in the Bingley-Jane affair, and the account she has received from Wickham of Darcy's alleged unfair treatment to him (Wickham). Later in the novel, on discovering that Elizabeth's youngest sister, Lydia, has fallen prey to Wickham's superficial charming looks and manners; and has eloped with him: Darcy tracks the pair down. He compels Wickham to marry Lydia: thus saving both Lydia and her family from social disgrace. Darcy bribes Wickham by paying off his debts, and getting him a commission in a northern regiment: thus inducing him to marry Lydia. It is apparent that Darcy does this under cover of anonymity because of his concern for Elizabeth and her family. But there is another, more familiarly personal reason for Darcy's intervention. Wickham had tried once to seduce Darcy's younger sister, Georgiana in order to force marriage and thus, gain access to her fortune. Wickham thus reveals himself to be a spendthrift with money and a practised womanizer. This last is corroborated by the fact that even Elizabeth on first sight had almost fallen prey to his charm. Darcy's intervention was not done to win Elizabeth. He attempted rather to keep her from knowing of his involvement. He did it rather to ease her distress. Earlier Mr Bennet had not paid heed to Elizabeth's warning not to allow Lydia to go to Brighton. He had given permission to Lydia to go under the protection of Colonel Forster, the Colonel in charge of the Meryton Militia in which Wickham serves. Darcy also feels partially responsible for failing to

inform Elizabeth and the public of Wickham's true character. Darcy then consents to Bingley's courtship of Jane again. (It must be admitted that Darcy's activities and attitudes are snobbish; he can make or break relationships, as if in his circle he is morally responsible for everyone). Accompanying his friend to Longbourn: Darcy proposes to Elizabeth again: and now she accepts partly due to gratitude for saving Lydia, and more importantly being influenced by Pemberley and the thought of becoming its mistress.

If we analyse Darcy's character, we will find that he is an arrogant and proud man: particularly to those who he considers to belong to a socially lower status. He thinks that his high social class invests him with special qualities, connections; and so he does not want to interact with people from lower classes than himself. We see evidence of this in the Meryton assemblies and balls. Because at all the parties there, he seems to be distancing himself from the rest of the crowd: because he thinks they are not worthy of mixing with. Another important but often overlooked fact is that he belongs to the old Anglo-Norman aristocracy; as indicated by his own name and more so, in the name of his aunt, Lady Catherine De Bourgh. At the dances, he does not wish to dance with any girl; because they all belong to a lower social class. We can sum up Darcy's character as being too much class-conscious.

This same sense of class-superiority is applied to Elizabeth also, though Darcy is attracted by her intelligent and lively eyes. He is attracted moreover to her 'light and pleasing figure', her easy and playful manners, mind and personality, and finally considers her 'one of the handsomest women' in his acquaintance. These features of female appearance and personality were deemed estimable qualities in a woman of Pope's age and early 19th century. He does, moreover, mention to Elizabeth that he is uncomfortable with making new acquaintances, and finds it hard to converse with people he does not know. This shows the shy, perhaps even reclusive aspects of Darcy's nature which is not very highlighted in the novel. Towards his friends, however, he is caring, friendly and honourable. Despite his past behaviour with Elizabeth and his first insulting proposal; she is surprised by his 'gallantry' as he persists in pursuing her. Vivien Jones notes that Darcy's handsome appearance, original arrogance and wealth signify to the reader that he is the hero of a romance novel. Wickham's irresponsible elopement with Lydia allows Darcy to demonstrate that he now feels responsible for not exposing Wickham by his remaining silent. If he had made Wickham's bad character public knowledge: Lydia would have been safe. Though Darcy is condescending towards Elizabeth in the first part of the novel, he always finds her to be 'uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes'. (A modern reading will, however, find Darcy as physically strongly attracted to Elizabeth: though his class arrogance prevents him from expressing it). 18th century had been a time of the 'cult of courtesy'; a time that prized delicacy, refinement, exaggerated politeness above all. In the words of the British writer Adam Nicolson, wide sections of English 18th century social life became dainty and fragile: losing vitality due to excessive politeness. In 18th century idea, a man was expected above all, to be pleasant and pleasing; and so it was better for a man to lie and behave hypocritically rather than say or do anything that might be offensive. In short, 18th century British upper-class social life became emasculated. Naturally, this indulged hypocrisy. By early 19th century, a more brooding, tougher version of masculinity was starting to become fashionable, and the character of Darcy exemplifies this trend. Nicolson describes the

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differences between Bingley on one hand, and Darcy on the other, thus. The villain, Wickham, takes the advantage of this culture of hypocrisy. Bingley is a typical 18th century man: agreeable, delightful, friendly, fond of dancing and socialising, gentleman like, handsome. Darcy is disagreeably arrogant, forbidding, refined, handsome and noble. Darcy is a typical 19th century man: masculinity incarnate, brooding and uncompromising.