On Frames and Resistance in Pride and Prejudice

In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the larger philosophical questions of beauty, truth, and rationality are examined in the context of frames. There exist the frames of the country and of the city, of privilege and of poverty, of men and of women, of family, and, potentially of most thematic importance to the novel, of acting within and without the limits of decorum and the judgment of others. There are limits to everything in this society, limits on who can court whom, limits on the manner in which one either defers or condescends. Lady Catherine acknowledges this existence of spheres based on inherent social limits, addressing Elizabeth: "The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune…If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere, in which you have been brought up"(232). Lady Catherine very astutely focuses on the crux of the conflict that Elizabeth, Jane, and all who are not privileged face in the presence of richness and supposed good breeding. There is a certain association between acting inconsistently with one's class and upbringing, and pretense. Lady Catherine lists the very concerns which could potentially isolate the Bennets from the Darcys and Bingleys, of breeding and fortune, and very directly suggests that Elizabeth does not belong; her use of the term "quit the sphere" suggests that Elizabeth must cross a line, a demarcation which will involve her into an entirely different existence. It is this focus on decorum and acting within one's spheres of existence, in all their myriad forms, which certain of Austen's characters, like Lady Bingley, espouse. But Jane Austen herself seems to suggest a rethinking of rough demarcations, of pushing one's boundaries and frames in as many ways as possible. An inspection of those things and characters she chooses to paint reveals the ideals she is pushing thematically in the novel, of being constrained by one's context and resisting it.

Austen is inspired by the ideals of the picturesque, as suggested by a moment of metafiction which happens in the beginning of the novel. As Mrs. Hurst takes Darcy's hand and they walk off

together with Miss Bingley, Elizabeth says 'You are charmingly group'd, and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth. Good bye" (36). In this moment, we see the literal illustration of Austen's thematic exploration. The footnote explains this moment as a rule of the picturesque, that "groups of three are especially attractive because of their irregularity "(36). A basic rule of picturesque, a focus on that which is irregular, a perception of that which is not typically smooth or perfectly beautiful (Gilpin). In the scene in the novel, Austen draws attention to her own acknowledgement of her craft; in addressing the fact the three are picturesque, she also expedites Elizabeth's immediate removal from the scene; yet, when Elizabeth is removed, so the scene ends. In terms of Elizabeth's notion of picturesque, that they are "charmingly group'd", there is a simplicity to her meaning, implying a certain beauty or aesthetic appeal. We learn later, at Pemberley, that Elizabeth is very unacquainted with art. Austen, however, well-acquainted with notions of the picturesque, reveals subtly her design as an author; scenes end when Elizabeth is not in them; her choice of focus, like in a picturesque painting, is on the ruggedness, an irregularity of character, which manifests more in Elizabeth than in any other.

We begin the novel within the frame of the Bennet household, a household rife with the aspirations and endeavors of a number of women, though encircling and limited by the agency of a single man. The first dialogue comes from Mrs. Bennet, who is entreating Mr. Bennet to call on Mr. Bingley. Upon assuming Mr. Bennet will not do so, she says such things as "I am sick of Mr. Bingley", and then hearing his admission of having called upon him, says "I was sure you loved your girls too well to neglect such an acquaintance" (6). The implied sentiment here is that the happiness of the girls is dependent on a familiarity with eligible bachelors in town, and that the task of creating such an acquaintance is entirely within Mr. Bingley's hands. Here, then, is the demarcation: Mrs. Bennet, insisting so vehemently on Mr. Bennet's taking an action, is not able to act directly on her own, because she is not the patriarch of the family. To "neglect such an acquaintance" would mean

a certain disregard for the prospects of his daughters, and when Mrs. Bennet assumes Mr. Bennet has not called, she is resigned to Mr. Bennet's choices.

There is a certain aspect to the limitations of the Bennet household that is aptly described in Nina Auerbach's essay: The near-invisibility of Longbourn and the collective life of the Bennets within it is at one with its economic invisibility under an entail which denies a family of women legal existence" (330). This invisibility is not only thematically true, but physically and descriptively true. There is a glaring lack of description of the Bennet house itself; it serves as a baseline, a starting point from which all other things lead. Especially compared to other locations, the Bennet house remains elusive physically; because its ownership is so tenuous, because none of the women have any certain claim to it, the invisibility is, as Auerbach suggests, indicative of a disempowerment of the Bennet women. When we see the examples of higher-class, higher-power places, notably Pemberley, the descriptions are vivid and solid, just as is Darcy's solid and incontrovertible presence associated with the manor: "…their furniture suitable to the fortune of their proprietor; but Elizabeth saw, with admiration of his taste, that it was neither gaudy nor uselessly fine; with less of splendor, and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings"(159). The descriptions of the manor are constantly juxtaposed with references to the master; it exists because of his "fortune" and "his taste." There is a consistent presence of Darcy, just in the description of his house; he has a certain dominion, both in the thoughts of Elizabeth, and over the manor. The descriptions are such of isolation, because Elizabeth has denied him, and is grappling at his presence through his material belongings. Austen's choice of painting Pemberley, but not Longbourn, is a conscious one, reflecting their frames of existence: where Darcy's Pemberley itself casts a dominion over the surroundings, Longbourn is invisible materially and economically, the Bennets quite unsure of its remaining theirs.

The sphere of family relations and "connections", as Lady Catherine puts it, are most apparent in Darcy's case. His connections to Mr. Bingley bring connections to Miss Bingley, who hopes to seduce him; his tie to his sister creates a family dynamic that functions outside the typical two-parent and children assumption; his ties to Wickham stem from his father's legacy; his ties to Lady Catherine open him to a potential prospect for her daughter; and his ties to Elizabeth Bennet must invariably lead to his ties to her family. If we imagine Darcy with this web of connections, it is apparent that he must tread very carefully to avoid severing any ties. But in both Elizabeth and Darcy's cases, there are certain conventions that must be overturned in order for their love to exist.

Darcy overcomes his breeding, and the strict conventions of his class by condescending to Elizabeth, and helping her family. As we see in his first scene, "Mr. Darcy danced only once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, declined being introduced to any other lady, and spent the rest of evening in walking about the room, speaking occasionally to one of his own party" (8). Darcy's enclosure within a certain circle of acquaintances and of class is readily apparent in his refusing to dance or speak with anyone outside his immediate acquaintances; in doing so, he denies the social possibilities inherent in a party, choosing instead to stay rigidly confined within the frame he is accustomed to. However, during the accidental meeting at Pemberley, when he is introduced to Elizabeth's aunt and uncle, he expresses a much different perspective on mingling with those outside his class: "That he was surprised by the connexion was evident; he sustained it however with fortitude, and so far from going away, turned back with them, and entered into conversation with Mr. Gardiner" (165). The "conversation", the beginning of a dialogue is exactly that which drives the novel; in conversing with Mr. Gardiner, Darcy is expressing an acceptance of Elizabeth's family as equals. A conversation implies that the two sides are equally engaged, and it is this equality of speaking which signals many turning points in the novel. This passage signals Darcy's breaking free of the rigid assumptions which bound him. Elizabeth's communication with Darcy when he first

suggests marriage is what reveals to him all her notions of him that he had not before known. The extent of the conversation is what drives the plot; the subsequent letter from Darcy another extensive attempt at communication. Conversation breaks the barriers which have thus far disenabled them from behaving freely towards each other. And conversation seems to stem freely from them once they receive the approbation of the family.

In the end, we return to the idea of frames, this time illustrated by houses and their locations. Austen details where each couple lives and their relations to each other, and in doing so, establishes that these new frames are malleable and transcend the notions of class and fortune which guided the beginning of the novel. In terms of Lady Catherine, "her resentment gave way…and she condescended to wait on them at Pemberley…" (254). So does Lady Catherine become integrated into a new order of social spheres which does not operate on exclusion.

Austen, in her attention to certain aesthetic and visual descriptions, reveals her tendency for complication, for malleable and changing characters which push their boundaries and frames. Though Darcy and Elizabeth both begin in spheres which are uncompromisable and very limiting in their individual ways, Elizabeth manages to break away from the invisibility of Longbourn and Darcy manages to rework Pemberley as a place of socialization and integration, rather than the isolation which was present in its initial description. The combination of physical descriptions and character-driven events defeat the notions of class distinction and immobility which mire the beginning of the novel.

Works Cited

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