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## Of Life and Happiness: Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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### Abstract

It is a fact universally acknowledged that humankind struggles to live an honourable and happy life. However, the concept of happiness and honour varies from person to person; community to community; and generation to generation. These phenomena of “true” happiness are as much social as psychological. The Collins, Mary, Mr. Weston and the like are “happy” in their lives and with themselves as much as Elizabeth, Darcy and their kind are happy with themselves and their lives. The perception of true happiness among characters in *Pride & Prejudice* is divergent. Some of Austen’s characters learn from life as they experience ups and downs in lives due to the choices they make. Others continue to perpetuate the misery that has become their lot due to the compromises they make. The likes of Elizabeth and Darcy face numerous problems in the beginning in finding their soulmates. Once they find one, the remaining part of their lives become productive, peaceful, and prosperous. They go through the mill of power, social, and sexual politics of their society but emerge successful since they and choose wisely. The others, like the Collins and the Charlottes, choose their partners on the prevailing standards of their society; thus, the duality in their beliefs and deeds undo them. They opt for short-cuts in making choices, and end up having lives full of challenges, boredom, and indifference to the wellbeing of each other. Such lives have their prices and consequences.

**Keywords:** happiness, experience, society, choices, characters, consequences.

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## Of Life and Happiness

Some of Austen's characters learn from life and achieve happiness as they experience ups and downs due to the choices they make in their lives. Others continue to perpetuate the misery that has become their lot due to the compromises they have made and remain unhappy. There are various causes of unhappiness and "lie partly in the social system, partly in individual psychology- which of course, is itself to a considerable extent a product of the social system" (Russell 20). The likes of Elizabeths and Darcys have numerous problems in the beginning in finding their soulemates. Once they find one, the remaining part of their lives become productive, peaceful, and prosperous. They go through the mill of power, social, and sexual politics of their society but emerge successful, for they choose wisely. The others, like the Collins and Charlottes, choose their partners on the prevailing standards of their society. The duality in their beliefs and deeds undo them and their lives. They opt for short-cuts in making choices for themselves and end up in a life which is full of challenges, boredom, and indifference to the wellbeing of each other. Both these kind of life come with their prices and consequences.

Some of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*<sup>\*</sup> fail to experience the joys of collective happiness which spoils their spiritual lives. They involve in self-interested schemes to achieve individual pleasure. Only those who are able to see beyond self-interest achieve true happiness. Lydia has no regard for her elder sister's tears when she is leaving for Brighton, because she is completely engrossed in her own happiness. Kitty, with whom she has a lot in common, becomes almost a stranger when she is rallying in her own happiness.

This selfishness is common for we too, at times, keep a show of friendship though we are tempted to pull each other's legs to achieve our own end. Ironically sometimes this makes us so self-possessed with our own interests that there is no intrusion into the affairs of other people. This keeps the social set up peaceful as happens in the world of P & P. A superficial harmony is maintained imperceptibly through hypocrisy because all agree on one point and that is the desire for social acceptability. At times they even bargain it at a high price by making emotional, psychological and mental sacrifices. Collins and Charlotte's marriage is one such example. For them the means are more important than the end.

The ones who aspire for this superficial life live an inner fragmented life. Wickham suffers from lack of self-contentment which makes him commit errors. We realize

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\* All subsequent references to this novel *Pride and Prejudice* are indicated by the letters, P & P for the sake of brevity and the text referred to with page number. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: David Campbell Ltd. 1991).

the actual value and worth of an object only when we achieve it. We suffer disappointments for we have made sacrifices for these achievements, as is the case with Charlotte Lucas. The realization of the futility of such sacrifices dawns on us when it is too late for then there is no retracing. In reality there are possibilities of undoing the wrongs that one is led to commit but generally the fear of being labeled stops us short. Matter of honour and guilt are huge hurdles and only few have the courage to cross it as does Darcy and Elizabeth.

Mr. Bertram in *Mansfield Park* (MP) and Mr. Bennet in *P & P* are both conscious of their faults in the brought-up of their children and are ashamed. They realize their own part in the harm that is done. They go through a transformation in their concept of ethics and values. Mr. Bennet realizes that he should have been a little more vigilant towards the moral education of his children, and, Mr. Bertram learns that his extreme postures regarding worldly education have made his children morally deficient. Not only is this remorse felt by the elders but by the young generation too for they also come to realize their own mistakes. D. Devlin comments on Mary Crawford in MP, in the following words:

When Mary moves from 'ill-bred' to 'wrong' she moves from manners as 'good-breeding' to manners as 'conduct', from the world of Chesterfield to the world of Locke and Johnson; she knows how close she is to being educated by her love for her tutor Edmund into a clearer knowledge of herself and others. But it is too late (122).

Those that claim to be at the helm of affairs, like Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, are seen pointing fingers at others but the abysmal state of their own morals is shaky enough to make precedence for others; and so the whole social structure represents a confused milieu. People with weak determination and resolves are afraid of redressing others for they are unable to hold a reflective mirror to those who are wrong but powerful and influential. Darcy suffers this fate because he is never made to realize that he can be wrong. He is used to being praised. Bingley almost worships him and relies on his judgment even in the matters of heart. Col. Fitzwilliam, Darcy's cousin appreciates him and trusts him to the extent of allowing him to "arrange the business just as he pleases" (172) without any argument. Darcy's servants tell Elizabeth that he is the "best landlord and the best master" (232) and even Elizabeth at one time says that "Mr. Darcy has no defect" (53). Even Wickham informs Elizabeth that Darcy "chuses that everyone connected with him should have an understanding of the first class" (79). Though the people of Hertfordshire consider Mr. Darcy rude and a snob they are afraid to tell him yet it is Mr. Darcy's self-realization triggered by Elizabeth that makes him conscious of his blemishes and consequently humanizes him; making him a lovable character.

Mr. Darcy never lacks substance even in his most snobbish state and that is why he is one of those characters who finally manage to achieve true happiness. When he is shocked at Mrs. Bennet's behaviour the reader understands his state of mind and wonders why Elizabeth is not trying to check her mother in her excesses. The reader does appreciate Darcy's ethical beliefs in comparison with the behaviour of the Bennet family and we acknowledge the strength of his character though he is proud and rude at times. According to Russell a person "has an image of himself as he thinks he ought to be, which is in continual conflict with his knowledge of himself as he is" (Russell. 20). As such Darcy's continual struggle to come at peace with himself continues till he achieves self-realization. This makes him a commendable character with all his weaknesses: his social limitations.

He has to recognize that though physical comforts are essential to life they are subservient to other more essential considerations viz. mental satisfaction, dignity, propriety and grace. For Elizabeth the foremost consideration is not Darcy's wealth; she is well aware of his status. Had this been not the case, she would have followed the lead of the prevailing mentality and would have accepted him when he proposed for the first time. Even today, in our own society we see this awareness developing in our youth and they are learning to admire the true virtue of sincerity and love rather than riches. The desire of worldly possessions has been eternally present in all societies but few manage to realize the futility of this transitory pursuit. Here we observe that Austen's novels are not mouthpieces of superficial considerations of her time. They are channels through which we are able to realize how relationships based on material gains can harm characters and consequently the society. Those, eligible for noble consideration and possessing a full realization of all human fallibilities manage to form a sublime relationship based on deep rooted noble ideals. It is when hearts and minds are open that we are able to understand the others. Darcy has to liberate himself from confined ideals so as to understand Elizabeth and all that she represents. Possessing brittle personas will only result in fragmentation of personality for it is the flexibility of understanding that helps us live contentedly. His role in helping the settlement of Lydia's affair provides him contentment because he has done a virtuous deed by restoring the honour of the family.

All human beings seek the happy life, but many confuse the means- for example, wealth and status- with that life itself. This misguided focus on the means to a good life makes people get further from the happy life. The really worthwhile things are the virtuous activities that make up the happy life, not the external means that may seem to produce it (Epictetus. 111).

Wealth and status can never be the criteria for happiness. Lady Catherine and her daughter are two discontented solitary beings. There is no understanding

between the mother and the daughter. We never meet them in a lively mood. Their wealth fails to provide them happiness. Living within one's means and avoiding wastage saves one from many embarrassments. Certainly, the Austen novels do not seem to hail meagre means as criteria of true happiness. Though desires are incessant and unfulfilled desires might sadden a person temporarily yet it is the inner contentment that gives longer lasting peace of mind. The dominant note is wastage of money and wasteful activities and we see this when Mr. Bennet is in need of money he has none. It is then that he regrets his expenditures. He "had very often wished, before this period of his life, that, instead of spending his whole income, he had laid by an annual sum, for the better provision of his children, and his wife, if she survived him. He now wished it more than ever" (289). In comparison to him Mr. Gardiner who is tradesman by profession shows resourcefulness, responsibility and provides finances; hence manages to solve Lydia's affair. On the other hand in *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor gives us a very fine idea of happiness which satisfies the mind and the soul: "I wish as well as everybody else to be perfectly happy; but like everybody else it must be my own way. Greatness will not make me so" (87). What she means perhaps, is, that happiness has nothing to do with money or social status, that happiness is a soulful unification of the realities of life outside ones entity no matter how grisly they may be.

A balanced approach to life and its affairs seems to be the dominant note of all Austen's novel. She presents her heroines in a sombre manner regarding money matters. They are careful enough not to waste money on trifling. In comparison to them we come across certain female characters like the Bingley sisters who "were in the habit of spending more than they ought" (13) and Mrs. Elton in *Emma*, who spends recklessly on her gowns; but soon we are to learn about the flimsiness of their moral fibre. They hide their hollowness by donning external refinements on their persons. Their values are of a superficial world catering to the needs of a superficial life. Though they possess riches they live very discontented lives.

Such are the values of the likes of Bingley sisters in a transitory world. Because of the limitation of their vision of life they fail to understand the bigger and solemn aspects of life. Their morals and ethics are as shallow as their understanding. They are not even ready to become conscious of their lack. They avoid facing who and what they are. This case is seen in Mrs. Elton in *Emma* too. Her sole obsession is wealth, dresses and all sorts of futilities. Boasting about her wealth and connections makes her hearty and vain. Basking in the glory of her ten thousand pounds, she considers herself happy and all others beneath her. The reader dislikes her as much as Emma does when she calls her "insufferable woman!" and a "little upstart, vulgar being" (283). Interestingly the environmental ethics<sup>1</sup> of particular persons or class differ and provide them with justifications of their actions so they fail to see

the stance of the others and it is this element that creates disturbance in the society when people from different social backgrounds come into contact with each other.

The lives of most of the characters (inclusive of men and women), whom Miss Austen depicts, have a kind of obsession with money. A good match is often talked about in terms of money. Mr. Bingley is a cultured man and possesses goodness of heart but his most attractive feature is his five thousand income is an impressive amount in comparison to Mr. Bennet's meagre amount of two thousand though it is enough to make them live decently. Charlotte Lucas marries Collins because he has "a comfortable home" (120), but for Elizabeth, Charlotte's idea of marrying Collins is "a most humiliating picture". She might think that Charlotte's chances of living "tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen" (120) are few yet it is a decision that is made wilfully. Charlotte's worldly wisdom makes Elizabeth realize later when she is reflecting on Wickham's mercenary attention to Mary King that "A man in distressed circumstances has not time for all those elegant decorum which other people may observe. If *she* does not object to it, why should *we*" (145)?

Mrs. Bennet is the one who talks openly on the subject of money as a main source of happiness. Wickham and the Bingley sisters nurse the desire of increasing their wealth secretly. Mary King suddenly attracts Wickham's attentions after she has inherited ten thousand pounds (145), and the Bingley sisters want their brother to marry Miss Darcy for her thirty thousand (191). Mrs. Bennet is obsessed with the idea of wealth. In her youth she had won the love of Mr. Bennet, the owner of an estate, which to a significant extent made her life easy and comfortable. Perhaps that is why she has such faith in wealth; and perhaps that is why she considers it a main source of happiness. She does not have any idea of what domestic happiness is all about. She is the kind of a person whose happiness revolves around having a good house; a carriage; beautiful dresses; and good furniture.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are the kind of people who are "forced" to live together. They choose each other due to the personal belongings and material things that they have. Mrs. Bennet "likes" Mr. Bennet for the money that he has; and Mr. Bennet likes her for her "looks". Each gives what the other wants. Their marriage is more like a business. It may not be inappropriate to say that the two should technically leave each other for other people who have more of what they based their marriage on.

Among the many couples in P & P Darcy and Elizabeth is the only one whose notion of happiness is different than that of the rest. These two do not see each other as a mean to an end; they are together not due to the material belonging that one brings into the life of another. We rejoice in their union for it is based on mental affinity and understanding. While the union of people like the Bennets is

more likely to break if the material comforts are not available any more, the marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth, on the other hand, is more likely to stay. Darcy and Elizabeth have married the persons that they are; the Bennets and others like Bennets have married the things that they possess. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are from the same camp to which Darcy and Elizabeth belong. They are a happily married couple and respect each other for what they are. Their relationship, understanding and practical knowledge of the world make them an exemplary couple. Jane finds solace and peace in their house when she is in trouble. They treat her with care and kindness. She learns from the Gardiners what is not available to her at home—care and kindness. The happy marriage of the Gardiners gives her an opportunity to think independently and realistically. Her aunt's consoling attitude and discussions—something utterly lacking in the Bennet household—enables her to manage her feelings of loss and strengthen her intellect. Her stay at the Gardiners helps her see things differently. Now she is able to discern “a strong appearance of duplicity” (141) in the Bingley sisters. She would not have done so had she stayed with her mother; so, she learns sagaciously about people and their morals. Here we realize the importance and value of discussion in improving the understanding of the world and morality. Absence of dialogue at the Bennet household not only hampers the understanding of the residents, it creates misunderstanding among them.

Darcy learns about the blessings of happiness and contentment when he goes through the process of self-analyses and closely observes Elizabeth's happy constitution and “playful manners” which alarms Him. We learn that:

Elizabeth could not help observing, as she turned over some music books that lay on the instrument, how frequently Mr. Darcy's eyes were fixed on her. She hardly knew how to suppose that she could be an object of admiration to so great a man; and yet that he should look at her because he disliked her, was still more strange. She could only imagine, however, at last, that she drew his notice because there was a something about her more wrong and reprehensible, according to his idea of right, than in any other person present (47).

Darcy, conscious of this attraction, tries to prevaricate it by finding faults in her family and then he tries to suppress his emotions by leaving the place and even removing Bingley from Netherfield. But the desire within him, from which there is no escape, grows so overwhelming and unmanageable that when next he meets her at Rosings he fails to silence it any longer, “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed” (178). The force and beauty of Elizabeth's depth, subtlety, ethics, and standards make him weak. He learns that she is not

one of the many hunting for a husband. His sudden expression of love surprises the reader as much as it does Elizabeth.

Darcy struggles to look into himself keeping aside all his petty prejudices and social ideals that prevent him from declaring his love for Elizabeth. He goes through the process of suffering that is rewarded by self-evaluation.<sup>2</sup> “In the great crises of life, in the supreme moments when to be or not to be is the question, little tricks of suggestion do not help” (Jung 133). He observes Elizabeth’s confrontation with Miss Bingley with interest and notes her confident retorts to all Miss Bingley’s efforts to let her down at Pemberley. She retains her graces increasing Miss Bingley’s chagrin. Miss Bingley’s petty criticism paves way for Darcy to appreciate Elizabeth objectively.

In P & P, we observe characters making choices of marriages in a hurried manner e.g. Lydia/Wickham and Collins/Charlotte for they fear that delay will deprive them of happiness they so desire. We understand that at certain crucial moments in life one becomes a little expedient when one faces limited choices, at this point morals are disregarded. Charlotte’s choice of matrimony is limited but she is intelligent enough to see it. In real life most of the common people become slaves to the norms of the society for mere survival. Jane Austen’s practicality in these matters is appreciated by critics. “She is concerned with the difficulty, in real life, of clearly understanding both ourselves and the others, of figuring out the right thing to do, and trying to do it in the face of our desires and life’s conflict” (Benditt 246).

“Judging properly” (89), as we observe in the novel, is not only the outcome of intellect or emotions; rather it is interplay of both—emotions and reason. Human emotions are instinctive and hence spontaneous. They can only be channelized properly through the reasoning faculty. The instinctive reactions are liable to many errors so one cannot afford to consider their moral value on the spur of the moment whether they are good or bad, appropriate or otherwise. We observe that Elizabeth’s dislike for Darcy is formed in a hurry. Furthermore, it is for this reason that one tends to regard Lydia’s behaviour with less extremity than that of Maria Bertram in M P. Proper moral and spiritual education guides us in making better decisions.

We notice a spiritual and moral vacuum in the lives of the characters who do not take life seriously. Such people live and approach life superficially and physically. The problems and sufferings in their lives have deeper causes which are a little too difficult and deep for them to understand. The result is that their life and their sufferings both become worse. Wickham and Lydia are only concerned with temporary pleasures. They know what is ‘good’ for them financially though the moral implications are completely ignored; they do not consider their actions to be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.<sup>3</sup> What is good and what is right are mere words and if someone

tries to define it he or she will be using just other words. Like Austen G. E. Moore does not believe in giving final judgment regarding the principals of ethics. He thinks that it all depends on that which we decide unanimously to call good whether it is a sense of duty or a certain moral conduct. While in the world of P & P the concept of 'good' has its own peculiar interpretation. For those, who need wealth to live a comfortable life, it means worldly comforts and hence "a single man in possession of a good fortune" (1), or a lady with "thirty thousand" (191), become the ultimate goal. Even the rich suffer from the same problem; they differ only in the amount each party has in mind.

Living in the money-minded society the female protagonists of Austen's novels learn that finances as not the basis of comfortable relationships and learn that physical attributes and gains are not the necessary ingredients for a healthy relationship. These qualities combined with rational thoughts and good motives followed by good actions cause happiness and add substance to the character. A good person, or a good enough person, should possess emotional literacy, mature self-discipline, cultivated intrapersonal sympathies, and a steadfast personal commitment to high moral standards of worth (Callahan. 25).<sup>4</sup>

A healthy relationship is a sort of exchange of positive qualities between two individuals who complement each other and through this exchange acquire happiness.<sup>5</sup> This is what makes Mr. Darcy a better individual who is able to feel the misery of others beyond his own suffering and creating in Elizabeth the awareness to refrain from passing judgments without knowing the actual truth. She goes through a shift from complete confidence in her judgment from "one knows exactly what to think" (81) to "Till this moment I never knew myself" (196).<sup>6</sup> It is at this stage of her life that she realizes that those who are blindly following the existing strict codes of conventions of their society are those for whom true happiness resides in worldly treasures and transient goods because living a superficial life they are not conscious of the bliss that one experiences due to self-satisfaction. Yet it is she who manages to see the reality and acquires true happiness.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For detail see *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* by Hargrove. Eugene C. USA: Environmental Ethics Books (Denton T X) 1989. LC No. 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Darcy turns out to be better than Shakespeares Hamlet who is caught in the question of To be or not to be and hence suffering a tragic end, Darcy survives his fate by resolving his dilemma.

<sup>3</sup> Philosophers have tried to define good but could not do so with any finality, e.g. when G. E. Moore tried to define good could not do so and he ended up in

saying, good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked How is good to be defined? My answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it (Moore 6).

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Callahan. *Ethical Expertise and Personal Character* The Hastings Centre Report, Vol. 24, No. 3 (May- June, 1994. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093>.

<sup>5</sup> In her youth she had declined the addresses of a gentleman who had the recommendations of good character, and connections, and position in life, of everything, in fact, except the subtle power of touching her heart. 28 this proves her preference regarding marriage.

James Edward Austen-Leigh *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. Contributors: James Edward Austen-Leigh - author, Chapman. R. W. - editor. (London: Richard Bentley and Son. 1871)

<sup>6</sup> These lines strangely echo Gloucester in Shakespeares tragedy *King Lear*, who goes through a process of self-realization through his sufferings, being disillusioned by the behaviour of his illegitimate son, I stumbled when I saw (Act. IV. Sc. I), and is able to see with the inward eye the reality so far hidden.

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