
Mr Bennet's Character Portrayal: Sense of Humor and Insensitivity

In her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen channels many of her perceptions of 18th century English society through both her dominant and smaller characters. Austen uses unfailingly sarcastic Mr. Bennet as a vehicle for the deception and spite rampant in such a community. While Mr. Bennet's mockery remains amusing and harmless in Volume I, his facetious witticisms turn mean-spirited and heartless in Volume II. Instead of continuing to target foolish, unsuspecting individuals as he had done for his own quiet amusement, Mr. Bennet begins to victimize his own undeserving family members; the comments he only considers to be lighthearted and smile-inducing soon become irrevocably hurtful to his own emotionally-unstable daughters. The book's heroine, Elizabeth, once appreciative of her father's humor, is now surprised and offended by his senseless, unsupportive comments, and she begins to question if he is now addressing his duties as a father with the seriousness his role demands. Austen displays Mr. Bennet's subtle yet undeniable transition from comic teaser to insensitive bully through speech (and lack thereof), structurally simple sentences, and details delineating the repercussions of his actions.

Austen uses words, or an absence of words, to shape the interactions of Mr. Bennet with his most intimate relations. Whether the effects of Mr. Bennet's speech provoke disconcertion or oblivious gratitude, the language he employs strongly conveys his interpretation, and subsequent exploitation, of his associates' confessions. By using words that perfectly contradict his feelings, he has the ability to use sarcasm to ridicule- if only for his own amusement- the expressions of those with whom he is speaking. Following his wife's insistence that he call on Mr. Bingley, a young bachelor recently moved into the neighborhood, Mr. Bennet preys upon his wife's gullibility and conceit by mockingly responding, "You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party." (ch.1, pg. 6) Mrs. Bennet, reacting exactly as Mr. Bennet had anticipated, concurs with her husband and feigns modesty. Although such an exchange is strictly humorous, the continuation of Mr. Bennet's sarcastic diction in serious times displays his inability to control the ways he uses his words. Upon the demand of his daughter Lydia to "follow" soldiers to the town of Brighton, Mr. Bennet's elder daughter Elizabeth runs to her father in protest; such an action, she claims, will enforce her sister's untamed, immature behavior, thereby putting the entire family's reputation at risk. In response, Mr. Bennet calmly expresses his inveterate mockery: "We shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton. Let her go then... She is luckily too poor to be an object of prey to anybody. At Brighton she will be of less importance even as a common flirt than she has been

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here. The officers will find women better worth their notice...At any rate, she cannot grow many degrees worse, without authorizing us to lock her up for the rest of her life.” (ch. 41, pg. 196) The dry wit implicit in Mr. Bennet’s speech displays his failure to address the situation seriously and reasonably, thereby exposing his inadequacies as a father.

Austen uses sentence structure and complexity to further portray Mr. Bennet as habitually sarcastic and idiosyncrasy-exploiting. Whether Mr. Bennet’s partner in conversation construes his phrases as facetious or insensitive depends entirely on his or her emotional stability, yet the similarities among all of Mr. Bennet’s sentences show his complete disregard of any pain his expressions may cause. Mr. Bennet frequently uses short, simple sentences when the situation demands long and insightful ones, allowing himself to appear ignorant of the issues of his family members at times when they depend on his earnest advice. Following his wife’s hysteric rant that their daughter Elizabeth refuses to engage herself to Mr. Collins, Mr. Bennet calmly simulates complete misunderstanding of anything Mrs. Bennet had just said: “I have not the pleasure of understanding you. Of what are you talking?” (ch. 20, pg. 97) His wife’s ensuing frustration serves as exactly the type of reaction Mr. Bennet both expects and enjoys. In another instance, Mr. Bennet’s derision of his two youngest daughters by using concise, easily understood phrasing causes similar disconcertion: “From all that I can collect by your manner of talking, you must be two of the silliest girls in the country. I have suspected it some time, but now I am convinced.” (ch. 7, pg 26) In a few modest sentences, Mr. Bennet shows his talent for prompting strong emotional responses in others while suffering no guilt for doing so.

In describing the aftermaths of Mr. Bennet’s confusing and insulting expressions, Austen employs generous details to convey the extent to which he affects his peers and family members. Those characters depicted as foolish carry on their lives in ignorance after falling victim to Mr. Bennet’s subtle ridicule; Mrs. Bennet’s agreement that she had seen her days of beauty following her aforementioned exchange with her husband shows her oblivion to what had really passed between them. However, Austen also uses details to describe the distress Elizabeth felt after her father had openly and sarcastically mocked her potential husband: “Elizabeth had never been more at a loss to make her feelings appear what they were not. It was necessary to laugh, when she would rather have cried. Her father had most cruelly mortified her by what he said of Mr. Darcy’s indifference, and she could do nothing but wonder at such a want of penetration, or fear that perhaps instead of his seeing too little, she might have fancied too much.” (ch. 54, pg. 306) In delineating Elizabeth’s subsequent self-doubt and insecurities after her father’s unsympathetic amusement at the concept of her connection to Mr. Darcy, Austen gives her readers a thorough understanding of the magnitude of Mr. Bennet’s abusive statements and implications.

While Austen keeps Mr. Bennet as a bystander to the central events of the novel, the various literary devices she applies to distinguish his character do much to address the ways in which

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he molds (or fails to mold) the recipients of his simply structured, flippant sarcasm. Although his natural wit instigates reactions in others that seem clearly ludicrous to the reader, Mr. Bennet's inability to tame such speech ends up damaging the people for whom he should, as a father, have the most respect and sympathy. By portraying not only the ways in which Mr. Bennet expresses his abominably unserious comments but also the products of such comments, Austen paints a vivid picture of the influences of sardonic ideas in 18th century English society.

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