



Study of Individuality & Social Evolution in Literature

Janani Harish, Associate Fellow, World Academy of Art and Science;
Research Associate, The Mother's Service Society

Abstract:

Science unravels the universe and empowers man. Technology has made life easier and is continuing to make the inconceivable possible. Social studies chart the evolution of society along various lines, and steer it towards greater progress. Apart from development and enjoyment of the aesthetic sensibilities, can the arts directly contribute to our understanding of life and our capacity to promote the progress of society?

Literature is a creative art, but it doesn't merely entertain. It reflects life. It portrays the values and aspirations of people and society, even the political atmosphere, economic situation, and social attitudes of the times. One good idea from a book can inspire individuals to acts of greatness. Powerful words can and do spark off revolutions. Inspiring stories can initiate progressive social movements or spur worldwide debate and reform. Fiction is often the forerunner of technological innovation, challenging man to actualize what he dreams of. Literature reflects history, elevates the present, and creates the future. Great literature is true to life. Great writers are seers of life who reveal through words subtle truths regarding human character and the character of life.

Literature provides unique insight into the process of evolution that governs the advance of society, civilization and culture. It offers greater depth of penetration than either historical narrative or biography because it can portray the subjective psychological and social consciousness of the characters and the times with far greater depth and realism. Therefore it can be a powerful complement to objective analysis of external institutions and events.

This paper analyzes Jane Austen's famous novel *Pride & Prejudice* to derive insights into the relationship between the development of society, the development of human personality, and the role of the evolved individual in process of social advancement. Although often regarded as a comic romance, on examination we discover that it offers profound insights into the process of social development at the time of the French Revolution when dramatic changes in social values, attitudes and behaviors in England made possible peaceful evolutionary change through intermarriage between the classes in place of the violent revolution by mass exterminations that took place on the other side of the English Channel.

Ever since man began drawing on the walls of caves, he has been expressing himself in a myriad ways. His canvas has changed beyond recognition, from stone toparchment to today's liquid crystal display. The medium has evolved and diversified, from primitive line art to exquisite paintings, from crude hieroglyphs to flowing poetry and prose. Regardless of the form or the medium, man's need to express himself has produced treasures of great value, of which the world's literature is a precious part.

The aesthetic value of literature is long established and appreciated. This paper is an attempt to focus on another of its values – the profound and subtle knowledge of life, society and human nature which is embedded in great fiction. That knowledge is of immense relevance to humanity today as it gropes to consciously shape its own future. And most valuable of all is the insight literature offers into the most remarkable and powerful of all human creations, the individual, and the role of the individual in the evolution of society.

Literature is not just a reflection of an author's fertile imagination. It reflects life. It portrays the values and aspirations of people and society, even the political atmosphere, economic situation, and social attitudes of the times. It provides unique insight into the process of evolution that governs the advance of society, civilization and culture. It offers greater depth of penetration because it can portray the subjective psychological and social consciousness of the characters and the times with far greater depth and realism than history or biography. Therefore it can be a powerful complement to objective analysis of external institutions and events.

Victor Hugo's portrayal of the spirit of revolution among the common people in France during the 1830s in *Les Misérables* and Anthony Trollope's portrayal of 19th century English elections, corruption and parliamentary politics in his *Palliser Series* can be a powerful complement to objective analysis of external social institutions and historical events of the time. There are ideas we understand about slavery from Harriet Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its abolition from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* that are difficult for a research report to depict or explain. Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, called the Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Horse, that describes the travails of work horses, resulted in legislation protecting the animals and changed the mindset of people regarding traditional and fashionable practices that caused much suffering to animals. The lives of the factory workers at the time of the industrial revolution that changed the face of England and the world have been well researched and documented. But Charles Dickens' portrayal of *David Copperfield* adds realism, a personal perspective of the situation, insights which a mere historical or statistical description cannot provide. Apart from being a story of adventure and romance, Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* is a meticulous historical and social record that paints a vivid picture of the close ties between religion and politics in France, the concentration of political power accompanying the rise of absolute monarchy, the extreme detachment between the extravagance of the wealthy and the poverty of the common people that later turned to revolution, and the machinations in military governance and international relations in the 17th century. Dumas' description of the precarious war-like situation between countries precipitated simply by petty, personal reasons is a lesson for the 21st century as well. Coming to a book of recent times, American intellectual Gene Sharp's writings on democracy and nonviolent action have been the inspiration and guiding force for revolutions that have ushered in change in many countries, most recently in Tunisia and Egypt. If a man writing in Boston can influence people and initiate progressive changes in the far corners of Burma, Bosnia and Zimbabwe, the role of literature does deserve serious attention.

One good idea from a book can inspire individuals to acts of greatness. Powerful words can and do spark off revolutions. Inspiring stories can initiate progressive social movements or spur worldwide debate and reform. Fiction is often the forerunner of technological innovation. Literature reflects history, elevates the present, and creates the future.

This paper analyzes the famous novel *Pride & Prejudice* to derive insights into the relationship between the development of society, the development of human personality, and the role of the evolved individual in the process of social advancement. *Pride and Prejudice*, written by the eighteenth century English novelist Jane Austen, is a comic romance set in rural England at the time of the French Revolution. It is the story of the Bennet couple and their five young daughters, and their quest for love, marriage and fulfillment in life. As the story traces the falling and rising fortunes of the Bennet girls, we discern the emergence of individuality in society, and its impact on the larger movements in the land.

The Industrial revolution had begun at that time. Across the Channel, the French revolution was raging. America had recently won her independence. But in stark contrast to such epochal eventstaking place all around, Austen's novel is a meticulous description of the pleasant and fairly uneventful country life, with its balls, dinners, proposals and weddings, marriage being the undercurrent of the entire story.

Not just the story, the entire lives of women at that time revolved around marriage. It was every girl's aim. It was her family's wish. It was society's expectation of her. She was supposed to find fulfillment only through marriage. The 19th century British philosopher John Stuart Mill described the situation succinctly: "Women are so brought up, as not to be able to subsist in the mere physical sense, without a man to keep them... as not to be able to protect themselves... without some man... to protect them... as to have no vocation or useful office to fulfill in the world, remaining single; and what little they are taught deserving the name useful, is chiefly what... will not come into actual use, unless nor until they are married. A single woman therefore is felt both by herself and others as a kind of excrescence on the surface of society, having no use or function or office there... a married woman is presumed to be a useful member of society unless there is evidence to the contrary; a single woman must establish... an individual claim." So, no woman was single by choice.

The eldest of the Bennet girls is twenty three and feels all the pressure to find a husband. Her mother Mrs. Bennet is more anxious. An unmarried girl was left with little choice. She could take up employment as a governess, and resign herself to a life of hard work and relative deprivation. Or she could stay dependent on the charity of her wealthier relatives. In either case, she became an old maid, an object of pity and derision. So Mrs. Bennet spends her every waking moment planning, dreaming or talking about her daughters' marriages.

Into such a society and family comes Elizabeth, the second Bennet daughter. Elizabeth is unintelligent and strong twenty one year old girl. She is pleasant, good natured and naturally cheerful. Nothing worries her much, not even the thought of marriage. In fact, she is not thinking about it at all. Her elder sister has been waiting patiently for years for a marriage proposal. Her friend, not willing to wait, takes things into her hands and elicits an offer. Her younger sister turns her back on decorum and elopes with her lover. Elizabeth differs from everyone else. To her, marriage is an ideal union of two individuals who love and respect each other. It is not a ritual to be gone through to secure one's place in society. She will not marry because her sisters and friends do, everyone around expects her to, or because it is considered to be the woman's destiny. If she finds a man of strength and values, one she can love, and who reciprocates her feelings, she will marry him. If she does not meet such a man, she will cheerfully remain single, undeterred by any associated physical hardship or society's

unflattering comments. At a time when a woman derived her sense of self worth solely from being the wife of a man, Elizabeth does not need the prefix of Mrs. to her name for her psychological survival.

Her quiet village is stirred to life by the arrival of two wealthy young gentlemen. These gentlemen arouse interest among the villagers, their bachelor status combined with their substantial incomes largely contributing to the general interest. One of the young men, Fitzwilliam Darcy belongs to an old, wealthy family of considerable standing. He has had a privileged upbringing, and moves in the highest social circles in the land. In the midst of the villagers notches below him in the social scale, he looks upon them as savages. He is many times wealthier than they are; he owns an estate the likes of which they might never have set their eyes on. So he believes he is their superior. He is affronted when they talk to him. He vehemently rebuffs every attempt they make to socialize with him. When his friend Bingley falls in love with the eldest Bennet girl, he dissuades Bingley from the pursuit, finds fault with the girl and dismisses her younger sister, Elizabeth, as being just tolerable.

Almost all the neighborhood is in awe of Darcy's rank and wealth, even if his pride is repelling. The villagers are flattered by his presence. Elizabeth's friend justifies the pride, a young man with family and fortune has the right to think highly of himself, she argues. At a ball, Darcy makes disparaging comments about country balls to his host, who is pleased to be simply spoken to by Darcy. Darcy insults Elizabeth's cousin, who is gratified to be addressed by the gentleman. Ladies with titles and inheritances angle for him, swallowing their pride and often, even self respect. They anticipate his every move, flatter him, compete for his attention, and go to ridiculous lengths to secure him. But Elizabeth, the village girl with no elegance or sophistication, little dowry, inferior connections, and hence less than promising prospects in the marriage market is neither impressed by Darcy's position nor intimidated by his demeanor. When the most distinguished man in the assembly calls her tolerable to look at and refuses to dance with her, Elizabeth laughs. She is not crushed at being rejected by a man of such consequence. She is not disappointed to lose the opportunity. She is not offended by the insult, she is not angry. She just laughs. Great strength is required to simply hold an opinion opposed to all society's. But greater still is the strength that can laugh at an insult, especially one coming from a man everyone around worships. In neighboring France, proclamations were passed, prisons stormed, church abolished and a gruesome weapon made part of the popular culture by decimating the monarchy and aristocracy – all to question the superiority of the higher classes and to demand equality. Here, Elizabeth accomplishes the same by laughing. What an impassioned and determined populace struggles to accomplish seems to be possible even for a single clear, strong individual. Darcy, who is accustomed to being revered, desired and fawned on, suddenly finds himself shorn of that aura of superiority he had been swathed in.

Earlier, Darcy had summarily rejected the villagers, looked down on their manners and taste, and felt time spent in such society a punishment. But sometime during those weary balls and tedious dinners, Darcy notices a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty girl. Her manners lack sophistication, her spontaneity is disconcerting, her family is vulgar. She has relatives in trade, residing in localities Darcy will not set foot in, and she has no wealth or status. But Darcy is unable to take his eyes off the girl he recently wrote off as barely tolerable, Elizabeth Bennet. The thought of his own feelings is unpalatable to him, and he tries

to tear himself away from her. He argues with himself that he belongs to higher society, and cannot, should not stoop to Elizabeth's level. Her family connections will sully his name and pollute his hallowed estate. Deeply in conflict with himself, Darcy leaves Elizabeth and her village. But the spark of a feeling for a girl from a lower class is born in the heart of an aristocrat. This spark grows into a flame, now flickering, now steady, in the haughty landowner, and then in the lively village girl, and after many a confrontation and flare up, leaps outside and blazes all around, bringing down artificial social edifices without physical destruction and ushering in a new social order.

However, at present, alarmed at being drawn to a girl in an inferior situation, Darcy is in conflict with himself. He thinks he has subdued his shameful feelings by going away from her village, but the winds of change blowing in the land carry him to his aunt's estate, when Elizabeth is visiting her cousin in the same neighborhood.

Over tea and dinner, during walks in the park and at church, Darcy gets to admire those fine eyes again and again. She is no longer just tolerable. He sees there is more to her than just the fineness of her eyes. She may lack the elegance that often accompanies the high born, but her good nature more than makes up for her demeanor. Her values raise her higher than ladies of rank. Their fine silk and lace hardly embellish them like Elizabeth's cheerfulness does her. The strength of her character is more valuable to Darcy than wealth or property. The suavity of the city-bred, the sophistication of the wealthy, their knowledge of French and Latin and social etiquette pale in comparison with her keen intelligence and ready wit. Darcy makes up his mind. Her family is still odious to him, his friends will be shocked by the match, his family will disapprove. His fine name and estate are at risk of being sullied by contact with the lower ranks. But Darcy knows he wants to marry Elizabeth Bennet. Ladies whom he considered worthy of his attention, those of rank and wealth, now seem like empty shells or depthless shadows next to the girl he has chosen.

The French aristocrats swore by their superiority. They took their high birth as a license to assert themselves. They jealously guarded their rank, and prevented any contamination from the lower levels. Oblivious of the simmering discontent and resentment around, they maintained their haughty ways till everything was forcibly snatched from them. Lost in their self glory, they lost all their power, riches, chateaux and lives. Darcy, by choosing to recognize value in one socially below him, in learning to love a girl outside his rank, gives up his ego, and saves his head. Figuratively, this individual act saves the collective head of the aristocracy from the guillotine.

Darcy changes his mind and proposes to Elizabeth. Elizabeth's response makes him change his mind some more. Elizabeth has seen ladies indefatigably trying to secure Darcy. She has heard about the splendor of his estate. She sees the esteem in which he is held by friends and family, simply by virtue of his position. But she does not go, lemming-like, after Darcy. She sets her standards by a different scale. She is not a fortune hunter. Her ideas of fortune and misfortune differ. No sum of money can induce her to overlook his pride and rudeness. She cannot marry the man who, she incorrectly believes, has separated his friend from her sister, thus causing much grief to both sides. His detestable nature far outweighs the grandeur of his family and estate, in Elizabeth's eyes. Without pondering over his proposal for second, she turns him down, and never once looks back wistfully at the material and social advantages she has thrown away.

It was a time when a respectable lady could not make money. In some cases, she could not even inherit it from her father. With the notable exception of the queen of England, an English woman's property was turned over to her husband after marriage. She was not allowed to live alone, or be the head of a household. She could not have a career. "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor", Jane Austen said. She would know, being unmarried and dependent on her brothers herself. Therefore marriage was very often the ambition of women, and the objective for their education and training. Girls were taught to sing, dance and play musical instruments, to catch the eye of eligible bachelors. Painting and sewing could embellish their accomplishments and improve their chances in the marriage market. "Work" for a woman today may mean a variety of tasks, but in Austen's time, it was short for 'needlework'. Academic knowledge in girls was frowned on. John Gregory, an eighteenth century Scottish moralist, in his famous publication, "Father's Legacy to his Daughters" in 1761 asks ladies to refrain from exposing any learning they might have, this would hurt their chances of attracting a husband. Lord Byron himself once said that women should read "nothing but books of piety and cookery". Some knowledge of language and arithmetic that would enable them to be efficient housekeepers was all the academic knowledge that was deemed necessary for the girl, since it was the future of every fortunate girl to marry and keep house. Elizabeth does sing, dance and play the piano very well, but not to snare a husband. Nor does she employ any artifice or ruse for the purpose. Not all her work involves needle and thread, she spends considerable time reading and improving her mind. Far from hiding her knowledge, she enjoys an intelligent conversation, seeks opportunities to practice her keen wit and loves challenges. She does not worry about putting off a man with her sense or lively impertinence. Not that she is irreverent or rebellious for the sake of being so, but she will not follow the herd instinct and conform to mindless conventions. Marriage, unlike for most other girls, is not the all in all for her. And if it requires any compromise of her values, is not worth bothering with. And hence her prompt rejection of the proposal from the man she believes to be arrogant and unethical.

Half a century later, when Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre*, many considered it shocking that a woman, a governess, who is the protagonist in the book, should narrate the story in first person, in such a strong voice. The *Quarterly Review* wrote that *Jane Eyre* exemplified the „tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine.“ The divine code, man said, was that a woman, even a fictitious one, should be mild and meek. Seen alongside this, Elizabeth's tone of voice, and of thought was without doubt a very strong one. In a society that encourages young women to exercise gamesmanship instead of honesty, and trade off value against land and fortune to secure a marriage, Elizabeth valuing character higher than all social and material wealth is a statement of her individuality. This at a time when, according to Mary Poovey, an American cultural historian and literary critic, women were encouraged "to practice propriety instead of displaying their intelligence, to practice self-denial instead of cultivating self-assertion, and to think of themselves collectively, in terms of universals of the sex, instead of contemplating individual autonomy, talents, and capacities or rights“.

Darcy who had been under the impression that Elizabeth, like all other girls, was waiting to receive attention from him, is more than stunned. He did not know a girl would have any grounds for rejecting a man of rank and fortune. Hearing her charges about his pride, which

he feels is natural, and behavior that seems only befitting, he learns for the first time that a man is more than his high birth, there are values higher than income, rank that he takes for a resplendent armor is turning out to be an illusion. For a man who from childhood had been encouraged to be proud and selfish, to be abused and rejected is a hard blow. But Darcy does not react summarily in anger. He does not give vent to his shock, humiliation and disappointment through bitter words or thoughts. Out of sheer sincerity and psychological strength, he gives his feelings a proper direction, using them to transform himself into a good human being valued for what he is independent of his family name.

Instead of reiterating his stance, surrounding himself with those who bow to him and fortifying his ego, Darcy sheds his negative traits. As his pride, arrogance and resentment leave him, better things occupy the space, he becomes humble, courteous, a real gentleman. He and Elizabeth part after the unsuccessful proposal, but providence brings them together again. Elizabeth is on a holiday with her aunt and uncle when they unexpectedly run into Darcy.

Darcy is now all that Elizabeth could ask for. Elizabeth has long since been Darcy's ideal wife. But unexpected news reaches them, Elizabeth's youngest sister has eloped with George Wickham, the son of Darcy's former employee, a thorough rogue who has tried more than once to betray his patron.

Darcy is at a crossroads now. He has declared his love for a girl from a social stratum much below his, and let go all his class consciousness and the pride stemming from it. He looks beyond the superficial and discerns higher values such as goodness and strength, both in himself and Elizabeth. But now her family has stooped to new depths, its name has been dragged through the mud. By any standards, the family has fallen, and related itself to his arch enemy. Should Darcy safeguard his family honor so carefully nurtured for years, maybe even for centuries by others before him, and disassociate himself with the Bennet family? Elizabeth can go nowhere, meet no one without her sister's infamy being whispered about behind her back. Did he not know that his aunt would disapprove in very strong language? Would not his friends snigger, and ladies stick up their noses at Elizabeth? Could he survive if that halo of propriety and superiority that had been hisis gone?

Darcy takes the way forward. He does not pause to worry about public opinion or conformity with societal norms. He loves Elizabeth, and sets off in search of her sister. He traces the runaway couple in an area in London he would not normally set foot in. Finding that Wickham does not intend to marry Elizabeth's sister, Darcy coaxes him to change his mind, offering to settle his debts, get him a job, and set up his house for him. Wickham is in dire straits, and decides to accept the lucrative bargain. Darcy arranges the wedding and personally takes care of every detail. He attends the wedding and makes sure that Wickham keeps his commitments. He saves Elizabeth's sister, and consequently, her family from ruin.

That Darcy saves the sister and the Bennets is plain enough. But in fact, in saving them and assisting his employee's son, Darcy has also saved himself. Anobility that is rigid and conceited, that refuses to budge an inch is eventually brought down from its pedestal rudely. The French nobleman who looked disdainfully at his tenant farmer eventually had to make way for the peasant, and pay for his disdain with his head. The English historian G M Trevelyan said that if the French nobility had been capable of playing cricket with their peasants, their chateaux would never have been burnt. It is on the record that on that July day in 1789

when the Bastille was stormed, some 300 miles away in Hampshire, the Earl of Winchelsea was playing cricket, and bowled out before he could score a single run, by an untitled man, William Bullen. Whether it was playing cricket with a commoner that saved the Earl's chateaux or not, it was definitely embracing his employee at some level that saved Darcy's future. Wickham had been trying to get at Darcy, but Darcy instead stoops to Wickham's level for a while. He sets Wickham free of his debts, takes care of his basic needs, and lends him some respectability. He takes on the task he is not obliged to do, and ensures that Wickham is permanently indebted to him. By assisting Wickham along his career and providing occasional monetary support, Darcy obliges Wickham to not burn bridges behind him. A potential threat has been blunted, and a foe converted into a harmless, though perhaps unwilling ally.

Some nobleman might have been willing to overlook difference in status earlier. An aristocrat had probably liked a commoner before. An earl might have wanted to marry a girl without title. A lord might have wished to be friendly with his dependents. But the unwritten rules of society forbade them. But when one strong, bold individual dares to break those invisible bonds and takes a step, others naturally follow. This movement, this inter class marriage, this mingling of the ranks, initiated by Darcy, and emulated by others, homogenized the highly stratified and class-conscious society. And that eventually saved the whole country the bloodbath that neighboring France experienced. One individual, acting out of his highest values, can and does play a pivotal role in making history. In England, a peaceful social evolution replaced violent revolution.

Unconscious of these undercurrents, Darcy comes back to Elizabeth's village. Elizabeth feels gratitude, respect and love for him now. Jealous ladies who would like to marry Darcy try to turn him against Elizabeth, but he remains strong in his resolve. Darcy's noble aunt, alarmed at the threat from the lower ranks, attempts to bully Elizabeth into submission. She asks Elizabeth to stay within her sphere. But Elizabeth does not give in, she is strong in her conviction that one's sphere is not defined by the land one owns. She has seen proof of Darcy's love for her, she has come to love him deeply, and no one else's sense of right and wrong can influence her thought. And so when Darcy renews his suit, she accepts him readily, bringing to a happy, harmonious conclusion the tale of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Darcy, the heir of a distinguished family in England marries Elizabeth, the girl from the lower gentry. In the process, he accepts links with the trading class in Elizabeth's aunt and uncle. He mollifies the conservative aristocracy that can still not come to terms with the changing scenario, by healing the breach with his aunt later. He accommodates the needs of the lower ranks that are aspiring to rise, by making Wickham his brother in law, and replacing the simmering hostility with a truce. By looking beyond class, title, wealth and rank, and truly loving Elizabeth, Darcy starts off a trend that is mirrored in numerous incidents throughout the country, and eventually ushers in a peaceful social evolution in England.

This cheerful love story depicts England's subtle response to the French Revolution, and the peaceful progressive evolution that was effectuated in England. More specifically, it depicts the role of formed individuals in bringing about radical social change. For the one thing Darcy and Elizabeth share is a willingness to transcend the prevailing values and behaviors of their time, to act out of deeper personal convictions which place them in conflict with the societies in which they live. Like her creator Jane Austen, Elizabeth Bennet is the

prototype of the modern woman, who has the courage, strength and individuality to reject the material and social security of a respectable marriage. Fitzwilliam Darcy is the pioneering aristocrat who breaks every established centuries old norm, voluntarily gives up his privileges even when it disturbs his sensitivities. Both are in search for something higher and truer, even at the risk of failure or ostracism. Elizabeth achieved that higher goal by social elevation through marriage. Darcy's psychological fulfillment matches Elizabeth's material rise. Their creator, Jane Austen accomplished two hundred years later, by gaining literary immortality.

To make a fire, all it takes is a spark. Not a steady flame, not even a shower of sparks, but just one single spark. Its size is of no consequence. The size of that which is to be lit is beside the point. One lone spark can grow to immense proportions and encompass all that it encounters. Similarly, one inspired individual, inspired by the right ideas and values, can set in motion and generate consequences that change a nation or reach around the world. Such an individual is a living center of the illimitable.