

False First Impressions:
A Defense of Lydia Bennet
(ultra-condensed version)

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Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

- Readers tend to admire the witty protagonist Elizabeth Bennet
- Her fifteen-year-old sister Lydia usually suffers our scorn
- If we closely examine these two characters, we will see that they actually share many of the same personality traits. They have more in common than not.
- Their differences seem insubstantial and inadequate to explain this discrepancy of how the two are perceived.
- Why then is Lydia so disliked? This is the question that my research attempts to answer.

Stubborn, Snarky Sisters

Both disregard propriety at certain points when perhaps they ought not to:

- Elizabeth's refusal to tell Lady Catherine her age
 - “Lady Catherine seemed quite astonished at not receiving a direct answer; and Elizabeth suspected herself to be the first creature who had ever dared to trifle with so much dignified impertinence” (165).
- Lydia openly criticizing Miss King
 - “I will answer for it he never cared three straws about [Miss King]. Who *could* about such a nasty little freckled thing?” (215)

Cont'd

Neither of them are particularly concerned about what others think of them:

- Lydia constantly talking about men
 - “Have you seen any pleasant men? Have you had any flirting? I was in great hopes that one of you would have got a husband before you came back” (216).
- Elizabeth’s forward criticisms of Mr. Darcy to his face:
 - “Mr. Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise” (57)

Cont'd some more

- They each are most concerned with doing what pleases themselves above what may please others
- Elizabeth says as much in her final confrontation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh
 - “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (346)
- Lydia's eloping with Wickham

“Reputation is an idle and most false imposition”

Differences between Elizabeth and Lydia: One is smart and one is stupid?

- Elizabeth is inarguably witty
- There is little evidence for Lydia’s intelligence; the narrator tells us “She had high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence, which the attentions of the officers ... had increased into assurance” (46)
- However, intelligence and stupidity alone don’t determine whom we like—look at Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith in Austen’s Emma (1815). Harriet is the least bright of the two, but she is more appealing than Emma early in the novel.

Cont'd

Elizabeth is compassionate and Lydia is self-centered?

- Lydia *does* endanger her family's reputation by eloping with Wickham, but
- Elizabeth subjects them to a similar risk when she refuses Mr. Collins, because her family's estate is entailed to him. They stand to lose their property by this refusal.
- She also rejects Mr. Darcy, whose wealth is so substantial that it could render the Bennets' loss of their estate inconsequential. She is thinking primarily of her own interests when she refuses these proposals.

Cont'd again

Elizabeth is self-aware and Lydia is oblivious?

- Elizabeth is undoubtedly self-aware because she corrects her mistakes; she comes to understand both Wickham's and Darcy's true character
- Lydia, however, has no one to inform her of Wickham's duplicitous nature, unlike Elizabeth.
- If Elizabeth, intelligent as we know her to be, lacked the capacity to detect Wickham's true character on her own, why should we expect her younger and less experienced sister to be able to do so?

Cont'd a third time

- Wickham intentionally misleads Lydia, who genuinely loves him.
 - “Lydia was exceedingly fond of him. He was her dear Wickham on every occasion; no one was to be put in competition with him” (308)
 - She intended to marry him from the beginning, so she doesn't need to be self-correcting in this respect
 - “I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with who, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel” (281)*
- *Gretna Green is in Scotland where eloping couples would go to get married

Conclusion – part one!

- It seems we prefer Elizabeth primarily because the novel is told from her point of view. We become close to Elizabeth; we do not get to know Lydia well.
- Other characters in the novel, particularly Elizabeth and Darcy, disapprove of Lydia. Perhaps we internalize these attitudes toward her.
- The narrator has little positive to say of Lydia as well, and we may tend to passively accept this assessment without considering the similarities between the two sisters. Additionally, the narrator mostly reflects Elizabeth's perspective.

Real Conclusion

- If we can judge two similar characters in a novel in such diametrically opposite ways, how do we judge people in real life? Are our judgments reliable?
- We cannot simply get away with saying we like or dislike someone and leaving it at that; we must explore the foundation of that assessment.
- In this process, we can learn at least as much about ourselves as we do about the people we judge. When Elizabeth discovers how deceived she was in Wickham, she famously says, “Till this moment, I never knew myself” (205)
- We should not be hasty to judge others if we are not willing to look inside ourselves.

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