No Love for Lydia: The Fate of Desire in Pride and Prejudice
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As a narrative of courtship, *Pride and Prejudice* is an anatomy of a particular species of desire: the quest for a Mr. Darcy or an Elizabeth Bennet, desire as sexual attraction or romantic love. Yet the novel has often been seen as lacking in precisely these qualities. Charlotte Brontë was the first reader, but not the last, to argue that Austen’s novels minimize both: “The Passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood; even to the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition; too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress.”¹ Overstated, Brontë’s assertion has become, nonetheless, a commonplace of Austen criticism: both characters and author control their emotions, expressing only those feelings which are compatible with decorum, the rules of polite society.² *Pride and Prejudice* would seem to confirm this judgment since it evinces a complex restraint of desire which transcends even the dictates of decorum. Not only are the majority of the novel’s characters unwilling to acknowledge publically their romantic impulses, but Bingley and Darcy, like Jane, are reluctant to “feel more than [they] acknowledge.”³ Darcy only admits his love for Elizabeth because “it will not be repressed.” Elizabeth evinces an even more subtle and complete repression; uncertain until the novel’s end of her sentiments toward Darcy, she cannot admit her love even to herself. Austen, too, seems concerned to restrict the scope of desire. The novel contains little direct discussion of sexual passion, and Austen attempts to discount the potential irrationalities of romantic love.⁴ Comparing Elizabeth’s experiences with Wickham and Darcy, Austen argues against love at first sight and in favor of the slow growth of a rational affection based on gratitude and esteem. Whether considered from the standpoint of the characters or the author, *Pride and Prejudice* presents the reader with a suppression of desire.
Yet the matter is more complicated than this. Simply because desire is not expressed, it does not cease to exist; repressed, it does not disappear. Instead it is symbolically displaced, returning with repetitive insistence in a concealed form. If the novel’s characters are reluctant to admit their romantic desires, whether out of deference to decorum or because of personal repression, then the reader must look beyond direct statement to discover the workings of “passion” in what is, after all, a novel about love. A close examination of Elizabeth and Darcy’s courtship will reveal the way in which the repetitive force of repressed desire structures their relationship and will indicate the arenas reserved for desire in the society depicted in the novel. Finally, this analysis will clarify Austen’s own view of desire and explain why, beyond the dictates of decorum, she is concerned to constrain the force of “passion.”

In its broadest outlines, Elizabeth and Darcy’s courtship is structured as a linear progression toward marriage. The first half is concerned with Darcy’s attempts to suppress his growing love for Elizabeth and culminates in his first proposal of marriage. The second half begins with Elizabeth’s reading of Darcy’s letter, presents the evaporation of her dislike for him and her gradual discovery that she is in love, and ends with her acceptance of his second proposal. As the two offers of marriage suggest, however, this linear structure is itself composed of a circular movement of repeated actions. Because both characters repress their desire for each other, their mutual attraction is metonymically displaced into a series of reiterated actions which shape their courtship: proposals to dance, glances, and walks.

These motifs occur in roughly serial form and follow a similar pattern. Unable to acknowledge his interest in Elizabeth directly, at first because of his pride and later because of his uncertainty about her feelings, Darcy repeatedly expresses his attraction symbolically. Having concealed her affection for Darcy from herself, at first through her dislike and later through the “unsettled state” of her feelings, Elizabeth will respond with perplexity, rejecting him, but will finally accept in an unconscious moment. This behavior first emerges in the novel’s ballrooms. Having initially refused Bingley’s suggestion that he stand up with Elizabeth, Darcy marks their three subsequent encounters by asking her to dance: at Longbourn, at Netherfield during Jane’s illness, and at the Netherfield ball. Wounded by Darcy’s initial snub, Elizabeth consistently refuses until the last occasion. There, taken by surprise, she accepts him, “without knowing what she did” (p. 90). If Darcy’s insistent proposals suggest a growing interest in Eliza-
beth, her unconscious acceptance reveals an attraction to Darcy of which she herself is not aware.7

Elizabeth and Darcy’s dance at the Netherfield ball allows a return of the repressed, a symbolic acknowledgment and satisfaction of their mutual desire. Yet such satisfaction is only symbolic. Still repressed, and having exhausted the metaphoric possibilities of the dance, Elizabeth and Darcy’s affection must be displaced into another indirect expression—the glance. Darcy has been attracted by the beauty of Elizabeth’s eyes, which render her “an object of some interest” in his own. As a result, he continually gazes at Elizabeth from across the room or stations himself in such a position that he can stare at her as she plays the pianoforte.8 Elizabeth is perplexed by Darcy’s glances, assuming that she draws his notice because there is something “wrong or reprehensible” about her. As such, his stares are unwelcome to her, but, once again, this structure of repeated looks is ended by her unconscious assent to Darcy’s scrutiny. Touring Pemberley, Elizabeth pauses to examine a portrait of Darcy. He is depicted as smiling, a smile that Elizabeth remembers to have “sometimes seen when he looked at her.” Her response is curious. Inverting the relations of subject and object, Elizabeth “fixes” the portrait’s eyes upon herself and thinks of Darcy’s “regard” with gratitude. As the implicit pun on “regard” suggests, Elizabeth’s submission to Darcy’s gaze, mediated here through its representation, is a tacit acceptance of his affection. And this acceptance is itself an indirect acknowledgment of the love for him which she is just beginning to discover. This emergence of hidden feeling is underlined by Elizabeth’s abdication of the role of subject here, which suggests the suspension of the conscious self as her repressed desire emerges.9 The episode is capped by its logical conclusion. Walking out into the grounds of Pemberley, Elizabeth unexpectedly encounters Darcy, meeting him so abruptly that she “cannot avoid his sight,” and their eyes meet. As with the dance, the motif ends in a symbolic acknowledgment of mutual desire.

The two proceed to stroll through the park together, an apt choice, for walking also plays a major role in their courtship. During Elizabeth’s stay at Hunsford, she selects a favorite path through the park for solitary walks. She finds it curious that on several occasions she encounters Darcy there, and to prevent its ever happening again, took care to inform him at first that it was a favourite haunt of hers.—How it should occur a second time therefore was very odd!—Yet it did, and even a third. It seemed like wilful ill-nature, or a voluntary
pence, for on these occasions it was not merely a few formal enquiries and an awkward pause and then away, but he actually thought it necessary to turn back and walk with her. (p. 182)

Elizabeth’s view of Darcy’s motives is occluded here; the same behavior as adduced as evidence of either good or ill will, voluntary penance or ill nature. What such confused reflections omit is a simpler explanation: the walk as an expression of Darcy’s concealed desire. And a less prejudiced observer would see that Darcy “accidentally” encounters Elizabeth or proposes a walk at significant points in their relationship. It is while walking that Elizabeth meets Darcy bearing the letter of apology that will begin her reassessment of him, and they are on a walk when he proposes for the second time and is accepted. The last occasion, of course, ends the pattern of indirect expressions of Darcy’s desire and unconscious acceptance on Elizabeth’s part. Darcy’s love and Elizabeth’s reciprocation become direct and conscious. Yet Elizabeth, nonetheless, notes that during the walk “they had wandered about, till she was beyond her own knowledge” (p. 372). Perfectly plausible on a literal level (Elizabeth does not know where they have walked to), the phrase also summarizes the ontological process which Elizabeth has undergone during Darcy’s courtship, her discovery of the repressed feelings which were “beyond her own knowledge.”

The structure of Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship, then, reveals the path of repressed desire in the novel. Displaced into symbolic expression, desire insistently returns. With the lovers’ admission of their feelings to each other (and in Elizabeth’s case to herself), the pattern of repetitions ends. But why is their affection displaced into these particular modes of expression, the glances and walks which compose their relationship? The answer would seem to lie at the origin of their courtship, itself a matter of some dispute. Given their concealment of their feelings, it is hardly surprising that neither Darcy nor Elizabeth can fix the point at which he or she fell in love. Both state that they “hardly know where it began,“ and both would presumably disclaim their first encounter as the origin of their love. At the Meryton Assembly, Bingley suggests to Darcy that he dance with Elizabeth, who is sitting down behind them because of a “scarcity of gentlemen.” Darcy is not enthusiastic: “Turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, ‘She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me’” (pp. 11–12). Sending Bingley back to Jane, Darcy himself
walks off. Elizabeth, overhearing the snub, conceives “no very cordial feelings” toward Darcy.

It is an unpromising beginning, but Darcy soon “turns round,” revising his opinion of Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s feelings might be more cordial than she knows. Her intense dislike of Darcy, a hate at first sight (or first snub), seems sufficiently in excess of its apparent cause to suggest a fascination with Darcy. In a sense, then, the episode can be seen as the inception of their mutual interest, and, significantly, the principal features of their courtship are simply inversions of their first meeting. Having refused to ask her to dance, Darcy will continually seek Elizabeth as a partner. Having withdrawn his glance, he will stare at her. Having walked away from her, he will now walk with her. Derived from the circumstances of their initial encounter, the symbolic modes of Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship are traces of the origin of their desire.

Yet Elizabeth and Darcy’s courtship is not as unique as it first appears. If dancing, looks, and walks are incidents from a personal “primal scene,” they are also part of the apparatus of traditional courtship. Darcy and Elizabeth are merely an extreme case of the repression of desire in the novel; expression of their feelings is restrained not only by decorum but also by their pride and prejudice. Doubly constrained, their desire returns with unusually repetitive insistence, but at the most basic level their relationship does not differ substantially from Jane and Bingley’s. Shy and prevented by the conventions of courtship from directly expressing their feelings, Jane and Bingley also make use of repeated dances and walks to intimate their concealed affection. As Mrs. Bennet is quick to note, Bingley’s attraction to Jane is first apparent when he asks for a second dance at the Meryton ball.

On the larger level, then, the motifs of Elizabeth and Darcy’s romance indicate the places on the margins of society where repressed feelings emerge. Taken together, the dance, the look, and the walk define a sort of psychological Gretna Green, a liminal area between what Lévi-Strauss has called culture and nature, between society and what it has excluded.

The dance provides perhaps the clearest definition of the dimensions of this intermediate space, but it seems at first glance to be entirely associated with culture. Its status as one of the “accomplishments” required by polite society reveals its role in the social order. During a discussion of the social skills a woman must possess, Miss Bingley cites dancing in her recital of the necessary attainments. Miss Bingley’s list is a supplement to Bingley’s more limited survey of the “common extent” of social graces. The women
of his acquaintance, he notes, are said to very "accomplished": "They all paint tables, cover skreens and net purses" (p. 39). Bingley's inventory reflects his easygoing nature; he requires only a bare minimum of skills. But his list, by its very starkness, identifies a zero degree of "accomplishment" which reveals its underlying principle—concealment. Painting, covering, weaving nets: the essence of accomplishment would seem to be the disguise of all those naked tables and screens. Nor is it simply the objects of a lady's craft which are obscured; the lady herself is "adorned" by her skills. In this sense, Miss Bingley's more comprehensive list, which adds singing, drawing, and dancing, and Darcy's additional requirement of extensive reading do not radically alter the function of social attainments: the transformation of a woman into a lady, of nature into culture. Such metamorphoses are traditionally engineered by a governess, like Miss de Bourgh's Mrs. Jenkinson, whose function is symbolically condensed in her duties at social gatherings. When Elizabeth first meets her, Mrs. Jenkinson is "entirely engaged" in listening to Miss de Bourgh and in "placing a screen in the proper direction before her eyes" (p. 162).

Ostensibly used to ward off heat from the fire, the screen, like the absorption of Anne de Bourgh's conversation, serves to protect her from contact with the world, but Mrs. Jenkinson's actions also hide her charge from view, an apt synecdoche of the governess's duty of concealing nature under accomplishments. This function of the social graces suggests the role of the dance in the social order. Not always admissible in polite society, the emotions and desires roused in courtship are impulses from nature whose potential for social disruption is demonstrated by Lydia's elopement. As a means of courtship which is also a social skill, dancing serves to constrain such feelings within the social structure. Regulated as to its proper time and place, dancing delimits the sphere of courtship and submits it to a set of rules, both those of the dance itself and of the etiquette required in the situation. As such, the dance serves as an arm of culture, ordering and restricting the scope of the emotions generated during courtship.

Sir William Lucas would seem to judge correctly, then, when he remarks that dancing is "one of the first refinements of polished societies" (p. 25). Typically, however, Sir William says more than he knows, for there is another side to the dance. Sir William's use of "polished" is a dead metaphor, and its suggestion of veneered surfaces has lost its impact, but it nonetheless suggests an unintended truth about social refinements: they provide people with "finish" but do not actually transform them. Accomplishments may conceal or control nature, but they cannot eradicate it. Darcy's
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response to Sir William makes precisely this point. Dancing, he notes, "has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world.—Every savage can dance" (p. 25). Dancing might be a refinement of polite society, but it is also an attribute of man in the state of nature. In fact, it is associated with the very emotions which decorum seeks to control. Popular wisdom argues that "to be fond of dancing [is] a certain step towards falling in love" (p. 9), and if the narrator mocks the assertion while recording it, the proverb contains a certain truth. It is while dancing that Jane and Bingley become enamored of each other. The dance might control courtship, but it is also linked to the realm of nature and the arousal of strong emotions.

Dancing thus functions as a liminal experience in the novel. Controlled by etiquette, it nonetheless introduces an element of emotional vertigo, allowing in an ordered setting the eruption of feelings which are normally concealed. This is appropriate because the dance itself is thoroughly mediate, both a social accomplishment which obscures one's unrefined natural state and a natural activity which the civilized and the savage share. It is both culture and nature. Regulating and yet rousing emotion, the dance provides a culturally approved arena in which desire can be expressed and yet controlled.

Like dancing, the look, or visual communication in general, provides an outlet for what society has rendered marginal. It allows expression to information or feelings which have been verbally suppressed. Decorum in Pride and Prejudice is as often based on knowing what not to say as on properly expressing oneself. It is typical that Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, intrigued by the exact nature of Elizabeth's friendship with Darcy, should refrain from asking directly. They see "much to interest, but nothing to justify enquiry" (p. 264). As such, after their second visit to Pemberley, conversational decorum requires the omission of a direct discussion of Darcy:

The looks and behaviour of every body they had seen were discussed, except of the person who had most engaged their attention. They talked of his sister, his friends, his house, his fruit, of every thing but himself; yet Elizabeth was longing to know what Mrs. Gardiner thought of him, and Mrs. Gardiner would have been highly gratified by her niece's beginning the subject. (p. 272)

Romantic preferences are not the only subjects treated with such delicacy; generally, "civility" is divorced from "truth," one's true
feelings. Darcy is considered remiss when he encounters Elizabeth after she has learned of Lydia’s elopement, crying out “What is the matter?” with “more feeling than politeness” before he can recollect himself (p. 276). As Mrs. Gardiner notes on another occasion, “slyness seems the fashion” (p. 325).

As such, characters who refuse to violate the rules of discretion and linguistic restraint are forced to discover essential information indirectly. Linguistically repressed, states of feeling become visually evident, and the novel’s characters continually scan each other’s faces to discover hidden emotions. This most often occurs when a third party tries to detect whether someone is in love with a particular individual. Darcy’s initial suspicion of Bingley’s preference for Jane is derived from watching him at a ball, and if Jane’s restrained manner suggests that she does not reciprocate Bingley’s feelings, Darcy decides upon “close observation” (after he and Bingley have returned to Netherfield) that Jane is in fact in love. Equally curious, Elizabeth watches Darcy to determine whether he loves Anne de Bourgh and observes Bingley to see if Miss Darcy is a rival to Jane. In both instances her observations lead her to conclude, correctly, in the negative. It is not unusual, then, for the Gardiners to attempt to determine the exact relation of Elizabeth and Darcy by directing “their observation towards each with an earnest, though guarded enquiry” (p. 261) when Darcy visits them at Lambton. Unable to ascertain Elizabeth’s feelings, they quickly arrive at the conclusion that Darcy, at least, is in love.

The impressions gleaned from visual inquiry may sometimes be deceptive, as Wickham’s pleasing appearance proves, but visual information is usually correct. The Gardiners’ observation of Darcy leads them to the proper conclusion. Small wonder, then, that the novel’s characters evince an almost universal obsession with the visual, for, like the dance, the visual realm provides an area on the margins of culture which escapes the social coding of decorum and allows expression of concealed emotions and repressed desires. Unlike the dance, however, which is associated with both culture and nature, the look is not itself liminal. Visual communication resists cultural control because much of it is unintentional. Blushes, facial expressions, and glances are the instinctive signs of hidden feeling. In fact, the mode of expression is itself outside of culture, a natural semiotics of the body unaffected by cultural coding. As such, the visual provides an arena for nature in the midst of culture. It is a realm particularly suited to courtship. In its endless reversals of subject and object, of scrutinizer and object of scrutiny, the glance is homological with courtship itself, in
which one takes on the dual role of lover and love object. Prevented by Mrs. Jenkinson’s screen from seeing or being seen, Anne de Bourgh is effectively protected from romance. At the novel’s end, she is still unmarried.

Yet the glance is not the only means of circumventing conversational etiquette. The walk also provides an opportunity for personal revelations. Life in *Pride and Prejudice* is conducted almost entirely in the public sphere, as Mrs. Bennet knows; witness her complex machinations to leave Jane alone with Bingley so that he can propose. Given this lack of privacy, the walk often allows a rare moment of intimate conversation. The privacy afforded by the walk does not completely suspend the requirements of “civility” or linguistic decorum, but it relaxes the rules, freeing the characters to discuss issues which cannot be addressed in the novel’s crowded sitting rooms. Lady Catherine may be celebrated for her frankness, but she does not confront Elizabeth publically about the rumor that she is to marry Darcy. Instead Lady Catherine suggests a stroll about the grounds of Longbourn, and it is there that their famous discussion takes place. Allowing a certain verbal freedom, the walk is thus an ideal occasion for the revelation of hidden desire. Only when walking alone with Darcy can Elizabeth find the nerve to broach the delicate subject of her gratitude for his role in Lydia’s marriage, and the topic is itself a tacit admission of Elizabeth’s esteem, her discovery of her love for him. Darcy responds with equal honesty and more directness; he renews his proposal of marriage.

Partially suspending linguistic decorum and allowing the revelation of concealed feelings, the walk lies on the border of culture and nature. This symbolic status is reinscribed literally in the areas where such walks most often take place: the parks which adjoin the novel’s houses. The choice is apt, for the park is an intermediate space, an area of physical nature which has been shaped and delimited by culture. In the grounds at Pemberley, for example, one of the streams has been enlarged, but “without any artificial appearance”; the scene’s “natural beauty” has been enhanced, following contemporary taste, without calling undue attention to the cultural “improvement.” Within such aesthetic blends of the natural and manmade, the characters often choose to walk in the most liminal areas: the borders of the parks themselves. When Lady Catherine suggests a walk, she asks Elizabeth to show her the “prettyish kind of a little wilderness” on one side of the house. Literally on the verge of the lawn, where domesticated nature meets the wild, the area is itself thoroughly oxymoronic. A “wilderness,” it is provided, the reader later learns,
with benches. Whatever their disagreements, Elizabeth shares Lady Catherine’s taste for spots where culture and nature meet. Her favorite walk at Rosings is “along the open grove which edged that side of the park, where there was a nice sheltered path” (p. 169). The combination of the sheltered path and the open grove reinforces the walk’s symbolic position on the boundary between the “inside” of the culturally ordered park and the “outside” of undomesticated nature. Like such locations, walking in Pride and Prejudice is situated on the borderline between culture and nature, an activity where the rules of civility and revelations of hidden feeling coexist.

Such activities as the walk and the dance thus provide the characters with a symbolic vocabulary, a means of evading cultural restrictions on the expression of desire and of circumventing personal repression. Suppressed by both Elizabeth and Darcy, desire emerges in the symbolic patterns of their courtship. Constrained on the societal level by decorum, desire finds expression in the novel’s ballrooms and parks. In both the personal and social realms, repressed desire returns. Yet this return does not guarantee the satisfaction of desire. Restated in symbolic form, Darcy’s desire for Elizabeth can receive only symbolic fulfillment: a dance or a mutual glance. Unsatisfied with such metonymic rewards, his love is continuutally re-presented in yet another figurative request. In theory, this process of displacement is endless, and the novel implicitly raises the question of how repressed desire can be directly acknowledged and satisfied. The problem is complicated, Austen suggests, by the fact that the difficulty of achieving satisfaction is inherent in the nature of desire itself. Although Pride and Prejudice is almost exclusively concerned with the specific romantic desires of the characters, Austen nonetheless hints at a comprehensive theoretical definition of desire during Elizabeth’s meditations on her proposed trip with the Gardiners, a point where her desire briefly shifts to a nonromantic object.

Initially conceived as a tour of the Lake District, the plan comes for Elizabeth at a time when Bingley’s desertion of Jane and Wickham’s defection to Miss King have made her cynical about men. She views the trip as a substitute: “Adieu to disappointment and spleen. What are men to rocks and mountains? Oh! what hours of transport we shall spend” (p. 154). As the trip approaches, Elizabeth continues enthusiastic, if only because her expectations of pleasure at Wickham’s departure from the neighborhood are unfulfilled:

Upon the whole, therefore, she found, what has been some-
times found before, that an event to which she had looked forward with impatient desire, did not in taking place, bring all the satisfaction she had promised herself. It was consequently necessary to name some other period for the commencement of actual felicity; . . . and by again enjoying the pleasure of anticipation, console herself for the present and prepare for another disappointment. Her tour to the Lakes was now the object of her happiest thoughts. (p. 237)

Concerned with mundane wishes and expectations, the passage nonetheless clarifies the nature of all desire. Beyond its pursuit of any individual object, desire is implicitly defined here as a lack, the absence of satisfaction. As such, desire seeks pleasure; its goal is the commencement of "actual felicity." Yet, Austen suggests, pleasure continually eludes us, and desire pursues it through a series of deferrals and displacements. Except for the dubious pleasure of anticipation, gratification is always elsewhere: in the Lake District if not at home; in mountains if not in men; in the future if not in the present. Elizabeth's expectation of pleasure is focused here on the tour, as the pun on "transports" indicates, but the trip is itself an apt metaphor for desire, a journey whose destination, satisfaction, is always a bit further ahead. In fact, Elizabeth's excursion will not fulfill her hopes of delight but will simply produce another displacement, a return to a romantic object. Visiting Pemberley, Elizabeth will come to recognize her desire for Darcy.

In theory, then, whether repressed or unrepressed, desire is eternal; pleasure always absent. Yet the theory does not seem to obtain at the novel's end. Elizabeth and Jane (not to mention Darcy and Bingley) are finally provided with a utopian existence whose primary characteristic is the absence of anything to wish for. In addition to "every other source of happiness," the sisters are settled within thirty miles of each other, and their pleasure seems total. Having obtained the object of their romantic desires, they are free from any sort of lack, financial or otherwise. Their satisfaction complete, they are immune from desire itself.

How have the characters managed to overcome the repression of their desires and to avoid the endless glissement of desire itself? How is such happiness achieved? Ostensibly, their final bliss is a reflection of the moral structure of the novel. Elizabeth and Darcy's personal flaws cause the repression which blocks the fulfillment of their desires. Darcy conceals his love for Elizabeth because of his pride, which is repelled by her social standing and the indecorum of her family. Elizabeth represses her love for Darcy
because her pride has been wounded by his snub. Purged of their pride in the course of the narrative, humbled and matured, they are able to admit their desires directly; repression is ended by moral improvement. Once their love is openly stated during the second marriage proposal, their desires can be satisfied. The characters' final happiness is an indirect reward for their moral growth.

Valid for Elizabeth and Darcy, such an interpretation cannot explain the rest of the narrative. Jane and Bingley's romance does not bear out the assumption that the satisfaction of desire is a by-product of moral growth. Jane and Bingley are prevented from the consummation of their love by diffidence, which makes each doubt that his or her love is reciprocated, and they are separated by Bingley's malleability, which makes him excessively dependent on Darcy's opinion. If the lovers eventually directly state their desires and achieve complete pleasure, this is not because they have reformed these defects. They continue to be "so complying," as Mr. Bennet jokes, that "nothing will ever be resolved on." Their reunion is brought about, instead, by a reversal of Darcy's machinations, itself evidence that Bingley is still easily influenced. The repression of desire is not always ended by moral maturation. Moreover, the direct admission of desire does not inevitably lead to gratification, as Mr. Collins's unsuccessful proposal to Elizabeth suggests; once unpressed, desire need not necessarily be satisfied. And moral growth cannot explain why Elizabeth and Darcy, much less Jane and Bingley, are finally able to avoid desire's theoretical insatiability, its tendency to select another object once its current goal has been obtained.

The logic of desire in *Pride and Prejudice* is not derived, then, from the overt moral structure of the novel. Instead, it is based on a deeper and more paradoxical principle: desire is not satisfied in spite of repression but because of it. Gratification depends finally on an *askesis*, on suffering and a renunciation of satisfaction. Elizabeth's sole reservation about her trip with the Gardiners is that Jane will not accompany them, but she concludes that it is fortunate that she has something to wish for:

> Were the whole arrangement complete, my disappointment would be certain. But here, by carrying with me one ceaseless source of regret in my sister's absence, I may reasonably hope to have all my expectations of pleasure realized. A scheme of which every part promises delight, can never be successful; and general disappointment is only warded off by the defence of some little particular vexation.  
> (pp. 237-38)
Pleasure, the fulfillment of desire, can never be total. Expecting perfect happiness, Elizabeth would certainly not find satisfaction; a "little particular vexation," however, serves magically to ensure gratification. In this case the "source of regret" that guarantees happiness is concurrent—Jane's absence—but in the novel as a whole the principle operates temporally. Absent in the present, pleasure will come in the future; grasped in the present, pleasure will evaporate. Desire, Austen suggests, can only be directly acknowledged and satisfied after it has been repressed and any expectation of its fulfillment given up. Only when Jane has accepted Bingley's defection does he return and renew his addresses. Only when Elizabeth decides that "connubial felicity" with Darcy is impossible because of Lydia's misalliance does he propose again. If Jane and Bingley or Elizabeth and Darcy finally achieve complete satisfaction, a bliss which marks the end of all desire, this is because they have already suffered.

Desire in the novel is thus governed by an ascetic logic based on an economy of pleasure. Repressing desire and renouncing satisfaction, one experiences the necessary amount of unhappiness. Repression is then magically lifted, one's desire automatically satisfied, and the endless glissement of desire halted. This principle is confirmed by the negative example of Lydia. Rejecting personal repression or cultural restriction of her desires, Lydia continually seeks immediate, complete gratification. Her "disdain of all restraint," whether internally or externally imposed, leads to her elopement with Wickham, a synecdoche of her tendency to grasp at instant, total pleasure. Yet, having refused to lack anything, Lydia ends the novel unsatisfied. Her marriage having sunk into mutual indifference, her income insufficient, Lydia is condemned to eternal want, both romantic and financial. Unrenounced, desire can never be satisfied. It is because she fails to realize this principle that there can be, finally, no love for Lydia.

If Pride and Prejudice details the conflict between desire and repression, Austen finally sides with repression. The novel may chronicle the characters' pursuit of satisfaction and the final gratification of desire in marriage, but the approved means to this end are the restriction, even the denial, of desire. The work is thus based on a fear of desire, an insistence that it must be controlled or negated even as one follows its dictates. Once again, it is Lydia who clarifies the reasons for this fear, and she illustrates the dangers of unrestrained desire. Thinking of nothing but "love, flirtation, and affairs," Lydia is an apt symbol of desire itself. In fact, because her goal is pleasure, she demonstrates desire in its purest form: the quest for gratification which lies behind the pursuit of
any particular object. As such, Lydia reveals the basic danger of desire: it is antithetical to the social order. Lydia’s elopement is distressing because it suggests that desire can lead an individual to violate cultural rules, to leave willingly the bounds of society and respectability. And her action is additionally insidious because it implicitly questions the institution of marriage itself. Satisfied with her ménage in London, Lydia is singularly oblivious to the necessity of marrying Wickham. From the perspective of desire, social institutions are irrelevant.

The revolutionary implications of desire transcend the temptation to violate social rules or question cultural institutions, however. A more subtle threat is revealed by a less dramatic event than Lydia’s elopement. Filling Elizabeth in on what has transpired while Elizabeth has been at Hunsford, Lydia recounts some “fun” at Colonel Forster’s:

We dressed up Chamberlayne in woman’s clothes, on purpose to pass for a lady.—only think what fun! Not a soul knew of it, but Col. and Mrs. Forster, and Kitty and me, except my aunt, for we were forced to borrow one of her gowns; and you cannot imagine how well he looked! When Denny, and Wickham, and Pratt, and two or three more of the men came in, they did not know him in the least. Lord! How I laughed! and so did Mrs. Forster. I thought I should have died. And that made the men suspect something, and then they soon found out what was the matter. (p. 221)

As one would expect, Elizabeth listens “as little as she could” to Lydia’s narrative, but the episode deserves more attention for it suggests the anarchic tendencies of desire.

Transmuting male into female, Lydia’s joke manipulates one of the basic distinctions on which the social order is based. This play with gender difference opens up a realm of dangerous possibility. Presented in a courtship setting, Chamberlayne is said to look “well,” and, for the briefest of moments, there is the chance that one of the officers might be attracted to this “lady.” Lydia’s laughter soon gives the joke away, but the incident nonetheless hints at a truth otherwise unacknowledged in the novel: romantic or sexual desire can ignore society’s heterosexual imperative, leading to a homosexual eros which in effect obliterates the cultural distinction of male and female. Polymorphous, desire can in fact disregard any of the fundamental taxonomic distinctions used to order society; love is equally capable of ignoring class distinctions.
Unwittingly, Lydia's trick suggests that desire has the potential to violate the logical foundations of her society.

The threat posed by desire goes beyond the implications of Lydia's evening at Colonel Forster's. The very nature of desire is alien to taxonomy itself, the ideological principle by which society exists. Society is created by defining sets of differences, both the crucial distinction between what is acceptable in a society and what is not, which defines the boundaries of a culture, and the elaboration of internal differences, such as gender and social class, which are hierarchically ordered to provide a social organization. Society is intrinsically taxonomic. Desire, however, is not. It evades any sort of difference or distinction. Immeasurable, it is theoretically indivisible, incapable of being segmented and ordered. And, because it is theoretically eternal, it resists boundaries. Continually shifting its attention to a new object once its goal has been obtained, desire is literally boundless, without end. Moreover, the infinite substitutability of the objects of desire suggests a principle of universal equivalence. If Elizabeth can pursue men or mountains in her quest for satisfaction, then all objects are equal in desire's eyes; a hierarchical ordering is impossible. Antitaxonomic, the very essence of desire is antithetical to society.

Desire thus poses a danger to the social order on a number of levels: it raises the possibility that individuals, like Lydia, will break social rules in pursuit of their objects; it can violate the taxonomic divisions of society itself, as Lydia's joke intimates; and, on the theoretical level, it defies the concept of difference which allows the construction of societies. Whether on the level of the characters, of the society depicted in the novel, or of the author, desire in Pride and Prejudice threatens a nihilistic dissolution of the social order that fully justifies Austen's fear of it.¹⁸ Yet, as a story of courtship and marriage, the novel does not completely disallow desire, and the banal married life of Charlotte Lucas reveals the fate of those who ignore it. Desire, the novel suggests, is a necessary part of human experience, and Austen deals with its dangers not by rejecting it absolutely but by presenting a series of strategies for its control. The point is not simply that Lydia is forced into respectable marriage, the antisocial tendencies of her desire curbed by familial pressure. By repressing their desires, individuals such as Elizabeth and Darcy stay within social rules, and society provides a number of activities on the cultural margin where desire can be expressed without disrupting the social order. And just as the novel's characters and their society allow desire while controlling it, Austen depicts desire...
in the novel while purging it of its antitaxonomic implications. Not merely a mimetic look at the course of love in a decorous society, *Pride and Prejudice* can be seen as an unconscious theoretical project, a redefinition of the workings and nature of desire that serves to make desire safe for society.

If the novel is grounded on the assumption that desire can be satisfied only if it is repressed, this is not simply because repression controls desire but also because, on the abstract level, it transforms desire. Repressed, desire focuses on a specific object, and the endless progression of desire from object to object is converted into a movement through symbolic expressions of desire for the same object. This not only limits the range of desire but renders it hierarchical; some objects become more important than others. Elizabeth is Darcy’s actual goal, and his demand for dances and walks is a pursuit of secondary symbolic pleasures. Moreover, because repression leads to repetition, both of a series of symbolic expressions of desire (dances, looks, walks) and of an individual expression (three proposals to dance), desire becomes measurable. Segmented into repeated actions, it can be submitted to the logic of mathematics. Mrs. Bennet is not the only character to assess romantic interest by counting proposals to dance. Repressed and displaced into recurrent actions, desire can be systematically gauged. Finally, because it focuses on a particular object, repressed desire is provided with a boundary. The attainment of the object, marriage to a Darcy or an Elizabeth, ends desire and inaugurates the reign of complete satisfaction.

The repression of desire thus exorcises desire’s antitaxonomic implications. Rendered quantifiable, provided with its own internal hierarchies, bounded, desire becomes compatible with the social order.19 Austen perhaps realized that desire, even repressed desire, is in fact endless and that it resists limitation or control. Elizabeth’s thoughts on men and mountains suggest Austen’s recognition of desire’s true nature. But *Pride and Prejudice* is based finally on a rejection of this knowledge. The novel is founded on an argument that desire can be successfully repressed in order to protect society and to preserve our ideals of order themselves. If Austen rejects a “speaking acquaintance” with desire, this is not because it is unknown to her but because she understands it all too well.

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Notes


4. Austen tends to intimate and yet conceal the presence of sexual desire by playing on the contemporary ambiguity of the word “passion,” which could mean strong emotion, ardent love, or sexual attraction. Suggested in amorous situations, sexuality is finally subsumed under the concept of romantic love. If Lydia’s passions are said to be stronger than her virtue, her motives seem obviously sexual to a modern audience, but Elizabeth and Jane construe her elopement as evidence that she is “lost to everything but love” of Wickham. Modern critics who argue that Austen openly portrays sexuality often invert this process, subsuming the romantic under the sexual. See Jan S. Fergus, “Sex and Social Life in Jane Austen’s Novels,” in Jane Austen in a Social Context, ed. David Monaghan (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 66–85; Juliet McMaster, Jane Austen on Love, ELS Monograph Series, No. 13 (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 1978), pp. 67–75; and LeRoy Smith, Jane Austen and the Drama of Woman (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), pp. 96–100. Austen’s indirect presentation of sexuality through literary allusions, puns, and sexual symbols has been discussed by Alice Chandler, “‘A Pair of Fine Eyes’: Jane Austen’s Treatment of Sex,” Studies in the Novel, 7 (1975): 88–103.

5. In addition to the growth of Elizabeth and Darcy’s affection, the novel is structured by another linear development: the moral education of the hero and heroine and the eradication of their pride and prejudice. Universally discussed, this theme has been summarized by Robert B. Heilman, “E pluribus unum: Parts and Whole in Pride and Prejudice,” in Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 123–43.


7. One of the major tropes of Austen’s fiction, the dance has often been seen as a metaphor for courtship and marriage, and proposals to dance have been read as displaced marriage proposals. See Timothy Dow Adams, “To Know the Dancer from the Dance: Dance as a Metaphor of Marriage in Four Novels of Jane Austen,” Studies in the Novel, 14 (1982): 55–65; and Langdon Elsbree, “Jane Austen and the Dance of Fidelity and Complaisance,” Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 15 (1960): 113–36. See also Smith, p. 88, who argues that the dance represents sexual encounters, and Darrell Mansell, The Novels of Jane Austen: An Interpretation (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 8–9, who notes that dancing allows the celebration of sexual passion in an arena safely controlled by convention. Chandler,
Studies pp. 88–103, points out Darcy’s third invitation to dance as a suggestion of his desire for Elizabeth but does not see it as part of a larger pattern.


9. On another level, Elizabeth’s reduction to the status of an object in Darcy’s eyes reveals how closely their apparently anomalous courtship follows traditional gender roles. In courtship, apparently, the male is always the subject. Note that Nina Auerbach interprets the portrait scene as Elizabeth’s response to Darcy as an embodiment of institutionalized male power (Communities of Women [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978], p. 52). Elizabeth’s ability to open up emotionally before the portrait suggests, however, that it is less threatening to her at this point than Darcy himself.

10. Chandler (pp. 88–103) notes that walking becomes the major metaphor for sexual relationships in the second half of the novel.

11. Nardin (p. 8) argues that Elizabeth and Darcy’s early sparring is a sign of mutual attraction.

12. The principle applies both to minuets and country dances. For a discussion of the rules of dancing and of ballroom etiquette, see Adams, pp. 55–65.

13. Rachel Brownstein (Becoming a Heroine [New York: Viking, 1982], pp. 124–33) and Babb (pp. 113–44) have noted that Elizabeth and Darcy’s feelings are also indirectly revealed in their dialogues. Such encoded information is less clear than its visual counterpart.

14. Rejecting the obvious artificiality of the formal gardens of the earlier part of the century, the anonymous author of Observations on Modern Gardening, 3d ed. (London: T. Payne, 1771) argues for an unobtrusive “cultivation” of nature. In parks and gardens the new ideal is a mixture of natural wildness and cultural improvement: “though a large portion of a park may be rude; and the most romantic scenes are not incompatible with its character; yet it should seem rather to be reclaimed from a forest, than a neglected corner of it; the wildness must not be universal; it is but a circumstance; and it is a happy circumstance only when it is kept within due bounds; some appearance of improvement is essential” (p. 183).

15. Austen’s model here, of course, is not Freud or Lacan but Samuel Johnson. The impossibility of perfect happiness and the eternal renewal of desire is the theme, for example, of Rasselas. Although every desire is immediately granted in the happy valley, Rasselas finds that he is not “satisfied with fulness” (chap. 2), and the quest for satisfaction is represented here too by the metaphor of the journey, which provides the work’s picaresque structure.

16. If Elizabeth’s conscious desire shifts from Wickham to the tour to Darcy, unconsciously she has desired Darcy all along. The possibility of subliminal goals complicates, of course, the struggle to satisfy desire. For a discussion of Elizabeth’s interest in Wickham as an attempt to conceal her attraction to Darcy from herself, see Andrew Wright, Jane Austen’s Novels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 116–23.

17. A similar association of transvestism with homosexuality and the collapse of gender difference was a feature of eighteenth-century antimasquerade literature. See Terry Castle, “Eros and Liberty at the English Masquerade, 1710–1790,” Eighteenth-Century Studies, 17 (1983–84): 156–76. Chapman, in his “Index of Characters,” lists Chamberlayne as a member of the militia (p. 413). The sole reference to him in the novel is the passage cited, however, and his identity is
not very clear. It is conceivable that he is a servant, which would suggest the additional possibility of a violation of class distinctions.

18. Austen’s attitude toward her society has been the subject of extensive debate. D. W. Harding, “Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen,” Scrutiny, 8 (1940): 346–62; Mudrick, passim; and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 146–83, have argued that Austen is covertly opposed to contemporary social values. I agree with Marilyn Butler Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 197–218 and Alistair Duckworth The Improvement of the Estate (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 5–10) that Austen is essentially a conservative novelist, concerned with the maintenance of orthodox values and the existing social structure. Note that the apparent class mobility represented by Elizabeth’s marriage to Darcy is relatively minor. She is a gentleman’s daughter, as she insists to Lady Catherine, and not another Pamela.

19. It also becomes compatible with the narrative order. For a discussion of how unsublimated desire undermines the notion of coherent, intelligible personality which is a basic premise of nineteenth-century realistic fiction, see Leo Bersani, A Future for Astyanax (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 51–88.