

# Analyzing the Role of Anti-heroines in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

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**Abstract.** The paper aims to conceptualize the notion of anti-heroine and heroine, especially in relation to the novels of Jane Austen. The study of anti-heroines is a fascinating area that can throw a greater light and help us interpret the meaning and structure of the Jane Austen's novels in a better way. In this paper, we have tried to take the novel of Pride and Prejudice and attempt to study what Austen is able to achieve through her anti-heroines. The paper presents Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet as the two anti-heroines playing a foil to the heroine Elizabeth Bennet.

**Keywords:** Heroine, Anti-heroine, Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Lydia Bennet

## 1 Introduction

Of all the great novelists of the Romantic period, Jane Austen has been continuously reprinted, admired, argued about, and read, from the moment her works first appeared until the present day. One of the reasons that her novels remain popular is because her novels give an insider's view into the England of her time. Kathryn Sutherland says "Jane Austen fills her novels with ordinary people, places and events, in stark contrast to other novels of the time. She was doing something new with the novel, that she was using it to describe probable reality and the kinds of people one felt one already knew." Tesi de Laurea also says that "Jane Austen's novels are intended to mirror a section of the real world in her age and country". Austen was very well aware of the social dynamics of her times, and especially as a woman, the predicaments and trials that the women of her times had to cope with. And, her novels are a faithful recreation of that social reality.

So, while Jane Austen was telling us the narratives of her heroines, she also creates a number of other memorable characters, who seem to walk into the pages of her novel straight from the neighborhood that her readers lived in, to present unmistakable slice of reality from the England of her times. These characters are as interesting, if not more, as her female protagonists

are. Since her novels abound with so many characters, we shall limit the study of this paper to the study of a peculiar category of her characters, who we call as anti-heroine.

Before we proceed further, let us delineate the concept of an anti-heroine and distinguish it from the concept of a heroine. Heroine being a female - hero, let us see what do critics say of who a hero is. Edith Kern defines a hero simply as the book's leading character. Like Kern, W. H. Auden also suggests similar meaning of a hero as somebody who is the central figure of the novel, for Auden demands only two requirements of the hero: he must be interesting, and for clearness, his character, motives, and actions must be revealed to the reader. In his sense, a heroine is the books leading character whom we get to know intimately as the novel revolves around these characters. Although this a good starting point to identify heroes and heroines in a novel, it is quite misleading and makes little sense in knowing an anti-hero or an anti-heroine.

If we look deep into the conceptualization of a hero, we see, Sean O'Faolain conception of the word and the idea of "hero" as a social creation; the hero represents a socially approved norm. In order to be a hero, one must first meet the approval of the society. In this sense, if a hero is somebody who gets societal approval, then an anti-hero is somebody who challenges the societal norms and gets its disapproval. The concept of an anti-hero emerged slowly on the scene, with more and more writers creating anti-heroes at the centre of their narrative: Robinson Crusoe Vanity Fair, and Gulliver Travels are popular works where anti-hero emerged on the scene. Hoffman pictures an anti-hero as a complex character; always alone, yet quite not sure as to why. Roger D. harms says, An anti-hero thinks he knows where he is, and he pretends to know where he is going, because this is the socially expected attitude. But in reality he is constantly finding it hard to conform and is rebelling against the set norms. Roger D. Harms warns us that although an anti-hero is just the opposite of the conventional hero, he is not a villain. To call him a villain, just because he is anti-social, he says, would be to assume that society is an omniscient law maker, perfect and infallible. Making this point very clear, Sean O'Faolain makes this point clear when he says that society is ready to accept anyone as hero who acts bravely in its cause, but not one who acts bravely in some contrary cause; therefore the word "hero" has little moral content, for a public hero may be a private" villain".

One distinguishing character of Jane Austen's novels is that, these heroines and anti-heroines do not operate exclusively of one another. They both co-exist in the same fictional world and both strengthen one another to make each other's character clear and evident.

In each of her novels, on this basis, of the given definitions of a hero/heroine it is easy to identify the heroine: Ms. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*; Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*; Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*; Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*; Catharine Moorland in *Northanger Abbey*, and Emma Woodhouse of *Emma*. But, how do we arrive at the notion of an anti-heroine, especially when with so many women characters in each of these novel. For this N.Marsh on his "Jane Austen. The Novels" says: the anti-heroine has the main function of serving as a foil to the heroine, highlighting some characteristics of hers and providing obstacles or alternatives to her *Bildung*, so as to help her, by means of substitution, obstruction or alternative example, to get to know herself and the world and to take a position towards her inner self, the people around her and the society in which she lives. So according to this definition, among the many women characters whom we come across, in her novels, we have to identify specifically those women characters who play a foil to the heroine.

For instance, in a novel like *Persuasion* Anne Elliot, the heroine of the novel, is surrounded by a number of minor female characters, example, vain and presumptuous Elizabeth – Anne's elder sister, self-centred and capricious Mary – Anne's second sister; lively and impetuous Henrietta and Louisa, the Musgrove sisters. In *Persuasion*, these other young women are in greater number and of less individual importance so the readers wonder who among them will be the anti-heroine. And initially readers also feel that all of them are playing a foil in one or the other way. But as the novel reaches its climax, one realizes that, for sure, Louisa Musgrove, the only minor female character as anti-heroine. The reason is that Louisa is set in opposition to Anne and is treated as a substitute to her by Captain Wentworth. She creates a real competition for Anne by getting all the attention from Captain Wentworth, and Anne assumes that Captain Wentworth to be almost married to Louisa. But finally Louisa marriage to someone other than Wentworth, makes her a foil to Anne's steadfast love vis-à-vis her own dilly dallying in love.

To cut the point to chase, we can say that an anti-heroine is someone who is similar to the heroine in many aspects, i.e. she has similar concerns and interests and is faced with similar predicaments as the heroine. For instance, when we look at Elizabeth Bennet's sisters, it is Lydia

who emerges as the anti-heroine rather than Mary, because Mary is lost in her own world of philosophy, and her concerns are quite different from that of her sisters. Mary at parties unlike her sisters is keen about showcasing her talents and knowledge and her theoretical wisdom and is not socially engaged like her sisters. But albeit their futures and outcomes are exactly opposite, Lydia is faced with a very similar situation like that of the heroine. Hence the two sisters are connected with each other than just their sisterly bonds. As Lydia plays a perfect anti-heroine to that of Elizabeth.

So to summarize, the anti-heroines are those women characters in the novel who are similar to heroine in many aspects – like the sex, age, and interests, however they choose different paths and hence have different destinies.

And, one more aspect about heroine's and anti-heroines is the approval and disapproval that they receive respectively from the society. Similarly, in Austen's fictional world heroines and anti-heroines adopt different lines of conduct and make certain choices; characteristically, the choices of the heroines result in their happiness and also earns Jane Austen approval, while the choices of the anti-heroines incur Austen's disapproval and ends in having different destinies. These heroines and anti-heroines although show us the different range of choices available to women at her times, there are certain choices that Jane Austen approves and certain others she disapproves. Having heroines and anti-heroine playing foil to one another in the novel is a way for Austen to express her idea of what according to her moral standards and understanding is appropriate with regard to "love, passion, marriage, impression, perception, insight, judgment, affirmation of the self and conduct within society".

## **2. Analyzing the role of anti-heroine in *Pride and Prejudice***

All Jane Austen's novels belong to the genre of *Bildungsroman*; According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Bildungsroman*, refers to a class of novels that deals with the maturation process, with how and why the protagonist develops as he does, both morally and psychologically. The German word *Bildungsroman* means "novel of education" or "novel of formation." In this novel we see the maturation of both the hero and the heroine.

One defining feature of both the hero and heroine is their pride. The pride of Mr. Darcy that makes his refuse to dance with Elizabeth and to associate himself with the Bennet's and his interference into the relationship between his friend and Jane. The source of Mr. Darcy's pride is

due to his class consciousness, his confidence in his character, and his prejudice against the commoners of England. Just as Mr. Darcy is proud, so is Elizabeth. The fact that she was slighted by Mr. Darcy hurts her pride and hence early in the novel she remarks “I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine”. From this point of being hurt by Darcy, she acts on her pride by refusing to dance with Mr. Darcy later when he is asked to dance and repeatedly rebukes Darcy for his pride.

On this point of pride, there is an important point of difference between her and the other anti-heroines. Elizabeth’s pride gives her enough of self-esteem, on the basis of this, she can refuse the proposal of Collins, she can speak up to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and boldly speak her mind before Darcy. She even refused to accept the first proposal of Mr. Darcy, because of the contemptuous way in which he made his proposal. Despite all his riches, because of the contempt he expressed for her family background, she dares to refuse the proposal of a man of such a consequence as Mr. Darcy. One quality that stands out in her is her ability to stand by her own self-respect and regard. This quality of hers is strongly contrasted with that of Charlotte, who lacks any self-respect for herself and hence, she encourages Mr. Collins, who had just then had a failed proposal to Elizabeth, to propose to her again and gets engaged to him. And similarly, in Lydia, although she is proud like Elizabeth, she is vain and reckless. She is too self-centred and loves all attention to herself. And her vanity in having the best man to herself leads to her destruction.

Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Lydia also differ in the way each one of them treat the marriage. For Elizabeth, marriage is based on love and has nothing to do with material well-being, while for Charlotte it is a contract for a better establishment, and for Lydia marriage is just another game of flirtation. Charlotte when is said to have got engaged to Elizabeth has a rude shock, she exclaims:

“Charlotte married to Mr. Collins, impossible!”

But Charlotte is completely governed by only practical consideration and does not allow any emotional needs enter her marital decision. While Lydia represents another extreme of, she is most impulsive and has no practical considerations at all and gives in to her impulsive needs of sexual attraction and is hence doomed. But Elizabeth is a beautiful blend of both pragmatism and romanticism and hence she comes across as a most rounded person, and that is what is approved

of by the Austen and also by the society. Jane Austen is also concerned of the relationship of an individual with the society. In the case of Elizabeth, there is a perfect balance between the individual and the society. Whereas, in the case of Charlotte, she has sacrificed her personality for the sake of the social norms and social respect. Her prime motive of getting married to Mr. Collins is because that would give her a social status of a married woman and would free her of being called *an old maid*. And similarly, in case of Lydia, it is complete reckless disregard to what the society expects of a girl of her age. In all her conduct, she was too self-consumed to conduct herself in a socially responsible way. She often became the cause of shame for all her sisters and family and at the end with the elopement, she was a disgrace for all the Bennets. But, again Elizabeth, earns the admiration of the readers by her balanced personality where she is neither too overwhelmed by the society nor too disdainful of the society.

Last but not the least, another contrast between the heroines and the anti-heroines is that the heroine learns as she experiences life in the fictional world of the novel. Elizabeth learns to see through her prejudice and learns to judge people not by the first impressions but by knowing about them closely. She learns to be less proud and more judicious person at the end of the novel, but Charlotte and Lydia remain without much learning from their experience. Though not much has been said of Charlotte, Austen certainly tells us of Lydia who after her marriage continues to be carnal in her approach of marriage, and fails to grow up and become a matured woman. She was a wild girl at the beginning and she remains so at the end, and does not grow to be an adult.

So, although Austen narrates the stories of her heroines, her anti-heroines play a very important role in the structure and the plot of the novel.

### **3 Concluding Remarks**

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the heroine of the novel shows us what Austen feels is the best option or the best conduct in matters of heart, passion, and marriage, while the anti-heroines show us alternative paths that were perhaps the choices made some women of her times, but which were not favoured by the author. By looking at both the heroines and the anti-heroines we can understand the social dynamics of women at Jane Austen's times.

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