

Life lessons and the Selected Minor Characters in Jane Austen's

Pride and Prejudice

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Abstract

Literary texts have multiple characters of different classes who have various educational qualifications and characteristics. Whatever their types are, they are full of significant life lessons for the reader, although they are not present on every page or chapter. They become integral to fiction for their remarkable positive or negative character traits. Readers hate the negative ones for their villainy. The good-natured ones win our hearts for their sweet gestures and benevolent nature. Jane Austen's masterwork *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is her second novel, full of interesting and distasteful characters. It is globally known not only for its unique story but also for its diverse characters. In it, several major characters have touched the hearts of readers of all ages and periods due to their interesting character traits. Equally, the text is well-known for its remarkable minor characters, who advanced the plot. They are not available page after page, but they teach significant life lessons. These selected characters belong to different classes and age groups with interesting characteristics. Among them, some are men and women. This paper aims to explore their character traits and contributions to readers by giving life lessons through behavior, activities, conversations, and thought processes.

Keywords: Selected Characters, Men, Women, Characteristics, Life Lessons

Jane Austen's classic *Pride and Prejudice*, since its publication in 1813, appealed to readers in the literary world. The gripping story has interesting characters of varied ages, classes, and educational backgrounds. This novel is entertaining and has significant life lessons that readers can learn from the major and minor characters. The story revolves around the Bennet family, consists of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their five daughters. The family lives in the suburban area of Longbourn. They are intimate with the neighbor Lucas family, where Mr. William Lucas is the family head. He lives with his wife and several children. Three miles away from Longbourn is Netherfield Park, which is rented by the wealthy Mr. Bingley, accompanied by his sisters Caroline, Mrs. Hurst, and her husband, Mr. Hurst. Bingley's best friend, wealthy aristocratic Mr. Darcy, has also joined them from London to live with a friend in the rented house.

Apart from the Bennet and the Bingley family members, there are some significant minor characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. They shine among the major characters and in the minds of readers. We learn many life lessons from their negative and positive character portrayals. They reveal their stupidity, intelligence, sensibility, humorous, and mean sides. Their character traits are learning experiences for the reader to enrich themselves through these fictional characters. Among them, the Gardiner couple can teach us to be humane, mature, sensible, responsible, empathetic, and well-mannered. Charlotte can be a model for us who teaches us to be practical when the situation is unfavorable to us, especially the girls who have to marry for survival in a patriarchal society. She advises her friend Elizabeth to overlook the bad sides of her partner to be a happy wife. We learn which negative traits make people dislikable from the insensible, tactless, flatterer Mr. Collins. These fictional lifelike characters surround us, amuse us, and teach us in different ways through their activities,

dialogues, and behavior. The paper seeks to explore their characteristics and the life lessons they teach the reader.

The first minor character is Mr. William Lucas, a knight who is not well-off or well-connected. The father of several children lives in Meryton with his family and is "inoffensive, friendly, and obliging" (Austen, 1996, p.18) with his neighbors. His eldest daughter, Charlotte, is twenty-seven years old and is unmarried. Her other sisters are also of marriageable age. Her parents are concerned about the helpless predicament of the eldest daughter but have to accept her fragile position in the marriage market because of her plain appearance and lack of her father's money. Mr. Lucas represents the fathers of eighteenth and nineteenth-century England who could not marry their daughters off to desirable, eligible bachelors due to financial instability and lack of connections. His daughter gets compelled to choose an oaf with a home and money to save her face from the shame of society, where marriage is the only option for girls without money or social position. Charlotte marries the stupid clergyman, Mr. William Collins, with parental support. Her father, Mr. Lucas, is a practical man who cannot be choosy about his daughter as he knows middle-class fathers have limited chances. He becomes so relieved when his daughter gets engaged to Charlotte. He and his wife find Mr. Collins, the relative to the Bennet "most eligible for their daughter, to whom they could give little fortune, and his prospects of future were exceedingly fair" (Austen, 1996, p.103). He is aware that his would-be son-in-law would inherit the property of his relative, Mr. Bennet, in the absence of any male heir. This news is a decisive factor in the Charlotte-Collins marriage. He plans to visit St. James with his wife when Mr. Collins "should have the Longbourn estate" (Austen, 1996, p. 103). He is the first person in his family to declare the marriage news of his daughter, the intimate neighbor of the Bennet family. He is not ashamed of the match as he knows, at twenty-seven with plain looks; his daughter has no prospect in the marriage market. Through Mr. Lucas,

The second significant minor character is Miss Caroline Bingley, the sister of Mr. Charles Bingley and Mrs. Luisa Hurst. Caroline is young, but her behavior is unattractive to the hero, Mr. Darcy. The class-conscious Caroline belongs to the upper class and considers the middle-class Elizabeth Bennet a social climber, although she never chases any bachelor. Caroline is mean, uncivilized, cruel, envious, and calculative. Her malicious letters to Elizabeth's elder sister, Jane, gave false news to shatter her hope about marrying Caroline's only brother, Mr. Bingley. She is jealous of Mr. Darcy's fascination with a middle-class girl, who, according to her, is not a suitable partner for the aristocratic, close friend of her brother. She disrespects and demeans Elizabeth repeatedly without any cause or any remorse.

After coming to the Bingley house for dinner, Jane fell ill, but Caroline neglected the guests during their stay at their Netherfield Park house. Her indifference compelled Jane to write a letter to Elizabeth to nurse her sister as she did not get any care from the Bingley sisters. To respond to Jane's letter, Elizabeth reached Netherfield in the early morning jumping over puddles. Her sweaty, messy face became a subject of Caroline's criticism when she arrived at Netherfield Park, She did it to get some perverted satisfaction and to distract Darcy from Elizabeth. She criticized Elizabeth's reading habit. During Elizabeth's visit to Darcy's palatial house, Pemberley Estate, she insulted her in front of all the guests, "I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her" (Austen, 1996, p. 221). Her character gives us the lesson that perverted persons are always ready to belittle others to find pleasure in them. They are least affected, but their criticisms pain others. To fulfill their plans, they can conspire against innocent Elizabeth and her family members. She also represents those who neglect and insult guests of their house. She is an example of those flatterers who try their best to seduce aristocratic persons but cannot succeed in their plans as love needs to be mutual. Her efforts fail to make Mr. Darcy love.

Another minor character is Mrs. Hurst, the sister of Mr. Bingley and Miss Caroline Bingley. She has a small presence in the novel, but from her character, we learn that some wives have no dignity issues to be married to those husbands who are dependent on the income of the wives or in-laws. Her husband, Mr Hurst, “merely looked the gentleman . . .” (Austen, 1996, p.12). She encourages her sister to demean her during Elizabeth’s visit to Netherfield Park. Jane's letter compelled Elizabeth to visit her sick sister Jane at the three-mile distance house in drizzling weather. Consequently, she did not look impressive, and after her reaching, Mrs. Hurst took part in the criticism of her sister Caroline regarding Elizabeth, “She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker, I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She looked almost wild” (Austen, 1996, p.33).

When at the Pemberley Estate, Caroline humiliated Elizabeth. Mrs. Hurst did not stop her sister from showing abominable behavior towards Elizabeth. She cannot be the elder sister to any mean one who needs guidance or correction. The failed elder sister has limitations. Both sisters teach us the importance of showing good manners and disrespect to any person from any class. People have no right to humiliate any person for belonging to the lower class. Those who do so get disliked and disrespected by the surrounding people of all classes.

Mrs. Phillips is the youngest sister of Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner. She is the complete opposite of her brother and is equal to her elder sister, Mrs. Bennet. Like her sister, she is not intelligent or refined. She indulges the wild nieces Lydia and Kitty to the army officers. She invites them to her house so that the reckless nieces can get the chance to seduce the army officers. Lydia and Catherine visit her house three or four times a week. They “were well-supplied both with news and happiness by the recent arrival of the militia regiment in the neighborhood . . .” (Austen, 1996, p. 27). Her house is the meeting place of the nieces

and the officers. The worst part of her personality is her choice of life partner. Despite being the daughter of a highly qualified attorney general, she is “married to a Mr. Phillips, who had been a clerk to their father . . .”(Austen, 1996, p. 27). She teaches us that some women cannot show wisdom about selecting life partners. They marry just for the sake of marriage without thinking of the professions of the partners. She is a guardian but never warns the nieces about their wild behavior. She fails as an aunt. We also learn from her that a silly woman may lack prudence and intelligence, but she can be a doting aunt to her nieces and a comforting one to the distressed family after the elopement of Lydia. In the words of Jane, “My aunt Phillips came to Longbourn on Tuesday, after my father went away, and was so good as to stay till Tuesday with me. She was of great use and comfort to us all . . .” (Austen, 1996, p. 237).

Mr. Gardiner is the brother of Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Phillips. He is married to Mrs. Gardiner and “is settled in London in a respectable line of trade”(Austen, 1996, p. 27). He is “so well-bred and agreeable” (Austen, 1996, p.118). Despite being in the trade, which was not considered a respectable profession in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England, he is strikingly opposite to his silly sisters. We see his contribution to the Bennet family when they experience distress and difficulty by the sudden and shocking elopement of the army officer, Mr. Wickham. When Jane wrote Elizabeth about Lydia's disgraceful elopement from Brighton, a distant area from their house in Longbourn, Elizabeth was with her uncle Mr. Gardiner, and his wife. She received the news through Jane's letters and felt the urge to return to the family fast. Mr. Gardiner, being a sensible, loving, caring person, responded to her call and came back to Longbourn. After reaching, he went to London to search for the runaway couple. With the help of Mr. Darcy, he and his wife arranged the marriage of Lydia and Mr. Wickham. The Bennet family learned about the desirable marriage through Mr. Gardiner's letter, who did not forget to relieve them of the ongoing tension. He is the epitome of sensibility, responsibility, refinement, and warmth. He is so well-mannered that Darcy invited

him and his wife to his house during their visit to Pemberley Estate, Darcy's magnificent house. From them, Mr. Darcy changed his prejudice against the middle-class families.

The educated, cultured, well-mannered Mrs. Gardiner, the wife of Mr. Gardiner and the aunt of the Bennet nieces is an admirable character full of appreciable characteristics. The reader sees her in the second chapter of the second volume. She is "an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman and a great favorite with all her Longbourn nieces" (Austen, 1996, p. 118). She has all the ingredients to be a worthy partner of her model husband. The lively woman comes to the Longbourn house at the troubled time of the family. Mr. Bingley left Netherfield Park without informing Jane. In his mysterious absence from the area, the whole family was devastated as they wanted to see Jane as Mrs. Bingley. After her arrival, she distributed the "presents and described the newest fashions" (Austen, 1996, p. 119). She teaches the reader how to be a sensible listener and substitute mother to nieces. Mr. Bennet always ignores his wife, Mrs. Bennet, who finds her an unworthy, silly partner. So, she "had many grievances to relate, and much to complain of" (Austen, 1996, p. 118) to her only sister-in-law, who became an active listener.

Mrs. Bennet informed her sister-in-law about Jane-Bingley's separation and Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Collins. She finds [Mrs. Gardiner's arrival] "at this time is the greatest of comforts . . ." (Austen, 1996, p.119). Thus, Mrs. Bennet affirms Mrs. Gardiner's unique qualities. People want to share personal sorrows with close people or relatives, but only a few can be genuine, empathetic listeners. Mrs. Gardiner is such a listener who comforts Elizabeth regarding Jane's broken heart, "I am sorry it went off. But these things happen so often" (Austen, 1996, p.119). The caring, sensible Mrs. Gardiner also wants to take Jane with them to London to lighten up her spirit, "perhaps a little relief from home may be as useful as anything" (Austen, 1996, p. 119). She knows how vulnerable Jane is. The whole

family agreed with her prudent offer. She also ensures Jane has little chance to meet Mr. Bingley.

Mrs. Bennet invited her sister, the neighbor Lucas family, and the army officers in honor of the Gardiner couple. As a result, her sister-in-law came to know the association of the Bennet family with Mr. Wickham. As a substitute mother, she warned Elizabeth against the infamously of Mr. Wickham in his area. She knows him well as “she had spent a considerable time in that very part of Derbyshire, to which he belonged” (Austen, 1996, p. 120). She suspects from her close observations that Elizabeth’s growing intimacy with him might harm her. Mrs. Bennet never cautions her daughters about their attachment to any good or bad guy, as her only dream is to see her daughters married to any rich man. She is their mother only in name. Her daughters never share their matters with her as she cannot understand them. Contrastingly, during the visit to the Pemberley estate, Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth discussed everything. Elizabeth shared her concern about Lydia-Wickham with her uncle and aunt, who tried to console her. She is accessible and friendly. Mrs. Gardiner is opposite to Mrs. Bennett regarding the choice of life partners. She is an example of a woman who can be a mother to a child without giving birth. From her character, the reader can realize the worth of monitoring the socialization of children with any male partner. She also teaches us parents should not be troubled only to provide food, lodging, and clothes to children. They should observe the children’s activities, friends, and acquaintances to stop them from being ruined. We also learn that to warn somebody's children, to become a parent is unnecessary. Only good intention is needed. Only a warning is not enough. The way we warn is also significant. That is why Mrs. Gardiner sensibly questioned Elizabeth, “You have sense, and we all expect you to use it” (Austen, 1996, p. 122). She talked to her mildly so her ego would not hurt the niece. Most of the parents in real life get violent in dealing with their children when they go wrong. Mrs. Gardiner teaches us the right way to deal with children.

Post-marriage, when Lydia came to her parental house and informed Elizabeth about Mr. Darcy's presence on her wedding day, Elizabeth was tremendously surprised and she wrote a letter to her aunt demanding clarification of his presence there. She judiciously explained everything, and her writing is also admirable. The wise Mrs. Gardiner can tackle any complicated situation with intelligence, sense, and tact. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner epitomize the model couple who has trust, respect, love, understanding, responsibility, and sensibility, which we can learn and apply in our daily lives to be well-liked and well-respected.

Charlotte Lucas is not the main character in *Pride and Prejudice*, but she is significant for the theme of marriage and money. She is twenty-seven years old and is a member of the Lucas family. Elizabeth and Jane are close to her. She is past marriage age in nineteenth-century England but is not concerned about it. Charlotte's plain look and lack of money to provide a dowry force her to marry a stupid clergyman, who is not a perfect match for the intelligent Charlotte. She accepts Mr. Collins because of her level-headedness. She knows when chances are limited, people cannot be choosers. She is concerned about the marriages of her marriageable younger sisters. As a result, she sacrifices herself for the sake of her family. She epitomizes sacrifice, maturity, and realism. She also teaches the reader how to survive a loveless marriage with tact. Her marriage and marital life teach Elizabeth and the reader a lot. On her wedding day, she said to her best friend Elizabeth, "I shall depend on hearing from you very often, Eliza . . . Will you come and see me" (Austen, 1996, p. 122). Her feelings for her friend indicate her good nature. After her marriage, "Elizabeth soon heard from her friend, and their correspondence was as regular and frequent as it had been"(Austen, 1996, p. 123). By using examples, she shows how to keep friendships intact. Distance does not matter in a relationship if anybody intends to keep it alive. Her marriage is conflict-free as she consciously never hurts or disrespects her foolish husband. The judicious Charlotte knows that hurting his ego will bring disaster to the marriage. In married life, many

wives are unaware of this fact and put the relationship into trouble. She regularly visits the patron Lady Catherine de Bourgh's house as she matters to Mr. Collins's life. Elizabeth hears praise about the class-conscious woman from Charlotte, "Lady Catherine is a very respectable, sensible woman indeed" (Austen, 1996, p.132). She also did not forget to praise Miss De Bourgh to Elizabeth, "It is the greatest of favor when Miss De Bourgh comes in". (132). Her diplomacy works wonders for saving her loveless marriage. Loving couples sometimes fail due to tactfulness.

She is happy and unaffected by her marriage to Mr. Collins. Her "acceptance of Mr. Collins's marriage proposal was labeled as 'foolish', and added to everyone's surprise, more prominently because it was not very late after he proposed to Elizabeth herself"(Macpherson, 2003, p. 124). Before her marriage, when Elizabeth was surprised to know about her friend's engagement with a callous Mr. Collins, Charlotte reminded her of her unromantic, realistic nature and her practicality, "I am not romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home, and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situations in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast of entering the marriage state" (Austen, 1996, p. 105). She teaches Elizabeth and the reader that two persons can be best friends. But their views on marriage can differ as they are two individuals. Wright states, ". . . in an important respect she differs highly from Elizabeth-though Elizabeth herself does not know this fact" (1961, 106) by embodying the opposite views of marriage. Elizabeth should have viewed her decision realistically as in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England, for marriageable girls ". . . it was a sign of weakness to hope too much . . ." (Cecil, 1935, p. 22).

Charlotte knows the situation of every unmarried woman differs from one to another. At twenty-seven, she faced tremendous societal criticism and family tension for having several unmarried sisters. These factors led her to choose an unlikable husband who could

give her a home and financial security. Her marriage will rid her of social criticism, which her neighbors or friends could not provide. She prioritizes the economic stability of her husband as love is not enough for the survival of any couple. She represents the middle-class females of the Regency Era, who had to marry undesirable men for financial stability. Through her character, readers can learn that an intelligent woman needs to be realistic. To some, it is a dream. Before her marriage, she showed her concern to Elizabeth when Jane was not expressing her love for Mr. Bingley. She knows if Jane remains unresponsive, Mr. Bingley will not be interested in her. Elizabeth was surprised at her friend's concern because she believed no girl should marry an acquaintance without knowing him properly. The unsentimental Charlotte does not look for true love, as it is not the base of marriage. Later, her prediction came true when Mr. Bingley left Netherfield Park without informing Jane. Moreover, with limited chances, a girl cannot always marry for love. She never disrespects the lady as her disrespect would hurt her husband's ego. Here, we see her tactfulness to save a relationship. This sensibility is rare in every woman. She tries her best to save the marriage because she married a stupid husband knowingly. She showed her adaptability in her letters, "She wrote cheerfully, seemed surrounded with comforts, and mentioned nothing which she could not praise" (Austen, 1996, p.124). After her marriage, Elizabeth visits her new home with Charlotte's sister Maria and father Sir William Lucas. During their stay, Elizabeth did not get preferential treatment from her friend; rather, Charlotte welcomed all the guests equally and warmly. In their house, Charlotte is happy and has no complaints or regrets. Elizabeth observed the house where Charlotte arranged everything neatly. The tactful Charlotte avoids conflict in her mercenary marriage and busies herself with housekeeping, gardening, poultry-raising, etc., Elizabeth also enjoyed her stay and returned to her home after a fortnight's visit.

From Charlotte, we see love is not the only ingredient for a marriage. In real life, some loving couples fail as they do not know when to remain silent. Her maturity, sensibility, and tactfulness are highly appreciated. She teaches us the importance of practicality. Only intelligence is not enough for any person. One has to be practical to survive in any society where people are not easy-going. Elizabeth, having intelligence, fails to discover the color of Mr. Wickham's lies about Mr. Darcy due to her impulsiveness. Charlotte also teaches us not to be judgmental or critical when a woman marries for material prospects to save her from disgrace and rescue the family from tension. The surrounding people need to be thoughtful about them. In the words of Tanner, "We should sympathize with her instead of blaming her" (1986, p.108).

Among the characters of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins is a comic character and relative of the Bennet family. In chapter thirteen of the novel, we see his tactless letter to Mr. Bennet. Before his arrival to Longbourn, he revealed himself as an oaf by overpraising his patroness Lady Catherine de Burgh "whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of the parish" (Austen, 1996, p. 15). The insensitive, comical man was unwelcomed at the Bennet house as all found him a dislikable man for his talkative, foolish nature. From him, we learn the importance of letter writing with much thought because a person reveals himself by his speeches and writings. He lacks self-knowledge and repeats mistakes despite being an educated man. Only Mrs. Bennet enjoyed his company.

When he proposed to Elizabeth, she rejected him without thinking. He became angry with this rejection as he did not know his limitations, and her refusal offended his ego. Afterward, he gave up his pursuit of Elizabeth and proposed to her best friend, Charlotte Lucas. He teaches us the significance of knowing oneself properly. Mr. Collins fails to realize that the flatters are always unlikable to dignified, sensible persons. After his marriage to Charlotte, Elizabeth visited her house, and he wanted to make her regret her rejection of his

proposal. He showed off the house to her with exaggeration. After the shameful elopement of Elizabeth's youngest sister Lydia with the wicked Mr. Wickham, he wrote a hypocritical letter to Mr. Bennet in the name of consolation, "The death of your daughter would have been a blessing" (Austen, 1996, p. 240). He hurt a troubled father instead of comforting him. We learn from him that if one cannot console any distressed person, s/he should remain silent.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a memorable minor character in *Pride and Prejudice*. With her small presence, she teaches us several life lessons. The widow of Sir William De Bourgh is self-important, vain, ill-mannered, snobbish, and vulgar in dealing with people not from her wealthy class. She is conscious of her superiority and represents pretensions and materialism. She tends to demean middle-class people. During Elizabeth's stay at her friend Charlotte Lucas's Hunsford house, she went to the Lady's house with the other members. Lady de Bourgh, having failed to subdue the self-respectful Elizabeth, asked her vulgar questions, "Five daughters brought up at home without governess never heard of such thing" (Austen, 1996, p. 137). Her effort to make Elizabeth unnerve failed because Elizabeth remained unmoved by Lady de Bourgh's money or position. Among the guests, she talked "without intermission till coffee came in" (Austen, 1996, p. 135), and the evening became a disaster for Elizabeth. The great snob is dictatorial and always praises her unworthy daughter, Miss de Bourgh. She fails to realize that to earn respect, one has to respect others. The reader can learn some valuable lessons from her. If the reader can avoid her negative character traits, they can earn respect and will never bore guests or listeners.

Novels are not for entertainment. They teach varied life lessons to the reader through characters of all ages and classes. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has been providing education and entertainment to readers and enriching them with life lessons for a long. The characters of her novel are memorable for their good and bad sides. We find them significant for their

characteristics, which are educative to the reader of all time. We can learn life lessons from major or minor characters of Austen's well-read novel if we want to.

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