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## Setting and Character in *Pride and Prejudice*

CHARLES J. MCCANN

THE COUNTRY HOUSE is perhaps the most familiar landmark in Jane Austen's setting, and far from being merely decorative, it serves a vital purpose. Generally, it is an essential ingredient of her art; relatively simple in *Persuasion*, where Kellynch is an instrument of the plot, complex in *Emma*, where Donwell Abbey is the background of a central scene, and more complex in *Mansfield Park*, where the house serves in the fullest way as the background of the story. This is the inevitable consequence of the fact that Jane Austen carefully places her characters in just the proper symbol of their economic, social, or intellectual condition. In this respect the country houses in all Austen novels, and especially those in *Pride and Prejudice*, are constant values—that is to say, each is a recognizable emblem for a complex of social, economic, and intellectual realities. Thus, the pretentiousness of Rosings reveals Lady Catherine, as the nondescriptness of Netherfield does Bingley.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that she employs the country house emble-

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Mudrick has the following to say about this relation of character to setting in Jane Austen: "In Jane Austen's early novels . . . The problem of action is personal; choice, or the illusion of choice, is personal. It is not Longbourne and Rosings, but Elizabeth and Lady Catherine, who stand opposed: the individual makes his own climate, and does not have to locate himself in any other.

"In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen abridges this freedom for the first time. The individual can no longer act without locating himself. Place and group have, indeed, become central: the individual faces, not a choice of action, but a choice of allegiance; and the action of the novel is a collision of worlds." (*Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* [Princeton, 1952], p. 155.) I agree with Professor Mudrick that the action of *Mansfield Park* is a collision of worlds; I would suggest, however, that in *Pride and Prejudice*, while there may be "illusion of choice," at the same time worlds do stand opposed—but more on the level of symbol than on the level of action. That is to say that one (*PP*) is more uncomplicatedly ironic than the other, or at least that one (*PP*) is comedy while the other is not-comedy.

matically, Jane Austen can characterize obliquely, and in *Pride and Prejudice* as in no other work this method dramatically informs the entire novel.

Taken together, however, Netherfield, Rosings, and Pemberley are much more than three emblems of three separate families, that is, three discrete images. And this because, while the emblematic correspondence is soon made clear in the case of Netherfield and Rosings, the two lesser houses of *Pride and Prejudice*, the correspondence between Pemberley and Darcy remains unclear in the early stages of the action. While the early scenes of the work are built around Netherfield and Rosings, Pemberley remains in the distance; we hear much about it, but are not permitted to see it. Two revelatory ratios are established early, but one quantity in the third ratio remains unknown. Thus, while Netherfield is to Bingley as Rosings is to Lady Catherine, the unknown quantity that is Pemberley creates a certain mystery about Darcy. Existing as it does in this unspecified relation to the action and scene, Pemberley serves as the basis of a suspense which amplifies, parallels, and resolves with, the Elizabeth-Darcy story. In addition to furthering action and characterization, the image of Pemberley, always with the support of the two other houses, provides tonal, rhythmic, and rational unities, and serves as a symbol which makes the story—as comedy—possible. For it becomes a symbol of a fixed value, of a stable condition to which the heroine belongs, but from which she is separated by immaturity, and to which she finally attains. Pemberley, then, stands for that “rigorous and positive belief” which, according to Professor Brower, balances the “sense of variability.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to accomplish these various ends, it is necessary for Austen to mention Pemberley early in the novel. While it would not, however, be to her purpose to define the exact relationship between Pemberley and Darcy this early, she must imply a *close* relationship. This she does from the introduction of both, when the assembly at Netherfield discovers Darcy to be so proud that “not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance” (p. 10).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, while the “neutral” company is aware of a relationship

<sup>2</sup> Reuben A. Brower, *The Fields of Light* (New York, 1951), p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Page numbers refer to *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 5 vols. (London, 1952), Vol. II.

between man and house—an inexact one, to be sure—Elizabeth, at this time a little too self-centered, is unwilling to accept this fact with all that it necessarily implies. Thus, early in the novel Darcy's possessions help define Elizabeth's position in a subtle dramatic irony:

“His pride,” said Miss Lucas, “does not offend *me* so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a *right* to be proud.”

“That is very true,” replied Elizabeth, “and I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*” (p. 20).

Pride has reared its head for the first time, and in a context intricately associated with Pemberley. Without itself being the source of conflict, Pemberley serves as a focal point around which the lines of conflict are drawn. In the disguised maneuvering to win Darcy, Pemberley becomes the image to which characters respond with their own kinds of pride. Elizabeth's own self-defensive pride has already been clearly established. A little later, when Miss Bingley tries to denigrate her unwitting rival by suggesting the ludicrousness of Elizabeth's mother at Pemberley, she is attempting to arouse Darcy's pride by pointing out the essential incompatibility of the two families. At the same time that it does this, her attack also reveals her mean spirit and points out an implicit sense of pride at feeling free to associate herself with what Darcy represents.

At this point one is uncertain as to whether Pemberley is deservedly an object of pride; later we are to be convinced that Darcy's pride is justifiable, but even at this point there is a clear indication that Pemberley is already a norm: for if Miss Bingley's “queen of the hill” tactics are to mean anything, there must be a “hill,” and that hill is Pemberley. Futile hope of opening a soft spot in Darcy's heart by flattery of Pemberley guides Miss Bingley's tactics, but her excess—and we are meant to be aware that it is excess—calls her brother's better social sense into play. “Upon my word, Caroline, I should think it more possible to get Pemberley by purchase than by imitation” (p. 38).

While this early conversation sets up Pemberley as a possible ideal, Jane Austen, by reference to Pemberley, cunningly uses

this dialogue to delineate four characters. Miss Bingley's lack of honor and sensitivity—she is unknowingly but blatantly baring her meanness—and Bingley's bland and formless good humor are clearly revealed. It also captures Mrs. Bennet's vulgarity, and here is one of the pleasures of reading "Honest Jane": unsympathetic characters are allowed to speak the truth. It is Elizabeth, however, who always holds the center of the stage. We are never allowed to forget that she, in her innocence and pride, must progress to discover another kind of pride and perhaps even another more complex innocence—the one born of custom and of ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the suspense of the novel is dependent on whether Elizabeth will successfully make such progress. The brilliance of Austen's artistry lies in that we are able to follow so closely the landmarks in Elizabeth's development. The suspense involved, however, is not merely a matter of controlled point of view. For there is as much anticipation of discovering what Pemberley—and consequently Darcy—will be, as there is in following Elizabeth's progress. Let us, for the sake of argument, imagine a version of the story in which Elizabeth and the reader were permitted from the start to see Pemberley. Such a version could still present the sort of awakening we see in *Emma* and in *Persuasion* where the pleasures we are discussing depend almost entirely on control of point of view, but much of the effect peculiar to *Pride and Prejudice* would have been lost. To illustrate this quality of *Pride and Prejudice*, consider the following passage. Elizabeth is selecting a book from the collection in the drawing room at Netherfield:

He (Bingley) immediately offered to fetch her others; all that his library afforded.

"And I wish my collection were larger for your benefit and my own credit; but I am an idle fellow; and though I have not many, I have more than I ever look into."

Elizabeth assured him that she could suit herself perfectly with those in the room.

"I am astonished," said Miss Bingley, "that my father should have left so small a collection of books. —What a delightful library you have at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy!"

<sup>4</sup>Howard S. Babb has noticed the irony of Elizabeth's position, and calls our attention to the fact that the dialogue reveals what deep motivation Jane Austen has implanted in both Darcy and Elizabeth. "Dialogue with Feeling: A Note on *Pride and Prejudice*," *Kenyon Review*, XX (Spring, 1958), 203-216. Babb's argument makes an interesting conjunction with the premise of this paper, that the relation of setting (much of which is presented through dialogue) to action produces irony.

"It ought to be good," he replied, "it has been the work of many generations" (pp. 37-38).

It is not astonishing that Netherfield has so few books when we recall that Mr. Bingley senior had spent so much of his life working that he had little opportunity to purchase an estate, much less to fill the library shelves. Netherfield thus contrasts with Pemberley, the mellowed home of generations, and thereby creates a tension which in some respects modifies the Elizabeth-Darcy one. This tension, added to the minor one of Bingley-Miss Bingley, characterizes Bingley, Miss Bingley, and Darcy, and—since our information about Pemberley is hearsay—adds suspense. While it is surely important that our point of view is Elizabeth's, the suspenseful quality of this typical scene cannot be discussed solely in those terms.

The irony of Elizabeth's position, emphasized by the symbolism of the setting, is already becoming clear. Although one day she will be both subjectively and objectively "in," she is at present "out" in both respects. There is additional irony in the fact that Miss Bingley, now subjectively "in" but objectively "out," furnishes us with most of our advance information about Pemberley. Her desperate claims to the inside track, in remarks such as, "Do let the portraits of your uncle and aunt Philips be placed in the gallery at Pemberley" (pp. 52-53), supply pieces for the montage of an impressive house that gradually assembles in the reader's mind.

All the foregoing allusions to Pemberley have been made during the action at Netherfield. Although we know from the natives' opinion of its inhabitants that Netherfield is considered an important house in a neighborhood of Lucases and Philipses, it is significant that not one aspect of Netherfield is praised during these discussions, apart from Mrs. Bennet's suspect enthusiasms. The reader is not told much about Netherfield except that Bingley would be willing to leave at five minutes notice. Indeed, the sharpest image we have of it is of the "charming prospect over that gravel walk" (p. 42). This pointed nondescriptness has an analogy in Bingley's character, and a blandness already suggested in him as here intensified. In retrospect, then, the references to country houses in the beginning of the novel are dominated by ancient Pemberley, which gains as much ascendancy in the reader's

consciousness over rented Netherfield as aristocratic Darcy has over nouveau riche Bingley.

Rosings, the second-ranking house of *Pride and Prejudice*, heretofore only casually mentioned, is appropriately introduced by Mr. Collins's effusions. The actual change of scene to Rosings, however, comes only after modulation: description of Pemberley by Wickham, and reminiscences about Pemberley between Mrs. Gardiner and Wickham. By interrupting the crescendo of praise of Rosings, Jane Austen avoids interfering with the reader's anticipation of Pemberley; by suggesting that Mr. Collins wears rose-colored glasses, she prevents our confusing with Rosings what has been associated with Pemberley; and only after the standard by which to judge Rosings has been set forth in this oblique conversational manner do we get Catherine's picture, one that we may to some extent trust. But even then, "It was Mr. Collins's picture . . . rationally softened . . ." (p. 147).

Mr. Collins's view (the best in the Kingdom!) is of ". . . a handsome modern building, well situated on rising ground" (p. 156). His admiring account of the glazing of the front windows, praise which leaves Elizabeth unresponsive, reminds us that Lady Catherine's husband was the original owner. The effect of this summary treatment of the Rosings setting is to give the impression of a new, flashy establishment, a fit casing for snobbish Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Elizabeth is of course able to adjust unselfconsciously to the atmospheres of Netherfield and Rosings because she is unimpressed and unmoved by either. This reflects Jane Austen's relative unconcern with Elizabeth's reaction to these settings; her purpose is to create through dialogue a picture of a third setting, that of Pemberley, and by this means to point out the disparity between the reader's and Elizabeth's awareness of its importance. And this disparity, Jane Austen does not allow us to forget, is due to Elizabeth's present feelings about Darcy.

In the preceding discussion, I have suggested that if we follow the logic of associating houses and inhabitants a dilemma becomes apparent in the case of Darcy and Pemberley, a dilemma resulting from unknowns which call the reliability of the association into question. If the process of association advanced in a straightforward manner, we ought to have a most cold, forbidding picture of Pemberley. And this because insofar as we are close to Elizabeth

we ought to think its owner cold and forbidding. (We are, however, somewhat prepared to believe otherwise by the ending of Darcy's letter.) But the house, as we have been led to imagine it, does not at all reflect what we know of its master, whose attributes, while they might include nobility and inimitability, certainly do not seem to number delightfulness among them. Further uncertainty arises from the fact that our chief informant about Pemberley has been Miss Bingley, who, as a very interested party, is probably not a reliable architectural correspondent. Our suspicions about the accuracy of her reports are naturally aroused, and, if our suspicions prove correct, Pemberley may very well match its so-far-disagreeable master. At this point, then, two of the anticipated satisfactions of the story are in doubt: finding Pemberley magnificent, and discovering its master to be compatible with his milieu. With more than the simple interest evoked by Pemberley in Volume I, the reader approaches the end of Volume II with real suspense due to the expected, but apparent lack of, correspondence between house and master. This careful heightening of suspense, added to Elizabeth's expressed anxiety, accounts for that high tension we feel when "To Pemberley, therefore, they were to go" (p. 241).

Volume III opens on the same note, *tremolo*: ". . . her spirits were in a high flutter." The tension only gradually diminishes in what is by far the longest and most elaborate piece of description in the novel. Darcy's home, whose beauty is confirmed by a specific comparison to Rosings, is found to be truly superb. Pemberley, in short, has met high expectations: if anything its glories have been understated.<sup>5</sup> And Darcy, if we are to believe his housekeeper, is quite different from what Elizabeth has been led to believe. Elizabeth's preconception, however, is understandable, for she has been influenced by Bingley's hints that Darcy is susceptible to influence of place and situation. Then comes the sudden meeting in the park, and after a period of continued suspense during the tour Darcy surprisingly and significantly shows himself gracious in the test of meeting the middle-class Gardiners. The housekeeper's view of him proves to be the true one.

<sup>5</sup> The expansive style helps make this scene significant, "significance in this particular case being the *rational meaning*," according to Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York, 1953), pp. 107-109. See, also, Elizabeth Jenkins, *Jane Austen* (New York, 1949), p. 233: ". . . from the point of view of his [Darcy's] position in the work of art that presents him to us, the background of Pemberley . . . is truly harmonious."

It is obvious that love works upon Darcy to open and soften his heretofore inapproachably proud character. But he has been in love with Elizabeth for some time. Why could he not have softened before? Bingley, though typically indiscriminate, has hit upon a basic element of Darcy's character when he remarks: "I declare I do not know a more awful object than Darcy, on particular occasions, and in particular places; at his own house especially . . ." (p. 50-51). His setting seems to be a condition of Darcy's being. This is borne out by the fact that Elizabeth's impressions of him at Pemberley are shaken when she next sees him at Longbourn, now at his most forbidding. This insight of Bingley's, apparently borne out by Elizabeth's later experience, seems to contradict what we saw happening in the meeting at Pemberley. But there is no real contradiction—this merely reveals how sensitive Darcy is to both setting and character, and when either, as at Longbourn, is distasteful to him, he assumes a forbidding manner. But at Pemberley, where setting *and* Elizabeth's company are congenial to him, the forbidding manner falls away, thereby revealing it to be a polite form of indignation. At Pemberley, with those he cares for, he can be his true self. That Pemberley does not signify Darcy's whole personality in a one-for-one relationship, as setting does for the lesser characters where economy of characterization is necessary, reveals a degree of complexity in Darcy's character. Moreover, the fact that love does work upon Darcy further keeps him from being pasteboard, and further helps keep him as human enough for the nothing-if-not-human Elizabeth. Thus it is not surprising to find Elizabeth at Pemberley responding to a Darcy who has been softened by love but who is also (the context suggests) susceptible to setting:

Never, even in the company of his dear friends at Netherfield, or his dignified relations at Rosings, had she seen him so desirous to please, so free from self-consequence, or unbending reserve as now, when . . . even the acquaintance of those to whom his attentions were addressed, would draw down the ridicule and censure of the ladies both of Netherfield and Rosings (p. 263).

The significance of the subtle correspondence between characters and setting is underlined by the fact that Jane Austen from beginning to end never fails to suggest it. After the marriage, Pemberley is the home of felicity, usually open only to those who

are compatible with its true elegance and with the personalities of its master and mistress. Wickham is excluded; Mrs. Bennet is merely an occasional visitor; characteristically she is taken up with Darcy's town house, not with his chief possession, Pemberley. Netherfield, a dwelling for transients, is closed. Even the owner of Rosings must swallow her prejudice for the privilege of visiting the home of justifiable pride.

This discussion can shed some light on problems that have intermittently troubled readers of *Pride and Prejudice*: what is seen as a sudden change in Darcy, and what seems like opportunism in Elizabeth. As for Darcy, his apparent change is neither implausible nor unexpected. This is not to say that there has not been an illusion of change—an illusion due to the reader's early, imperfect vision of Darcy. Structured as the novel is, the reader cannot have a true picture of Darcy until he sees him at Pemberley. For if we are to follow the logic of the novel we must see Darcy's setting before we truly see him. As for the characteristic forbidding manner, it is merely an indication of his sensitivity to company and environment. Once the environmental unpleasantness has been removed, Darcy reveals himself to be what he has always been.<sup>6</sup>

The possibility of opportunism in Elizabeth can never be dismissed. However, Austen makes it clear that the visit to Pemberley affects her deeply. And later when her sister Jane asks her at what period she was first aware of her love for Darcy, she replies, jokingly: " 'It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley' " (p. 373). Elizabeth's remark seems straightforward on the surface; she intends it to be a sarcastic but playful comment about her apparent materialism. Elizabeth, of course, feels self-conscious enough to be forced to indulge in such facetiousness, but she can only do so because she does not believe the remark to be a true one. In view of what Pemberley has come to represent, however, we feel uneasy and wonder whether our author here intends us to see beyond Elizabeth's view of the matter. Sir Walter Scott, in his well-known objection, misses both the playfulness and the irony and stresses

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<sup>6</sup> For arguments on various other grounds as to the consistency of Darcy's character, see Brower, above, Babb, above, and Philip Drew, "A Significant Incident in *Pride and Prejudice*," *NCF*, XIII (March, 1959), 356-358.

the opportunism latent in Elizabeth's answer.<sup>7</sup> In doing so he seems to have intuitively grasped the intended implication without understanding the manner in which it is expressed. As a consequence, he makes Elizabeth decidedly too unsympathetic. Whatever truth her answer holds is due not to simple snobbism or cupidity in Elizabeth, although Honest Jane does not leave out the possibility of a hidden "normal" measure of either, and we would be wise not to despise the fact that R. W. Chapman labels this position "grotesque." Impure motivation seems inevitable in view of Mark Schorer's finding that in Jane Austen's world "marriage [is] a brutal economic fact in an essentially materialistic society."<sup>8</sup>

All this should indicate that Jane Austen's view of Elizabeth's motivation is extremely complex: more sympathetic than Scott's, more realistic than Chapman's. What seems to make this reading of Elizabeth's motivation so convincing is the fact that Elizabeth has been presented as the sort of girl who would not return love unless her suitor possessed those traits which Pemberley happens to reflect and foster, and then she only becomes conscious of being *able* to love Darcy since their meeting at Pemberley. Thus the prevalent motif of the novel is here once again emphasized. When Elizabeth connects the notions of her love and Pemberley she reminds us of the relation of character to setting, the structural system of *Pride and Prejudice* which allows Jane Austen to accomplish her end—to present ironically the maturing of a well-disposed girl<sup>9</sup> without, as in *Emma*, adopting an extremely related

<sup>7</sup> "The lady, on the contrary, hurt at the contempt of her connections, which the lover does not even attempt to suppress, and prejudiced against him on other accounts, refuses the hand which he ungraciously offers, and does not perceive that she has done a foolish thing until she accidentally visits a very handsome seat and grounds belonging to her admirer. They chance to meet exactly as her prudence had begun to subdue her prejudice. But the youth of this realm need not at present be taught the doctrine of selfishness." ("Emma: a Novel. By the Author of 'Sense and Sensibility,' 'Pride and Prejudice,' etc.," *Quarterly Review*, XIV [October, 1815], 188-201.)

<sup>8</sup> R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1948), p. 192. Mark Schorer, "Fiction and the 'Matrix of Analogy,'" *Kenyon Review*, XI (Autumn, 1949), 539-560; "Pride Unprejudiced," *Kenyon Review*, XVIII (Winter, 1956), 72-91.

<sup>9</sup> The reader will recognize this skeletal statement of theme for what is intended: argumentation, without attempt to embrace all the richness of theme as it has been vigorously exposed by Brower, Mudrick, Schorer, and Klinger. The latter's essay, a profound relation of the art-work to its intellectual milieu, has, moreover, been suggestive for my purposes. "The governing idea of *Pride and Prejudice*," writes Samuel Klinger, "is the art-nature antithesis. . . ." ". . . the art-nature an-

point of view. And here, precisely for this reason, she is able to accomplish her end with not necessarily more beautiful but with more mild irony than in *Emma*. Another solution would have been to follow the pattern of Fielding, and that of all down to George Eliot, that is, to use the narrative voice as the major control by which the reader could position the character. Instead, Jane Austen complemented point of view by using the imagery of her setting; and by submerging imagery even more into her dramatic texture by conveying it through dialogue, she produced, long before such a technique became common, one of the most artfully subtle uses of setting.

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tithesis is abstracted into a symbolism adequate to cover the adventures and mis-adventures which keep Elizabeth and Darcy apart in mutual repulsion at the beginning of the tale and bring them together at the end." "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the Eighteenth-Century Mode," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XVI (July, 1947), 357-370.