

The Case of Elizabeth Bennet: Challenging the Notion of an Agreeable Woman in Modern Adaptations of Pride and Prejudice

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**The Case of Elizabeth Bennet: Challenging the Notion of an Agreeable Woman in
Modern Adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and
Literature and Philosophy at the University of Rijeka

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is considered by many as one of the most notable novels in British literature. It deals with the socio-cultural climate of the early nineteenth-century Britain and the position of women in the society of landed gentry. The novel's protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet is a female character written as a challenger of her society's idea of what an 'agreeable woman' ought to be. *Pride and Prejudice* has since its creation been adapted throughout various media platforms and using an array of adaptation strategies. Among the many adaptations are *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* that confirm Elizabeth's status as a progressive female character within their own respective spheres. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* shows Elizabeth as career driven 21st-century woman, and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* as a strong zombie fighter.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, adaptation, representation, agreeable woman, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen was an English author active at the beginning of the 19th Century during Britain's Regency Era. She is most known as a novelist and wrote six novels in total, four of them, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* during the course of her short life, and two, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, were released posthumously. Her writing is often characterised as witty and containing an abundance of social commentary and criticism. This is precisely the main feature of her arguably most famous novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. The aim of the following thesis is to present its readers with research focused on observing and analysing various adaptations of Austen's 1813 novel which deals with the life of Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters and their position as unmarried, lower-class women in the Regency Era. The aim of the research is to establish whether the adaptations honour the novel's legacy as a work of social commentary on marriage, wealth and landed gentry and, especially, Elizabeth Bennet as a ground-shifting female character.

Particularly interesting and relevant to this subject is *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a web series created by Hank Green and Bernie Su in 2012 with an accompanying novel, *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet*, published in 2014. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus mainly on the plot of the web series with occasional insight from the novel which adds more perspectives to the retelling¹. The story is set in present time, more specifically 2012, with Elizabeth "Lizzie" Bennet making a video blog on the video-sharing platform YouTube as a school project in which she shares her everyday life and thoughts with her audience. It creates a considerably modernised environment for Austen's story while still trying to be respectful

¹ *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are mainly Lizzie's reflection upon events in her life with very little access to someone else's perspective on the matter at hand.

towards her characters and core issues. Seeing what was an undeniably progressive character for that period in history as a contemporary woman sharing her life and point of view with the world via the internet is a refreshing perspective, but it is also quite challenging for the creators to present Elizabeth as a noticeably strong female character in the modernized environment of the adaptation.

Apart from the more contemporary setting that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* provides, this thesis will also look at an adaptation that geographically and temporally matches Austen's original novel, but which provides an additional challenge for the Bennet sisters – zombies. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is a 2009 novel by Seth Grahame-Smith which is intended to, as it indeed does, parody Austen's original novel by placing a supernatural element in the original story and having the characters battle monsters as well as the oppressing society they live in. With the need to protect themselves from the zombies, the Bennets in this version are warriors trained in Chinese martial arts and their femininity and class is thus judged according to different standards.

Additionally, I would discuss the idea that plays a strong role in the original novel - the idea of specific standards that can be used to describe an “agreeable²” woman and the responsibility put on women to conform to it. In the novel this is seen in respect to skills that women were required to learn, such as dancing and playing the piano, and how presenting themselves as accomplished in the public sphere of their society. Observing today's society and analysing it critically, gender-specific roles are still very much present and my goal would be, particularly when discussing *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, to conclude how and if the character of Elizabeth, as well as some of the other female characters, provoke the existence of a standard and image of proper femininity.

² An expression I use specifically due to its importance in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. It is the term by which the characters express their approval or disapproval, like or dislike, of others and it holds a lot of weight when used throughout the novel.

1. THE CONTEXT OF JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

To begin this discussion, I should first briefly cover the context in which Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* as well as her other novels, all centred around women and their role in society of the time. Jane Austen lived and wrote during the Regency Era in England named after the most notable event of the period – it begins with the British Parliament's appointment of a Prince Regent due to King George III's worsening mental illness in 1811 and ends with the King's death in 1820 (Newman & Brown, 1997). The period is likewise well-known for the literature which includes Jane Austen's body of work which was published entirely during the span of the Regency Era.

The political climate of this period included plenty of instability. It was the time of both the American and French Revolution and Britain was under the constant looming threat of war with Napoleon Bonaparte (Sheehan, 2009). The British society was mostly country-based and characterized by a simultaneous abundance of wealth and of poverty and such extreme disparity made the gaps all the more difficult to bridge. This difficulty of crossing the barriers of social class and bettering one's situation at the time subsequently lead to the fact that marrying above one's status was one of the few options for women, but those from low-income families were not likely to find a well-off husband. Plenty of marriages were arranged and the arrangements were more often than not made within the same social class (Sheehan, 2009). Men were interested in having rich wives since their plentiful dowries meant they would not need to work but could keep their wealthy status. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet sisters have the misfortune of rather small dowries and subsequently small chances of marrying above their station.

Additionally, and as evident in the novel, women could not inherit land. (Sheehan, 2009) The period of the Regency Era, as well as the centuries prior to it, is also sometimes referred to as the time of *landed gentry* - a term used to refer to British upper-class gentlemen who were land-owners with that being their primary source of income (Cross, 2003). The male protagonist, Mr Darcy, is the epitome of the landed gentry. He inherited a great amount of land and fortune and makes his great yearly sum by renting his land to farmers. As one could see when looking at the term's definition, it excluded women. Women depended on their husbands to hold any sort of land ownership and support them financially due to inheritance laws of the time. One of them was primogeniture, a law that stated the first-born son is to inherit most of the family fortune and title in order to uphold the family's status. If the fortune is divided between all the sons in each generation, it would decrease significantly over time and primogeniture was to prevent this from happening. Families who only had female offspring were then at risk of losing their land to the closest male relative who would stake his claim once the patriarch of the family were to pass away (Jamoussi, 2011). In the case of the Bennets, the closest male relative is Mr Collins. Adhering to the law of primogeniture was not necessarily obligatory and some families opted to divide their fortune however they deemed fit. However, a legal document could be put out on inheritance in order to ensure that the line of inheritance remains limited to the first-born son (Jamoussi, 2011). This is precisely what happened in the case of the Bennet family; at some point in Mr Bennet's ancestry, an entailment was put out on the family estate of Longbourn and due to that, the Bennet daughters are unable to inherit the estate themselves. Their options were then limited to trying to find a good husband that could provide for them and the family once they lose their family estate. Overall, the status of women within any social rank within the Regency Era society was highly unfavourable and always interwoven with the issue of marriage. Any unmarried woman of a certain age was a burden on her family, be it her parents

or a male sibling if she had one, and was looked down upon by her community. The Bennet sisters had even the misfortune of not having a brother that would be obligated to care for them if they end up old maids, as Mr Collins did not have that obligation.

All things considered, women's lives were largely determined by their families and, once married, their husbands. This is precisely why a portrayal of a woman of the time who exhibits intellectual and moral independence despite a lack of a financial one (Sheehan, 2009) that Austen provided her readers with is what makes *Pride and Prejudice* an interesting piece of social commentary and Elizabeth Bennet a character to be further analysed in the chapters that will follow.

1.1.THE CONTEXT OF ADAPTATIONS

One ought to only take a look at the statistics of the most prestigious acknowledgement in film to realise how prevalent adaptations are in the media. The Academy Awards, or the Oscars, are considered to be the highest acclaim a film could receive and they seem to, and overwhelmingly so, favour adaptations over original films since “more than three fourths of the awards for ‘best picture’ have gone to adaptations . . . [and that] the all-time box-office successes favour novels even more.”³ Obviously, adaptations are a lucrative business and the economic aspect justifies the popularity and the abundance of adaptations and types of adaptations across various media platforms. Without a doubt, there is a lure to popular works of literature and the safety blanket of a title already being present in the minds of the target viewers that almost assures at least one demographic will pay for a ticket to go watch the film – the one that already has an emotional connection to the story being told. This, however, may bring about additional criticism on how faithful an adaptation is to the source work. Viewers that are also readers may expect the film to emulate the exact world that they have created in their minds while reading the original text, the look of the characters and the setting, the plotlines, etc. The text always seems to be held in the highest regard and the adaptation’s every deflection from it is prone to judgement and criticism. This occurs often, even though adapting implies only the process of transfer of story from one realised entity into another.

The manner in which this transfer occurs depends greatly on the decision of the adaptor and the realisation they aim to create by using the original story.

A tool of adapting commonly used in the context of modern adaptations is transposition. By definition from Whittlesey, the role of transposition is the following:

³ Beja 1979, p. 78

In transposition there is an attempt to produce the original as the author might have done if he or she appeared in the given socio-historical time and place of the transposition and retained the consciousness that created each sentence of the original. (Whittlesey 2009)

There is a general consensus that an adaptor with respect for the original they are adapting “should see himself as owing allegiance to the source work”⁴. It seems that by use of transposition in creating modernised adaptations, the adaptor is showing praise for the work and honouring its importance and ‘essence’ while realising that they would much more efficiently be translated to present generations through the context of the current socio-cultural climate. The spirit of the narrative and characters of the original is thus transported through time and space and given a new venue. An example of such an adaptation is *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, which will be further discussed in the chapters that follow.

Additionally, the question remains how one might approach an adaptation and determine the aspects of the original text that ought to be preserved, be it in the classic interpretations of novels or modern ones, as the essence or even simply the point that the original makes that is trying to be transferred onto this new entity. This is important to consider, since, as Andrew states, the adaptation’s “being owes something to the tale which was its inspiration and potentially its measure.”⁵ Andrew thus makes the distinction between those adaptations which aim at obvious fidelity in multiple aspects and those that simply draw inspiration from the original source, them being in a relation with the text as signified and referent, respectively. Both, however, are a form of representation of the original, a different lens to be used when looking at the same story.

⁴ McFarlane, p.7

⁵ Andrew, p.9

Adaptation delimits representation by insisting on the cultural status of the model [...] . . . in a strong sense adaptation is the appropriation of a meaning from a prior text'. (Andrew 1980: 9-10)

The original becomes a model of meaning for the adaptation to appropriate to whatever circumstances they bring depending on the strategy used to adapt. The task when doing this is making the appropriation successful in the assessment of the core of the original that ought to be transported and making the transportation successful for the consumers of both the original and the adaptation, since the “aim is to offer a perceptual experience that corresponds with one arrived at conceptually.”⁶

In some cases, adaptations are less evident at first glance. As mentioned before, within the spectrum of adapting original work fall those adaptations that merely draw on the source work for inspiration and create an entirely new story and characters who might at certain times experience plot points that allude to the source material or be a rendition of the character they are based on. These kinds of adaptations are often referred to as analogies or borrowings (Zatlin, 2005) and are often scrutinized for even being considered adaptations. These types of adaptations tear apart the original and use only parts to create something brand new that is somewhere in between original and borrowed. Examples of such adaptations will be mentioned in paragraphs that follow.

A final type of adaptations worth mentioning for the sake of this thesis are parodies. Even more so than analogies, parodies are not always accepted as adaptations, however, authors such as Leitch (Leitch, 2012) and Hutcheon (Hutcheon, 2006) accept their status as such due to their use of tools such irony and ridicule to transfer the original work into a new entity or realisation of the story. An example of such an adaptation is *Pride and Prejudice and*

⁶ McFarlane, p. 21

Zombies, a literary and film adaptation of Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, along with some of her other novels, is included on nearly every imaginable list of 'classical' literature. These lists include works that are estimated to have stood the test of time and are of assumed universal relevance. The notion of the classical and all that is considered such seems to have reached peak popularity in the past few decades with a surge of adaptations and remakes of classic works of literature ranging from traditional and faithful to eccentric. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is no stranger to the full spectrum of adaptations and its appeal is somewhat described in the following paragraph by Professor Timothy Corrigan:

Perhaps no body of literature has so prominently figured as a global and seemingly timeless map of the movements across adaptation and appropriation and as a measure of value and evaluation through history as a classical English literature – most especially perhaps Shakespearean drama and the novels of Jane Austen. Part of the attraction of this cultural and literary prominence in adaptation practice is, I believe, the powerful implications of 'classical' as a transcendent anchor of historical change, and of 'British' as a geographical location, mythologized as a global, if not imperial, center of world culture. Throughout the course of film and media history, these classical adaptations have described a particularly visible and illuminating map of adaptive value across different historical, political, and cultural shifts. [...] Today, too, the works of Shakespeare and Austen are not surprisingly the vehicle for transforming their temporal and geographical classicism into the performative appropriations that criss-cross the Internet and other new and old media. Here there's no denying the blasphemous exuberance and subversive energy of Youtube videos like Jane Austen's Fight

Club, or, more elaborately, of books and games such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* or *Sense and Sensibility* and *Sea Monsters*. (Corrigan 2015: 54)

In the paragraph, Corrigan attempts to define the allure of that which is ‘British’ and what makes the works of British authors such as William Shakespeare and Austen captivating for audiences who continuously consumed any form of media that pertains to their work. That media at times borders on the absurd, such as in the case of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies*, but it is undeniable that even such examples contribute to the socio-cultural conversation of Austen’s novel.

The mentioned and perhaps justified appeal of Austen’s novels above leads to there being a seemingly endless pool of Austen-related content. It is a simple question of supply and demand, described below by Margarida Esteves Pereida:

That Jane Austen has been transformed into a very successful marketable commodity seems an indisputable fact, one that has been thoroughly acknowledged by very different critics, especially, since the 1990s, when – marking the 200th anniversary of the writing of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* – Jane Austen's novels acquired a renewed interest by reason of the innumerable and very popular film and TV adaptations that appeared at the time and have continued to do so to our days. The commercial allure of Jane Austen is not only visible in the number and diversity of adaptations of her novels, but is on display on the internet, be it in scholarly sites dedicated to the writer, be it (and particularly) in the immensity of sites and blogs made by Jane Austen fans, or 'Janeites', all over the world. (Pereida 2017)

As Pereida states, Austen's works have become a market in and of itself and this is, to an extent, due to Austen's devoted fans and their passionate involvement in everything related to the novels. The internet is undeniably the most powerful media force of our time and the strong presence that the fans have online has definitely lead to the continuation of the interest in and popularity of adaptations in all their forms.

Austen's novels have been, apart from the classic and more faithfully-rendered adaptations, adapted by way of transposition, "a controlled shift of the original to the present". With *Pride and Prejudice* in particular, the adaptation count is almost too high to specify and it ranges from the aforementioned classic adaptations such as *Pride and Prejudice* (2005)⁷, *Pride and Prejudice* (1995)⁸, and *Pride and Prejudice* (1980)⁹, a film and two mini-series, respectively, to transposed adaptations such *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004)¹⁰ and those adaptations that draw inspiration from the novel but do not claim fidelity such as films *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001)¹¹ and *Austenland* (2013)¹²¹³.

The adaptations to be dealt with in this thesis were created as severely influenced by either trends in literature and cinema of the time (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and the trend of the supernatural), or by a shift in women's issues (in the case of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*).

2. WOMEN AND FICTION

⁷ Directed by Joe Wright

⁸ Directed by Simon Langton

⁹ Directed by Cyril Coke

¹⁰ A film directed by Gurinder Chadha

¹¹ Directed by Sharon Maguire

¹² Directed by Jerusha Hess

¹³ Both of the mentioned films are also based on novels are likewise a form of *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote about the relationship between women and fiction, or writing in general. Despite the lack of possibilities, time and space¹⁴ to write, women such as Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen felt compelled to write novels. At the time, there was no training for women interested in writing and all they had instead was “training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion”¹⁵. It is no surprise then that Jane Austen wrote novels of social commentary, using her observations and analysis to write what she knew and used the tool of her wit to do so. Apart from character, emotion and the rural society of nineteenth-century England, Austen also knew women and the relationships between women, as she maintained a close relationship with her sister Cassandra throughout her life (Boyle, 2011). Drawing from this, Austen was able to delineate complex female characters and render realistic depictions of the relationships and conversations women have.

An indication of this is the fact that *Pride and Prejudice* passes the Bechdel test. The Bechdel test, named after and created by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in 1985, is passed if a book or film consists of at least two female characters, the characters are named, they have a conversation and finally, their conversation is about something other than a man. The test is used to determine the extent of the presence of female characters in literature and film. When observing well-known novels, TV shows and films through the lens of the test's terms, the lack of adequate representation for women becomes evident.

Along with the novel, all adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* pass the Bechdel test with flying colours, especially *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* which has 7 female characters out of a total of 13 whose communication and experiences the show is largely based on. *Pride and*

¹⁴ Herein lying the appeal Woolf makes for 'a room of one's own'.

¹⁵ Woolf, p. 56

Prejudice and Zombies is no different and uses its supernatural elements to showcase the female characters and their relationships separate from the men in their lives.

Bechdel cited Woolf's 1928 essay as inspiration, specifically the following passage in which Woolf acknowledges Austen and her work:

All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. [...] And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. [...] They are confidantes, of course, in Racine and the Greek tragedies. They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that. (Virginia Woolf 2007: 614)

In this paragraph, as in the rest of her brilliant essay, Woolf expresses indignation about the lacking portrayals of women in fiction. It is evident why her words were inspiration for the Bechdel test as they are an appeal for more multidimensional depictions of women that do not revolve around the man in their lives since lives of real women do not. Relationships women have with men, romantic or otherwise, are only a small part of what makes women and they say very little of other aspects of their personalities.

Virginia Woolf makes a point of appreciating the relationship between women and fiction, whether it is women as authors of novels or women as characters in them, and there is no denying that characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and the women that create them such as Jane Austen are important examples of the representation of multi-faceted women in literature.

Of course, the social climate has changed and that has impacted the way women are written about and portrayed in film and TV series. We are now able to narrow the issue and discuss the lack of representation of women of colour, LGBT+ women, among others, since we may not live in a world of restricting and sexist inheritance laws and arranged or plotted out marriages, but the struggle for the characterisation of women that goes beyond the colour pink, make-up, dresses and obsession with boys, I would argue, still continues.

3. ON THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* (1813)

Pride and Prejudice is Jane Austen's second published novel from 1813 which inspired an abundance of adaptations in previous chapters of this thesis. The novel is nowadays praised and considered a classic of British literature. The novel is a third-person limited narration, thus providing insight into some of the things the protagonists seem to be missing, but predominantly focusing on specific characters. It is even arguable if we might call the novel omniscient by the way of the reader having the "guarantee of the 'truth' of the proceedings"¹⁶ to some extent. The novel's nature in this regard is important to mention as it is to be compared to its adaptations and the choices made by the adaptors that assist in getting their point across when recreating the story. Since the original novel does bring us information that the characters do not receive, we as readers are in the privileged status of being suspect of additional feelings between the female and male protagonists, of knowing that there is more to Mr. Wickham than Elizabeth realizes and knowing the true nature of Caroline Bingley by way of more than Elizabeth's bias. In the adaptations to be discussed, particularly in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the shift in narration brings about a shift in the focus of the plot (by making it more Lizzie-centred as she assumes the position of narrating her own life). The third-person narration of the original novel is then more noticeably focused on hinting at the reader that which is not yet apparent to the characters, Elizabeth most of all.

Even though the character central to this discussion is Elizabeth, I would in short like to address two other female characters in the novel – Mrs Bennet and Lydia Bennet. The two characters embody two generations of, if I may call them so, 'stereotypical' women of the time. They seem almost obsessed with the idea of marriage and a good one at that, one that would raise a woman's social status and provide financial security for her and her family. Mrs

¹⁶ McFarlane, p.18

Bennet is the hysterical matriarch whose insistence on throwing her single daughters at agreeable men ends up hindering her daughters' relationships due to her inappropriate manners and poor timing. She is an example of a helpless woman of the time, evident at the very beginning of the novel as she is pleading Mr Bennet to go visit Mr Bingley at Netherfield. As Mr Bennet expresses his lack of enthusiasm for such social calls, she says "It will be no use to us, if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them."¹⁷ From Mrs Bennet's frustration we might at first read this as another one of her lamentations, but what is seen here is the fact that since it was not appropriate for women to introduce themselves they were dependent on the patriarch of the family to introduce them. Even though in her essence, her character is redeemable due to her being a concerned mother of only daughters in a society that does not hold much regard for unmarried women of their station, she is not very considerate of her daughters' feelings, wishes and even wellbeing. After all, we see her ambition clouding her judgement when she makes Jane ride to Netherfield on horseback to have tea with her suitor and his family rather than give her the carriage. This was because she expected it to rain which would make Jane's hosts let her stay there. Jane, naturally, gets a bad cold from riding in the rain which thrills and delights Mrs Bennet because it would prolong her stay even more. Lydia seems to be Mrs Bennet's favourite and it is no mystery as to why that is so. She is the ditzy daughter that seems to only care about running after eligible bachelors and is in the novel described as "untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless."¹⁸ She is free-spirited and therefore an interesting female character as well, she is self-absorbed and follows her mother's wishes for the wrong reasons. Lydia has little concern for the future of her family, but wants a handsome husband to show him off, and that suits Mrs Bennet just fine it seems. However, with her occasional eccentric behaviour, Lydia provides another perspective on not conforming to the given patterns of behaviour.

¹⁷ Austen, p.3

¹⁸ Austen, p.211

Elizabeth, and to some extent Jane as well, is the author's attempt at providing a character that opposes the indicated stereotype. In contrast to the almost mocking portrayal of Mrs Bennet and Lydia, Elizabeth brings about a new kind of role a woman may assume in the Regency Era-society. Elizabeth gives more significance to her own moral compass and beliefs than to societal norms and her mother's weeping desire for a wealthy match for her daughters. At a certain point in the book, Elizabeth states the following about her own character: "There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me."¹⁹ As the story progresses and the character faces the issues of marriage and class, she is presented as following notions regarding those issues that were unconventional for the time, beginning with the arrival of Mr Collins, her cousin who is to inherit the Longbourn estate after her father's passing. Mr Collins arrives at the estate with an intention of procuring a wife per request of the esteemed Lady Catherine De Bourgh, a wealthy daughter of an earl whose attention flatters him greatly and whose patronage he insists on bragging about upon every chance he gets. Upon first glance at his cousins, Mr Collins expresses an interest in Jane who is often described as the fairest Bennet sister, however, Mrs Bennet quickly warns him of the surely pending marriage proposal from Mr Bingley. Per finding out that Jane is spoken for, Mr Collins turns his attention to Elizabeth by suggestion from Mrs Bennet and makes an attempt on courting her which resulted in a proposition of a highly agreeable marriage. As a clergyman, he explains that one of his motives for marriage to be setting an example of marriage in his parish, although his primary reason seems to be the aforementioned recommendation from his patroness, who he seems far more concerned with than his faith and parishioners. He also mentions his wish to choose his wife from one of Mr Bennet's daughters so as to lessen the pain of the eventual loss of their father and estate, although his demeanour towards the family

¹⁹ Austen, p.119

suggests that his aim here is more likely to appear righteous, since what we know of his character as described by Elizabeth is that he is "conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly."²⁰ It is also likely that he believed that his proposal to one of Mr Bennet's daughters will surely not be refused considering their circumstances and his role in them possibly becoming worse. As Elizabeth refuses his proposal for the first time, his reaction is showing of this characterisation, as well as of Elizabeth's situation:

"I am not now to learn that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long." (Austen 1995:74)

His reaction shows how certain Mr Collins was that his advances would be most welcome and how unfathomable it was for a woman in Elizabeth's position to reject these advances. However, Elizabeth has no affection towards Mr Collins and is not willing to compromise her happiness and marry out of convenience or even necessity.

"Upon my word, Sir," cried Elizabeth, "your hope is rather an extraordinary one after my declaration. I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. -- You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so." (Austen 1995:74)

Elizabeth here shares her understanding of the institution of marriage and what her expectation of it is – she is to marry for love and happiness and nothing less than that. As she

²⁰ Austen, p.93

believes that Mr Collins could bring her neither and she is certain she could not provide either for him, she refuses him once again. This is another proof of her distinctive character because as her friend, Charlotte Lucas, says, "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance."²¹, or at least it was at the time and women had other motives for marrying.

Mr Collins, of course, once again insists that Elizabeth is simply exhibiting some sort of girlish behaviour and toying with his proposal which she is certainly not refusing as she claims she is.

“Indeed, Mr Collins, all praise of me will be unnecessary. You must give me leave to judge for myself, and pay me the compliment of believing what I say. I wish you very happy and very rich, and by refusing your hand, do all in my power to prevent your being otherwise. In making me the offer, you must have satisfied the delicacy of your feelings with regard to my family, and may take possession of Longbourn estate whenever it falls, without any self-reproach. This matter may be considered, therefore, as finally settled.” (Austen 1995: 74)

What Elizabeth does in this paragraph is demonstrate that she is well aware of the repercussions of her reply. She knows that this risks Longbourn and potentially her family's future, but she nevertheless owes it to herself to do what is right for her and encourages Mr Collins to understand that and feel no blame in taking what is to befall him if he so chooses. Elizabeth's mind is set and she shows that she knows herself enough to be certain that there will not be blame on her side either if that were to happen.

When I do myself the honour of speaking to you next on this subject I shall hope to receive a more favourable answer than you have now given me; though I am far

²¹ Austen, p.14

from accusing you of cruelty at present, because I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character. (Austen 1995: 75)

Mr Collins here seems to be implying that it would not even be becoming of a lady to accept a proposal at first and that it is much more “consistent with the true delicacy of the female character” to play coy, and he feels even more encouraged to continue his pursuit. Looking from a 21st-century perspective, this seems highly disturbing and it is difficult to see how it would ever be anything but. Mr Collins’ disbelief of Elizabeth’s refusal might be understood as a lack of tact and social skills as he is described as a man that for some reason struggles with both, but his insistence and dismissal of Elizabeth’s sincere and direct refusal showcases a lot of issues when it comes to the attitude towards women at the time. Mr Collins thus continues:

You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course. My reasons for believing it are briefly these:

-- It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable. My situation in life, my connections with the family of De Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into farther consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications. As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall chuse to attribute it to your wish of increasing my

love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females. (Austen 1995: 75)

Mr Collins persists in his flattery of his own circumstances and assures Elizabeth of the unfavourable nature of hers. It seems as if he is trying to simultaneously assure himself that his estimation of her refusal is correct and assure her that in the unlikely case that she truly is refusing him, she has no other prospects and it is not probable that she will have any as she does not have much to offer a potential husband apart from her loveliness and amiability, which are not likely to get her far in the pursuit for a match. This expectedly frustrates Elizabeth and she realizes that she must be as harsh as possible:

I do assure you, Sir, that I have no pretension whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart. (Austen 1995: 75)

She does not appreciate the classification of typical womanly behaviour being applied to her, she simply wishes to be believed as a rational human being who cannot act against her own feelings, no matter the cost of what her feelings demand. As she has already suggested that she is aware of what this entails, she can say no more that would aid in her being taken seriously and says nothing more to the matter.

As previously mentioned, the Bennet sisters did not have large dowries which at the time meant an increased likelihood of becoming an old maid. This destiny was likely to befall

all the Bennet daughters, if not for the unexpected circumstances of the protagonists' acquaintance with the residents of Netherfield Park. This is precisely why Elizabeth's rejection of Mr Collins' proposal was considered so absurd and unexpected to both Collins and her mother. Mrs Bennet naturally attempts to justify her daughter's behaviour to Mr Collins, calling Elizabeth headstrong and foolish, in an attempt to keep his offer on the table while she makes Elizabeth accept it. By doing this she exhibits her disregard for her own daughter's feelings and criticizes her strong sense of self that we as readers can appreciate – after all, Elizabeth chooses to do as she does because is determined that the marriage would make for the unhappiness of not only her, but Mr Collins as well, which is to be applauded. The advantage of Mrs Bennet's attempt to mend the situation is that Mr Collins becomes disinterested in Elizabeth almost momentarily:

"Pardon me for interrupting you, madam," cried Mr. Collins; "but if she is really headstrong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogether be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation, who naturally looks for happiness in the marriage state. If therefore she actually persists in rejecting my suit, perhaps it were better not to force her into accepting me, because if liable to such defects of temper, she could not contribute much to my felicity." (Austen 1995: 76)

The disadvantage here is that we once more get insight into what was and was not appreciated in a woman's nature – most men, Mr Collins at least, were not interested in strong-minded women as that might lessen their happiness in marriage. Women were to be good-natured and humble in their relationship to their husbands and any resistance or opposition from them that might occur was highly unfavourable. Considering their position in the world they live in, women did not have much choice than to assume this role, but Elizabeth was not one to sacrifice her disposition.

I would like to discuss one more instance where the presented theory on Elizabeth's character is supported before ending this chapter. Much later in the novel, Elizabeth is confronted with Lady Catherine De Bourgh upon her finding out that there is a possibility of Elizabeth having a chance at her nephew, Mr Darcy's, hand in marriage. At this point, Mr Darcy has proclaimed his love to Elizabeth and she replied with her disapproval of him as all she has known him to be is prideful and disagreeable. Since then, she has come to know that her opinion of Darcy had been entirely wrong and that, while he is prideful, his kindness had escaped her notice and the wrongdoings she was accusing him of were not true. To someone like Lady Catherine, any offer of this kind is unacceptable since, as we know, social class presents an important barrier to her and she finds it necessary not to cross these boundaries, not even for affection. She demands Elizabeth to promise that if her nephew were to ask for her hand she will refuse him, as this is the proper and reasonable thing to do. As can be presumed from the previous accounts of Elizabeth's character, she does not give Lady Catherine the satisfaction of promising such a thing, even though she did not have much faith in the fact that another proposal from Darcy is coming her way after she refused him once before.

"Miss Bennet I am shocked and astonished. I expected to find a more reasonable young woman. But do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till you have given me the assurance I require." (Austen 1995: 241)

Lady Catherine's shock and astonishment here is why Elizabeth is a fascinating character. The Lady's status should have all but frightened Elizabeth into submission, but instead she persisted in her strive to stay true to her nature. Lady Catherine's portrayal is a satirical one, depicting an example of a dame insistent that her mere status makes her worthy

of being obeyed unconditionally, especially by those of a lower rank than hers. However, Elizabeth's reply was as follows:

„I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me. [...] Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude," replied Elizabeth, "have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either would be violated by my marriage with Mr Darcy. And with regard to the resentment of his family, or the indignation of the world, if the former were excited by his marrying me, it would not give me one moment's concern—and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn." (Austen 1995: 241)

Once again, she seems to show persistence when faced with the demands of her society. She does not concern herself with the sniggering remarks or disapproval of others and believes in the reasonability of acting according to one's own feelings without regard to issues of money, class and customs she finds absurd. She demonstrates her opinion of what makes someone equal in this sentence directed towards Lady Catherine's remark that she would be quitting her sphere and invading a superior one: "In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal."²² Elizabeth thus seems to present a different perspective on how societal spheres ought to be constructed in the first place, which justifies her comportment towards Mr Collins and Lady Catherine.

²² Austen, p.239

4. ON THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN *THE LIZZIE BENNET DIARIES*

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries begins as the novel itself does, with the words: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”²³ This introduction paints the picture of what the 100 part series is going to be – an homage to the novel by placing even the most antiquated of ideas at the centre of 2012 United States of America and providing a shift through space and time for the well-known story. Lizzie is a graduate student studying mass communications and she starts a video blog as part of her thesis and chooses to make it about her and her sisters’ daily lives. The video blogs range from 2 to 8 minutes in length and do not include all of the original novel’s characters as some are adapted or kept off screen due to the conditions of the format.²⁴

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries received high praise and acclaim, winning a Primetime Emmy Award in the category of Outstanding Creative Achievement In Interactive Media for best Original Interactive Program.

Conditions within the prevailing cultural and social climate play a big part in this particular adaptation and so it was created by way of transposition, a strategy of adaptation mentioned in previous chapters. Transposition entails “a shift that raises the spectre of similarities between the ages, similarities obscured by superficial changes like a horse and carriage becoming a taxi.”²⁵ This is precisely what the adaptation attempts, in many respects to be discussed later on. Since Austen’s work is severely influenced by socio-cultural climate as well, the task of the producers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was to get a sense of how the cultural conditions of the 21st century influenced the issue of women’s position in society.

²³ *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Episode 1: *My Name is Lizzie Bennet*

²⁴ For example, Charles Bingley is called Bing Lee, presumably to omit the name Charles due to it being old-fashioned, and Elizabeth’s sister Kitty is actually a cat.

²⁵ McFarlane, p. 22

On their intentions in creating both the video blog show and, subsequently, writing the accompanying book the author Bernie Su said the following:

We wanted to modernize the independent woman. Back in the 1800s there weren't a lot of options in careers, and it was important to us that career choices be an underlying current to every major decision that our characters make. We didn't want it to be about finding the guy/marrying the rich guy. (Su 2014)

As the author states, the idea was to create a contemporary version of an independent woman's struggles. Elizabeth struggles with expectations to "find the guy/marry the rich guy" and so does Lizzie, to some extent, thanks to the comic effect that are her mother's old-fashioned ways. Naturally, Lizzie addresses this very early in the web series stating very simply: "I've got other things to worry about."²⁶ She also gives her viewers insight in her upbringing and explains how her mother desired to instil in her the ambition to find a good husband, as opposed to the passion Lizzie has for academics.

My mom has been preparing me for marriage my entire life. I didn't turn out quite as she expected. [impersonating her mother] My Lizzie is quite the strange one. All that reading, writing and studying, and that mouth of hers! (Ep. 9)

Writing, studying and being outspoken are not undesirable qualities in modern women, but her mother considers them highly distracting and unnecessary. Since Lizzie is a 24-year-old 21st- century woman, she does not agree with her mother's outdated idea of what her life ought to be like.

What she doesn't understand is that what makes me happy and what makes her happy are two very different things. All life doesn't revolve around men anymore.

I can get a PhD. I can run a company. I can get one of those crappy mortgages and

²⁶ *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Ep. 1: My Name is Lizzie Bennet

put myself in horrible, debilitating debt. [...] So you can chill out, mom, 'cause I don't need a husband. (Ep. 9)

The authors made the decision to preserve this aspect of Lizzie's life to illustrate the fact that modern independent women are not entirely exempt from this expectation, even if "all life doesn't revolve around men anymore." There are many options that women nowadays have that they did not in the 19th century, but an unmarried woman of a certain age is still prone to criticism, the same way a woman without children is. The idea of a woman having to become a wife or a mother by a certain age is an old notion that seems to persist, although the age limit has certainly shifted upwards in today's world. The modern struggles of women include career, something Austen did not have to grapple with in her day. Su and Rorick faced the issue head-on, using the events of *Pride and Prejudice* to do so. This is best illustrated with Mr Collins' proposal, which Lizzie considers equally annoying as her counterpart in *Pride and Prejudice*. The antiquated marriage proposal from a cousin for financial and economic convenience became a job proposal in the story of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Lizzie is just as reluctant to accept the proposal, but its context is entirely adapted for the contemporary version of the character.

The scene in question begins as Mr Collins enters Lizzie's room as she is filming her vlog and requests a "private audience." The job Lizzie is offered is being Collins' business partner in his firm which makes educational videos. As this is not of interest to Lizzie, she refuses instantly, but Collins, as he does in the original novel, does not consider her refusal genuine and labels it as 'negotiation'. He mentions that Lizzie would, of course have to abandon her current studies and offers extended benefits "to sweeten the deal."²⁷ Elizabeth then makes an attempt at proving that her refusal is not an act of negotiating, but a sincere decline of the proposition she has made her.

²⁷ *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Ep 39: The Insistent Proposal

I'm not negotiating, I'm not being shrewd or calculating or any four-syllable word you can think of. I mean it, with all due respect that I possibly have left, when I say I don't want to be your business partner. (*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*: Ep.39)

As is customary for Mr Collins, he does not accept rejection well and begins to convince Lizzie that her refusal is nonsensical since her conditions do not provide her many options for her future.

I am well-connected, funded, and offering you a respectable position. As charming as you are, you are unlikely to ever be offered anything comparable with your connections and degree. (Ep.39)

As Collins says this, Lizzie promptly throws him out of her room and expresses her anger and disappointment to her viewers. Her plan for her career does not align with his offer and she is not going to compromise by accepting an inferior offer, no matter the risk of not having such opportunities in the future.

The episode is very reminiscent of the chapter in *Pride and Prejudice* and it is a perfect example of how the series used the original text and used the tool of intersection to adapt it to its own format. Another aspect in which this tool was used is the expanded universe of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* that the authors created to accompany the Youtube video blogs. The storyline of the vlogs became a transmedia experience to be followed as Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr accounts began emerging and viewer could even interact with the characters (or at least with their constructed social media presence).

Perhaps the main difference between this adaptation and the original relevant to this thesis is the unavoidable bias created by the fact that Lizzie is the narrator here, as opposed to the third-person narration of the original story and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which will be dealt with in the following chapter. *Pride and Prejudice* allows for Darcy's words,

statures and glance description (perhaps not much more than Lizzie's comic impressions of him in her videos), while the videos only break the veil of subjectivity when other characters appear in them. In the case of Darcy, this does not happen until episode 60 and, while there is anticipation to see the mysterious and disliked character, the viewer of the video blogs will not necessarily demand his presence; the aim of the adaptation is clearly sharing Lizzie's perspective on her life and the format does not demand guest appearances by other characters.

5. ON THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES*

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies is, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, a 2009 novel, a parodic gothic adaptation of Austen's novel by Seth Grahame-Smith. As the author explained the idea behind this adaptation, he stated:

You have this fiercely independent heroine, you have this dashing heroic gentleman, you have a militia camped out for seemingly no reason whatsoever nearby, and people are always walking here and there and taking carriage rides here and there ... It was just ripe for gore and senseless violence. From my perspective anyway. (Grossman, 2009)

The author did not have much of a motive for creating the adaptation apart from the entertainment factor of taking a classic and mixing it with then trendy supernatural elements such as vampires, werewolves and zombies. Since zombies fit the title of the novel, they were the monster of choice and the novel was born. The parody received varying reviews with entertainment website The A.V. Club's Donna Bowman giving high praise and commenting that "what begins as a gimmick ends with renewed appreciation of the indomitable appeal of Austen's language, characters, and situations..."²⁸ As evident in their review, the story did end up having great potential at providing a new view into what was great about the original novel; its writing, characters and story.

The characters, the major plot points and the setting adhere to the original story, with an inclusion of the 'sorry stricken' that are invading and threatening the lives of the protagonists. Although the novel retains much of Austen's language even verbatim, the inclusion of zombies in the sense of reconstructing the text creates an air of discomfort at

²⁸ Bowman 2009

times. However, one cannot accuse Grahame-Smith of anything similar to defacement of a classic, after all, the novel is presented as a parody and it is social commentary in itself just as much as *Pride and Prejudice* is. Additionally, Austen herself was not a stranger to the use of Gothic elements in her other novels and we might credit Grahame-Smith with paying homage to the fact, whether it was done intentionally or not. The novel honours the original in touching on class issues and gender issues, mainly by keeping Austen's commentary intact for the most part and adding a level of absurdity by way of the zombie apocalypse. This is to be exemplified further on in the chapter.

The adapted novel was adapted itself and in 2016, it was transferred to the big screen and directed by Burr Steers. Although I have mentioned the economic aspect of adapting novels into films and their overall success, this particular adaptation did not stand the test of transferring from novel to the big screen as the film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* ended up being a box-office flop despite the popularity of the parodic novel adaptation. I will include some of the film's dialogue and choice in this following analysis which will primarily focus on the novel adaptation.

A zombie invasion is certainly a new setting for the story of the Bennets and their wealthy companions, although its gothic elements are, as most of the text of the novel²⁹, still very much of Austen's creation. The novel and the film which I will be addressing here open with an adaptation on *Pride and Prejudice*'s famous line: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains."³⁰ The opening line is a perfect interlude to what the reader is to expect from the novel – a slightly comedic take on the story that uses Austen's words and simply gives zombies a role in the lives of the characters. Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe how this version of the story

²⁹ Not to worry, Austen was credited as co-author of the novel.

³⁰ Austen & Grahame-Smith, p.13

adapted Jane Austen's social commentary and took on Elizabeth's character as one of a woman dealing with the same issues that her original counterpart does with an addition of being a zombie warrior which, as could be expected, poses additional challenges. In another comment in his *Time* magazine interview, the author acknowledged that Austen's main protagonist did not leave much to be desired when it came to him adapting the novel.

It's almost as if Jane Austen was subconsciously setting this up for us. You have this sharp-tongued, fiercely independent heroine. It's not a huge leap to say she's a sharp-daggered, fiercely independent heroine. And then you have Darcy, on the other side, who's a pompous and privileged guy. And you say, all right, he's a pompous and privileged slayer. And that's how they battle it out with each other.

(Grossman, 2009)

Likewise, the authors did not do much to change neither the character nor the dialogue of Mrs Bennet. Her role as an overbearing mother with the sole interest in marrying off her daughters to well-off husbands is a constant in all the adaptations this thesis is addressing, as well as in others that have not been covered, such as the film adaptation from 2005 directed by Joe Wright.

What was done for Elizabeth's character is modify her resilience to fit this new world where the currency, besides money, is the kind of training one has received. The Bennet sisters were trained in martial arts in China because their father considered that to be the superior kind and he cared only about giving his daughters the best chance in the fight against the zombies that threatened their life. However, the location of where one receives their training in that version of British society was also a factor in the gaps between social classes. The upper-class members of society were in Japan and China was reserved for the lower class which the Bennets were classified as. Nevertheless, Elizabeth was proud of her skills and

where she acquired them, and her pride is exhibited in her conversation with Charlotte as she tells her that she “shall never relinquish my sword for a ring”³¹. Even though their skills of zombie slaying were more than necessary in their world, it was still considered unbecoming of a woman to continue using them after they are married. They were widely expected to give them up and assume their role as wives without preserving the one of warrior. When Charlotte attempts to convince Elizabeth that when the right man comes her way, she would have to sacrifice her skills, Elizabeth replies that the right man would not ask her to do so.

This is proven to be the case when Mr Collins comes into the story and makes his proposal. Upon doing so and mentioning what Lady Catherine's opinion of her skills would be, he says, “...your own talents in slaying the stricken, I think, must be acceptable to her, though naturally, I will require you to retire them as part of your marital submission.”³² Consistent with the original story, Elizabeth declines Mr Collins’ proposal as the terms given by him are not ones she is willing to accept. I will not explore the details of her refusal further as they do not significantly differ from those of the original novel which I have explained in detail in a previous chapter. Fighting aside, this version of Elizabeth is one in the same with Austen’s and she also believes, as she says in the 2016 film adaptation of the novel, “Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection.”³³ It is to be concluded that zombie-fighting Elizabeth’s conditions for marriage are affection and acceptance of all her qualities, even if they are deemed not ladylike within the institution. The appropriation of Elizabeth’s character to the realm with a supernatural threat has been done successfully enough that her empowering spirit is almost enhanced by these new circumstances.

³¹ *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, 2016, directed by Burr Steers

³² Austen & Grahame-Smith, p. 54

³³ *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, 2016, directed by Burr Steers.

There seems to be a lot in this world that was considered unladylike, even if the world holds so many dangers that one would assume the notion of femininity to be lower on the list of priorities. But alas, the conditions exist and women of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* are subjected to them with the Bennet sisters being no exception:

...they set off together, armed only with their ankle daggers. Muskets and Katana swords were a more effective means of protecting one's self, but they were considered unladylike; and, having no saddle in which to conceal them, the three sisters yielded to modesty. (Austen & Grahame-Smith 2009: 73)

This is an example the narrator provides of the societal pressures put on the women of the novel. Some of them were ridiculous enough as to endanger their lives and the fact that the Bennets adhere to them in this paragraph proves how strongly these pressures were imposed. In paragraphs such as this one, Grahame-Smith creates a fine balance between the traditionally understood feminine qualities and the empowerment that is provided to the characters by way of fighting skills. Both are somehow present in Grahame-Smith's universe as he makes the characters tackle both the issues of brain-hungry zombies and choosing just the right dress to wear, making the novel an interesting take on gender issues masked with gothic elements and mocking portrayals of social situations.

Now that the content of this adaptation and the position of women within it has been addressed, I will move on to the following chapter concerning the matter of 'agreeability' in all of the mentioned versions of the story.

6. THE AGREEABLE WOMAN IN ADAPTATIONS OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

As have we now observed the intended adaptations of Jane Austen's novel, I am to address the main issue of this thesis; how the adaptations tackle Elizabeth's significance as an extraordinarily multidimensional character as opposed to portrayals that do not exhibit the many facets of women's characters— independent-minded, witty, strong and loving at the same time. What I am to observe most is excerpts from the original novel and the adaptations in question that deal with the perception of what makes a woman agreeable and ladylike and how Elizabeth challenges the notion of an existence of such a woman.

All of the accounts that will follow in this chapter come from a point in the story where Elizabeth has found herself in the midst of a conversation between Mr Darcy and Caroline Bingley, Mr Bingley's sister. Caroline is an example of an upper-class young woman, her fine upbringing providing her with all the right and polite manners but none of the sincerity that ought to follow. Her demeanour to Jane and Elizabeth is for the most part cordial when she is in their company, but petty and critical when she is not. Caroline has her sights set on marrying Darcy and her brother marrying Darcy's younger sister, Georgiana, and thus has little interest in having her brother marry Jane and thus making her future sister-in-law one of a lower class upbringing and even less interest in losing the attention of Mr Darcy to Elizabeth.

The first instance we encounter Darcy in the novel is at an assembly where he accompanied the highly anticipated Mr Bingley as part of his party. His entrance is met with adoring looks and whispers of his ten thousand a year income. However, the admiration was short-lived and by end of the very next sentence the reader is taken down a different path with regards to their perception of the character:

“...his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.” (Austen 1995: 6)

The image of Darcy in these early pages is painted very specifically as a snobby and dislikeable character, unwilling to dance with anyone he is not well-acquainted with, referred to even by his friend as fastidious. This is also where we are allowed a first glance at the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy, as Charles Bingley suggests Darcy change his manner and dance with Elizabeth, who he finds “very pretty, and dare I say, very agreeable”³⁴, which Darcy dismisses upon a glance. “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me.”³⁵ Elizabeth overhears the exchange and even though the narrator paints her reaction as nonchalant with her retelling of what she had heard as a humorous anecdote, Darcy is no longer excused by his stature, not even in the eyes of Mrs Bennet who deems him disagreeable and horrid. To the reader, whoever, another side to Darcy is slowly revealed throughout the novel; a side of a generous and kind man who, granted, has some issues with social anxiety and, above all, pride. His transition from most disagreeable to the love of Elizabeth’s life may seem a bit sudden to some, and understandably so. As one of the reviews of the original book states:

Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine, is supported with great spirit and consistency throughout; there seems no defect in the portrait; this is not precisely the case with

³⁴ Austen, p.7

³⁵ Austen, p.7

Darcy her lover, his easy unconcern and fashionable indifference somewhat abruptly changes to the ardent lover. (Nixon 2009: 295)

However, he is a man of great wealth and fine education and the nephew of Lady Catherine, after all, and it seems that with all that comes a healthy dose of prideful behaviour. Luckily, Darcy overcomes his own faults and proves worthy in the end.

The reason why I have focused so closely and in such details on Mr Darcy is because his picky nature is evident in his very particular stance on what an agreeable woman ought to be like. All of the versions of *Pride and Prejudice* that are dealt with in this thesis have their own version of Darcy's account of the requirements of such a woman and they are to be presented in the following paragraphs. Another reason why his character was to be described is because despite all of his lists of necessary qualifications, he does fall in love with Elizabeth who has little prerequisites or interest to meet them.

The conversation in question begins with Mr Bingley's "complete"³⁶ character being exhibited once again through his appreciation of the accomplishments of the women around him. He is, of course, assured otherwise by Darcy and "his faithful assistant"³⁷, Caroline. Thus followed their comprehension of idea of an accomplished woman:

"Oh! certainly, [...] no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved."

³⁶ As defined by Elizabeth

³⁷ Austen, p. 26

"All this she must possess," added Darcy, "and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading." (Austen 1995: 26)

It is Georgiana Darcy's words that do most of the talking here, but Darcy's lack of criticism is surely a sign that this is intended to be his thoughts through someone else's mouth. As evident from the list Caroline provides, there is not much that does not prove to be of a decorative nature; musical abilities, drawing, dancing, knowledge of languages and a woman's overall manner, none of which have much to do with her personality or any kind of her cognitive abilities. They do seem to have much to do with a how one could attract a man's attention or present herself to her peers. Although it is not surprising that this is what the likes of Caroline and Fitzwilliam Darcy care about since they were raised to protect reputation at all cost. However, Elizabeth does not seem to regard these features as realistic, saying "I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united." Her reaction is certified as unjust by the women in the room who have aspired to meet these standards all their lives and the injustice is a condemned as another means of acquisition of a man's attention. Not much in this world is suggested to be done with any other intention, it seems, but Elizabeth attempted only to suggest that the terms are not likely to be met by most women as they ask for too much and consider too little. Elizabeth does not have much interest in the things Darcy and others mention and has not had much opportunity in her life to acquire them either.

The impression that viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* get of William Darcy is not unlike the one readers of *Pride and Prejudice* do for the better part of the novel. Darcy is as uptight and unlikeable as ever, without the advantage of a narrator that is not Lizzie to suggest

ulterior motives to his behaviour. As he does in Jane Austen's story, Darcy provides his take on what a woman should be like to be considered 'together.'³⁸ His list goes as follows:

Someone who is together is someone who is fiscally responsible... and interested in arts and culture beyond the standard Hollywood movies and pop music. Someone who is physically fit, and takes care of herself. And also takes care of others by being courteous, and has a charitable nature. But she should be selective of who she spends her time with. Education is important, so she should at least have or be pursuing an advanced college degree, and fluency in more than one language is so important in this day and age. As is being up to date on current affairs, and I'm not talking about who did what on whatever reality show seems to have gripped the nation at the moment. That is not a talent anyone need pursue. Oh, and she should be well read, especially in the classics. (Su, Rodrick 2014: 103)

Once again, Lizzie is surprised by such a list and finds it highly unreasonable. One thing I would like to point out about this version of Darcy's list is that he does address a woman's personality by wanting her to be courteous and of charitable nature. In Austen's version, only a woman's manners are mentioned, however, as we see in the case of Caroline, having manners does not guarantee a good-natured personality. Lizzie expresses her disapproval of his account:

There is no woman in the world who meets every requirement on that list. In fact [...] the only one I can think of is Anna Karenina. And she's fictional. [...] Tolstoy wrote the perfect woman. Elegant, refined, socially savvy. She was, in

³⁸ This adaptation version of 'agreeable' or 'accomplished'.

fact, *your* perfect woman. Until she dared to be herself. (Su, Rodrick 2014: 103-104)

By this point it should be no surprise that Lizzie's reply is witty and said with determination, but here we may laugh a little at the fact that in her reply she proved to check at least one requirement off Darcy's list³⁹. Lizzie makes a strong point at the very end of the paragraph, stating how Karenina met all of his terms until she got the courage to be herself. With this, Lizzie suggests that if a woman is to attempt to accomplish all that people like Darcy ask of her, it would leave her no room for individuality. She would be not more than a sum of list of things men might look for and Lizzie has no interest in that being what determines her personality.

Her reaction is one of the many reasons she stands out as a female character; while the likes of Caroline Bingley would do anything fit the mould created by their community, Elizabeth's aim here is to fight and almost ridicule it, since her circumstances have shown her that there are far more important things for a woman to be and that while adhering to the rules put forward might help her find a husband it does not guarantee her happiness, and she values that most of all.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies gives a new insight in Elizabeth's criticism of the societal image of what a woman must be to make an agreeable match and considered 'accomplished' by the likes of Mr Darcy. The adaptation has its own rendition of Mr Darcy's checklist of characteristics such a woman must possess and it, as it always does, strikes Elizabeth as absurd.

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages; she must be well trained in the fighting styles of the

³⁹ Being obviously well-read in the classics.

Kyoto masters and the modern tactics and weaponry of Europe. And besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved. All this she must possess, and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading. (Austen & Grahame-Smith 2009: 34)

Not unlike the rest of the novel, this list is not very different from the one in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, with the expected addition of fighting skills and what those skills ought to specifically be like. Zombie-fighting Darcy's agreeable woman does not have much in regards to a personality either, but she does seem to have the time and the conditions for both martial arts skills and caring about her posture and musical talent. Elizabeth does not fail to address this.

I never saw such a woman. In my experience, a woman is either highly trained or highly refined. One cannot afford the luxury of both in such times. As for my sisters and I, our dear father thought it best that we give less of our time to books and music, and more to protecting ourselves from the sorry stricken. (Austen & Grahame-Smith 2009: 34)

Although her response to Mr Darcy's criteria is disregarded as being severe to her fellow women, Elizabeth is simply trying to point out the reality of their position. Their world is full of danger and the acquiring of qualities deemed feminine falls a bit lower on their list of priorities – when your very existence depends on fighting zombies, there is not much time to spend on perfecting your drawing or singing skills.

As previously mentioned, in all varieties of the original story, Elizabeth and Darcy end up together and Darcy's list is rendered irrelevant. After all, looking at the lists presented as

outlines for accomplished and agreeable women, one might notice that there are characters in the story that do match the description. Georgiana Darcy, for instance, is an example of a well-mannered and educated young lady, eligible and agreeable in every way including her social and financial status; and yet she is almost ruined by her relationship with Mr Wickham. Jane Bennet is another example of undeniable agreeability with hardly any character throughout *Pride and Prejudice* and its adaptations showing dislike for her. However, her mother's behaviour and status lead to her losing Bingley, even if it is only temporarily.

The notion of agreeability thus spans the majority of female characters of the novel and its adaptations, and each seems to serve as commentary on the socially constructed idea of proper feminine mien. With Elizabeth at the forefront of this endeavour as perhaps the loudest and most obvious opposition, the largely female driven original novel and its counterparts presented in this thesis provide their consumers with relevant and elaborate commentary on gender roles.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is necessary to reiterate my stance that Jane Austen broke the mould when it comes to the relationship that exists between women and fiction, as a female author and an author that wrote about female characters. Depictions of women as multidimensional participants in all imaginable narratives that fiction can provide result in much needed social and cultural strides towards progress and fair representation, and Austen's role in this on-going movement is unquestionably substantial.

As far as the adaptations mentioned in this thesis, my opinion on their role as carriers of the torch that Jane Austen lit as a champion for women writers and female characters is that each of them adds something to the image of Elizabeth as a strong woman with a greater regard for happiness and contentment than societal standards of femininity. She does not allow for status and financial limitations to strip her of her independence and she assumes it whenever she is faced with challenges dealing with issues of morality and intellectuality. Each version of the story sets the scene of what is expected of women in order for them to be deemed agreeable and each version employs the character of Elizabeth confronting the notion of agreeability and its very existence.

The presented adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* were chosen in order to showcase the variety of ways Austen's novel has been revived throughout the years and how these versions of the story tackle the social commentary aspect of Austen's work through their contemporary and parodic lenses.

The unexpected advantage I have found *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* to have over *Pride and Prejudice* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is the lack of third-person narration. The story plays out through Elizabeth's eyes primarily and her perspective is the one that viewers rely on. This means that without the foreshadowing of Mr Darcy's affections that the original

novel provides, Elizabeth's attributes, both her strengths and flaws, have more time and opportunity to shine.

In the case of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, it provided a slightly humorous and absurd context for Elizabeth to prove herself in and it, in its own ridiculous way, allowed for her character to stand out as a confident and vivacious character. She realizes that her fighting skills are an advantage that should not be compromised, even for the advantages of marrying favourably. She was determined to marry for love and do that without having to lessen herself by giving up her sword.

To conclude, being put in an inferior position does not make you inferior – that is a lesson every reader should learn from the character of Elizabeth Bennet in all her editions; at least it is one that I have learned.

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