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Pride and Prejudice: Letters are Critical to Character Development

The letters in the story *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen are critical to the plot and were used to relay significant news, convey feelings of affection, and as a method of expressing social superiority. The direct function and importance for Austen's use of letters was to help facilitate the story by expediting the development of key characters as they expressed themselves through their letters. Upon closer examination of the letters from Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins we see that character development occurs via those letters as well as a letter written by Mrs. Gardiner and through all three of these letters we see the reflection of the true dispositions of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins. Letters were also used to present the extreme personality differences between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins and to change our negative opinion of Mr. Darcy's character while increasing our abhorrence of Mr. Collins' character.

Through his initial introduction we find that "Mr. Darcy's nature, far from being social, is reserved, independent, isolated, private, and vain" (Morgan 342). When originally asked about his attraction to Elizabeth he said that "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are tempted by other men" (Austen 9). From his comments and behaviour we begin to dislike Mr. Darcy and even begin to wish him misfortune. Later in the story Mr. Darcy professed his love for Elizabeth and after she had refused his proposal he wrote her a letter. In his letter we find that he was profoundly affected by her opinion of him and he attempted to explain his actions against Mr. Wickham and his objections to Mr. Bingley's marrying Jane. He also tells Elizabeth that he believed it was difficult for her to find that Mr. Wickham had been acting deceitfully because it wasn't part of her personality to be

generally suspicious. In his letter Mr. Darcy also stated that "Detection could not be in your power, and suspicion certainly not in your inclination" (Austen 134). Mr. Darcy was telling Elizabeth that he was not upset with her judgment of Wickham based on her knowledge at the time and that he remained approachable on any subject. After Elizabeth read his letter our judgment of Mr. Darcy's character began to change moderately as he had exposed his errors through his letter to Elizabeth.

Our prejudice against Mr. Darcy's character was changed considerably through a letter from Mrs. Gardiner that was written in response to a letter from Elizabeth inquiring about Mr. Darcy's involvement in the eventual marriage of Mr. Wickham and Lydia. To paraphrase what was written in Mrs. Gardiner's letter we learned that it was Mr. Darcy that had located Mr. Wickham and Lydia. We also learned that Mr. Darcy had persuaded Mr. Wickham to marry Lydia by securing a higher ranking commission for Mr. Wickham and agreed to pay him a generous financial settlement (Austen 208). Mr. Darcy's actions were critical to saving Lydia's reputation as well as saving the reputation of Elizabeth's family. Through Mrs. Gardiner's letter, Elizabeth developed contradictions to her initial prejudices of Mr. Darcy's character as he rapidly transforms into the role of the hero and into a character that Elizabeth could admire and fall in love with. This was completely opposite of the letters written by the lesser character of Mr. Collins which served to solidify the audacity and egocentricity presented by that character.

The most obvious existence of character development as a function of the use of letters occurred when Mr. Collins was first introduced via his initial letter to Mr. Bennett. In his letter Mr. Collins attempts to illustrate his social superiority through his association with his benefactor Lady Catherine. Mr. Collins stated that he was privileged that she had given him special recognition and further stated that her "bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of the parish" (Austen 43). The responses of the Bennett family to reading Mr. Collins' letter were varied and his flawed character was predominantly