

# Reshaping the Gentleman: Jane Austen's Notion of Gentleman in *Pride and Prejudice*

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## Abstract

The notion of gentleman has always been an unavoidable topic when studying Victorian novels. However, the notion of gentleman then was different from its original meaning since it only referred to those of noble birth at first. The shift from emphasizing birth to moral attributes can be traced back to John Locke in the 17th century. Novelists like Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen's works can also be regarded as the legacy of 18th century that helped refashioning the notion of gentleman in Victorian age. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, she depicts her ideal image of a gentleman, a man with responsibility and civility, stressing on the moral features of gentlemanliness.

## Keywords

Gentleman; Jane Austen.

## 1. Introduction

"Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilisation, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilisation, have in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion." When Edmund Burke wrote these words in *Reflections on the Revolution* in 1790, he was emphasizing the importance of the gentleman spirit in European civilization. Many Victorian critics would agree with Edmund Burke and regard the notion of a gentleman as a cultural goal, a mirror of desirable moral and social values. As early as 18th century, many novelists have begun to portray their notion of a gentleman through characters, sometimes in a quite didactic style. These novelists include Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen whose connection with the former is well known (it is well documented that Austen's favorite novel was *Sir Charles Grandison*). In Austen's famous work *Pride and Prejudice*, we can see the qualities that Austen thinks to be essential to a real gentleman. The novel is also a part of the efforts that Austen made in hopes of refashioning the notion of gentleman.

The origins of gentleman lie deep in feudal society and the qualification of birth. In other words, the original meaning of gentleman refers to those of noble birth or good family. The English word "gentleman" is derived from the French word "gentilhomme", but the English word is still widely used until today while the French term became obsolete short after the French Revolution. Since 16th century, the range of people who can be regarded as a gentleman has been expanded. Sir Thomas Smith wrote a statement in 1583: "One who can live idly and without manual labor and will bear the port (department) and countenance of a gentleman, he shall be taken for a gentleman." The gentlemanly status became accessible to the Church of England clergyman, the army officer and the member of Parliament. But it was not enough for those aspiring to attain this rank due to the increasing amount of wealthy people from middle class. Redefining the notion and the qualifications needed for a gentleman was important to the middle class. So when it comes to Victorian period, that a gentleman merely comes from pure gens was no longer the ruling idea defining a gentleman, people became more concerned with

the moral attributes of gentlemanliness. And in *Pride and Prejudice*, we can already sense the shift from emphasizing birth to emphasizing virtues when concerning the qualifications of a gentleman.

## 2. A Gentleman with Responsibility

For Austen, a gentleman should be responsible and take care for women and undertake tasks that other man are unable to perform. Darcy is certainly a gentleman if only concerning his noble birth, but his gentlemanliness does not only lie in his great fortune and good family. Elizabeth knows Darcy's fortune and income from the very beginning, yet her attitude towards him has not changed greatly until she realizes the many virtues that Darcy carries. During the visit to Pemberley, Elizabeth gradually becomes respectful and grateful to Darcy and she even reconsiders the proposal that Darcy once made to her. After the conversation with Darcy's housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds, Elizabeth began to change her mind towards Darcy about his nature. Mrs. Reynolds is full of praise for Darcy, describing Darcy as "the best landlord, and the best master that ever lived", "affable to the poor" just like Darcy's father. She also tells Elizabeth that "there is not one of his tenants or servants but will give him a good name". Here Mrs. Reynolds is authorizing and validating Darcy's work at Pemberley. Darcy well performs his duty as the landowner, his management makes Pemberley productive and gains the respect from his tenants and servants. It is true that Pemberley is a legacy that Darcy inherited from his father but his playing the role that no one can replace and executing the duties to maintain this land is also the truth. Austen has already portrayed those gentry landowners such as Mr. Bennet that failed to execute the duties and can eventually lead to family ruin.

Darcy also takes care of people around him and people who may in need of his help. The early death of his parents makes Darcy take the responsibility to raise his sister. In Mrs. Reynolds' words, "whatever can give his sister any pleasure is sure to be done in a moment. There is nothing he would not do for her". But it does not mean that Darcy would fulfil every wish of her sister, he would not spoil her and he protected his sister from being seduced by Wickham thus avoiding a disgraceful elopement. Darcy always feels that it is his responsibility to solve the problems that no other people are able to. When he knows that Wickham and Lydia eloped and Elizabeth and Elizabeth's family is in great astonishment and pain, he feels that he is responsible for this due to his late revealing of Wickham's true nature. He secretly takes the task and finds Wickham and Lydia when Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner failed to. He thinks about the best solution to end this elopement and saves Lydia from Wickham's roguish intentions. He forces the wayward Wickham to marry Lydia by granting him a huge amount of money while Elizabeth's family members are not able to achieve that. Darcy as a responsible gentleman playing the crucial role within the patriarchal framework, successfully protects his estate, his family and also the person he loves.

Compared with Darcy, Wickham is far from a gentleman when concerning the ability and willingness to take one's duty. Wickham's elopement with Lydia is one of the proofs. Wickham does not want to marry Lydia, he elopes with her only because Lydia is a flirty girl and easy to seduce. He considers little for Lydia since as a girl Lydia would seriously ruin her reputation by eloping. Wickham also fails to fulfil his duty as a soldier by escaping from the militia. It is also obvious that Wickham would not fulfil his duty as a patriarchal role to work so as to support his family(although only consists of Lydia and himself). Wickham's profession as a army officer does not naturally make him a gentleman just like Mr. Collins who has a noble profession as a clergy. Here Austen is suggesting that profession alone does not always bolster a man's character and that the identity that comes with involvement in the clergy, military, or law does not always add weight to one's gentlemanliness. Wickham is not a responsible gentleman that others can rely upon whereas Darcy's gentlemanliness is strengthened by his responsibility.

### 3. A Gentleman with Civility

Civility can be regarded as the defining feature of gentleman rather than politeness. In the 18th century, it could mean “conformity to the principles of social order” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Both “civility” and “politeness” were seen as features of civil and civilized societies, but the former term emphasized “elegance of behaviour” as a requirement in man as a citizen, while “politeness” has to do with polish and smoothness of surface. “Politeness” was associated with the manners of the aristocracy in France and Italy, whereas “civility” was seen as a characteristic of the English gentleman.

As for Jane Austen, she uses the word “civility” and its cognates much frequently than “politeness” and its cognates in *Pride and Prejudice*. “Civility” and “civil” appear more than 60 times in the novel while “politeness” and “polite” only 20 times. This can be seen as a sign of Austen’s concentrating on civility as a essential quality of a gentleman rather than “politeness”. As early as the 17th century, English philosopher John Locke has already emphasized the importance of civility as a crucial element when shaping a gentleman in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), which reads like an instruction manual stressing on moral education. Locke’s civility is “a disposition of the mind not to offend other”, an internal quality, while politeness is, Locke says, “the language whereby that internal civility of the mind is expressed”. Since “politeness” is relatively external, it can be performed. As Robin Gilmour wrote in *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Age*, “Dissimulation was the serpent among the flowers of polite manners”. Politeness can be a successful but dishonest performance which is always in danger of being mistaken for the real thing. Jane Austen is clearly aware of this problem since she depicts Wickham as a master of “those lesser talents, of an engaging, insinuating manner, an easy good breeding, a genteel behaviour and address”(in Lord Chasterfield’s words). When Wickham first appears, he seems to be a perfectly charming young man. “His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address.” Although Wickham acts like a gentleman and even earns Elizabeth’s good opinion through his performance, the revelation of his dandy and libertine nature finally comes. Through Wickham’s inconsistency between his outer politeness and inner disposition, Austen is warning the readers of the danger of being deceived by superficial “politeness”. For a real gentleman, civility as an internal disposition should be taken as the crucial feature instead of politeness.

Although Locke suggests that civility is internal, he also implies that civility can be taught, it must “be made habitual to children and young people”. In other words, incivility can be corrected. Darcy is not a perfectly civil character and the novel actually presents Darcy’s evolution in civility and gentlemanliness. Locke defines civility as “that general good will and regard for all people which makes anyone have a care not to show in his carriage any contempt, disrespect, or neglect of them” and “a disposition of the mind that shows itself in the carriage whereby a man avoids making anyone uneasy in conversation”. But Darcy seems be the exact opposite of Locke’s definition of civility at first. Darcy’s superciliousness at the Meryton ball is just what Locke defines as incivility—“contempt or want of due respect discovered either in looks, words, or gesture”. “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.” However, Darcy reflects upon himself after his first proposal rejected by Elizabeth and when they meet in Pemberley, a great alternation of his manners can be seen from his attitude towards Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. The polite and utterly charming interaction he has with them differs greatly from his first engagement with any new society in the past. He treats them with such kindness and consideration in spite of their lower social position which shows a large progress in his civility.

## 4. Conclusion

Although the notion of gentleman is much more flexible and hard to define in the 18th century compared with former ages when gentlemanliness was simply based on qualification birth, Jane Austen takes the responsibility as a novelist to reshape the concept of gentleman. Like John Locke, she concentrated on the moral component in gentlemanliness. Through revealing the irresponsibility and libertine nature of Wickham, Austen suggests the fragility of profession in proving one's gentlemanliness and the danger of dissimulation in politeness. Through depicting gentry landowner Darcy as a responsible gentleman protecting his estate and family while evolving in civility, Austen is emphasizing the importance of responsibility and the essential role of civility in shaping a gentleman.

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