Modern Character Interpretations and Feminist Critiques of Regency Literature

by Palgrave (goldenrod)

Summary

The study group has to read Pride and Prejudice for their English Literature 101. Annie learns sometimes it’s not a good idea to study your favourites too closely... and other times, it might just be one of the best ideas you ever had.

Notes

My fourth submission for the community-tv Summer School Fic battle, this time with an awesome prompt from fluffyfrolicker (‘The study group has to read Pride and Prejudice for their English Literature 101.’) It’s not really a crossover with Pride and Prejudice strictly speaking, but you’ll probably get more out of it if you’re read the book, seen a TV / movie version or at least have some basic familiarity with the story, concept and characters. Hope it satisfies!

It also gets a bit shippy -- not exactly anything that’s out of the realms of what’s been seen on TV so far, but it’s definitely an undercurrent. Also, while I’m not really a hardcore shipper either way, I tend to lean towards one of the pairings listed above over the other for the purposes of this story.

Turns out, the book the group are studying for English Literature 101 is one of Annie’s all-time...
favourite novels.

She first read it as a little girl, and marveled at all the depictions of the beautiful dresses and the balls and the unsteady course of the true love between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. As she got older, she loved at Jane Austen’s prose and the satire, how fresh and modern it all felt to her even though it was written almost two hundred years before she was even born. It got her through rehab, serving a lifeline through the pain and fear and hunger even as everything she’d ever known was torn away from her, just one thing left for her to clutch at and cling on to until she came out the other side.

Annie doesn’t mention any of this when they study it for the midterm presentation and accompanying paper, though. She’s not sure why, since it’s not like it would come as a huge surprise to the others and it’s exactly the kind of thing they know she would like. But part of her suspects that maybe that’s the reason; when they take the class she’s going through a mild rebellious streak where she wants to shake things up a bit and be known for more than the obvious things that signify ‘Annie’. *Pride and Prejudice* is too obviously ‘her’.

So when they read it for English Lit 101, as a replacement for the professor’s original choice (“Seriously, I wanted to go with *Twilight*, but apparently the *squares* who make up the curriculum reading list don’t think that it’s *classic* enough -- *whatevs!*”), she just sits and huffs mock-indignantly at Jeff’s good-natured jibe about her reading something that isn’t a textbook for once. She giggles at Troy and Abed’s terrible British accents when they read out their assigned sections. She nods when Shirley describes how dreamy Mr. Darcy is, (although he’s not as dreamy as Blair Underwood, that man is *fine* and his ass looks like it was cut from pure marble), and she rolls her eyes when Pierce says he doesn’t get it, who’s Pride and when exactly is the murder supposed to happen?

And she bites her lip through Britta’s tirade about the sexual politics of the novel and how Austen is *so* overrated as a proto-feminist and pretends that it doesn’t hurt a little bit (or even a lot) to have something so precious to her so casually and uncaringly torn to shreds.

(Not least because Britta clearly doesn’t get it. The point isn’t that the women are just doormats who are dependent on men and how cool that is, the point is that the women play these power games in their search for husbands because it’s, like, *literally the only power they have in this society*. It’s a *satire* about the whole thing, not just an endorsement. But that would be dependable, familiar, over-defensive Annie speaking, the Annie who is obviously *so* into *Pride and Prejudice*, so she keeps quiet.)

At home, later that night, as Troy and Abed develop prospective *Inspector Spacetime* routines in the Dreamatorium, she digs out her hardcover edition and reads it cover to cover. She rarely touches the hardcover edition, wants to keep it as pristine and flawless as possible and normally reads one of her well-thumbed, dog-eared and raggy paperback editions. But for some reason, she goes with the hardcover. The pages are cream and smooth, with gilded edges, and as she turns the pages and relives the scenes she knows so well, the ball at Netherfield and Mr. Darcy’s failed first proposal to Elizabeth, she amuses herself by picturing her friends in the roles of the novel.

She kind of feels bad about making Shirley Mrs. Bennett, since Shirley’s *way* nicer and smarter, but it has to be said that the fit isn’t entirely inappropriate. They both tend to meddle and guilt-trip and ship people way more than appropriate at times -- she spend *ages* trying to nudge Jeff and Britta into hooking up, after all, and Annie is provoked into a snort which is in *no* way a lingering remnant of jealousy and resentment about how all that got messy and how Britta still managed to get something from Jeff that Annie wanted but doesn’t seem able to get. And how this in no way reflects why at this particular moment Shirley gets Mrs. Bennett and not, say, Mrs. Gardiner, who is a much better and nicer example of a maternal figure in the novel.
Troy is Mr. Bingley. Again, Annie kind of feels bad, because Mr. Bingley isn’t exactly the brains of the bunch and it again seems kind of mean on that score, but at least this time she can at least defend it since Mr. Bingley is good, and loyal, and has the biggest, kindest heart ever, and who cares if he’s not the smartest guy in the world.

Pierce, of course, is Mr. Collins. Obnoxious, blowhard douche who isn’t nearly as clever or popular as he thinks he is. Annie can’t even feel bad about this one; hey, she can’t deny it’s not flattering, but it’s too perfect a fit in this case.

(Or maybe he’s a guy version of Lady Catherine de Burgh; same, but absolutely loaded. The thought of Pierce in a Regency dress makes her splutter with giggles for a few moments.)

Jeff... she’s not sure about Jeff. Not any more. She used to think Jeff was Mr. Darcy. It made sense at the time; Mr. Darcy was the guy everyone thought was a jerk but who turned out to be the dashing romantic who sweeps the heroine off her feet to take them to their happily ever after. Which seemed like a role Jeff was built for.

Except no matter what Annie does or how hard Annie tries, it doesn’t seem like Jeff wants to fill that role, and the more she learns about him the more he seems more like a guy who puts on such a good front to hide a seething mess of issues and fucked-up behaviour. She hates to think it, and smooshes it down if it ever crops up, but she’s kind of starting to think that Jeff is more like Mr. Wickham.

A good Mr. Wickham, to be fair. A Mr. Wickham who actually is decent, or at least capable of decency at the end of it all, a Mr. Wickham who’d never take advantage of an innocent maiden when it came down to it, no matter how much she kind of wanted him to. But Mr. Wickham, nonetheless. And you don’t get a romantic ending with Mr. Wickham. You get forced into an unhappy marriage between a self-obsessed jerk and a know-nothing idiot because the alternative is being a social pariah.

And Britta...

Annie’s tempted to make Britta a sluttier version of Lydia, a know-nothing idiot who just causes trouble for everyone and doesn’t care who’s feelings she tramples in the process, but her own conscience puts it’s foot down at this point; that’s totally not fair or justifiable, and entirely because she’s still a bit pissed at Britta’s condemnation of the novel from earlier in the day. Okay, Britta might not be the most thoughtful or tactful person ever, and okay, maybe her sex life isn’t that far off from a twenty-first century equivalent of Lydia’s thing for soldiers (and Annie’s really trying really hard to stop being so prudish about that kind of thing and accept that Britta is a strong, independent woman who can sleep with whoever she wants, no matter how ill-advised or regrettable or frankly weird and kind of creepy or freaky, but she has issues, okay).

But Britta would never pull the kind of selfish, blinkered crap Lydia pulls. Britta cares about people. Britta would walk through fire rather than hurt one of the people she loves. Britta, while she’d never take back her beliefs about the novel no matter how misguided or inaccurate they might be and would just dig in more stubbornly about them if challenged, would be utterly mortified and do anything to make amends if she’d known she’d hurt Annie’s feelings about it, no matter how ludicrous it is for Annie to get so hurt over someone harshly criticizing what is, at the end of it all, just words on a page written two hundred years ago -- and it is, Annie knows it is, but she can’t help how special it feels to her, how it feels like criticizing the book is criticizing her in some weird way.

Britta’s maybe Jane. Or Kitty. Or a bit of both. Okay, it’s not a perfect fit either way -- yeah, prudery or not, that sex life thing really doesn’t help her chances there -- but she’s the sister-figure, who, while she might be easily lead and have an issues-surrounding-female-sexuality-aside-a-
kind-of-regrettable-thing for soldiers / the borderline psychotic, is kind and loving and devoted. Yeah, if she is Jane, then she’s the Jane from the 2005 movie where they kind of tried to make things more ‘realistic’ and give Elizabeth and her issues in a way that Annie didn’t really like, ‘cause it seemed to miss the point for her, but still Jane. The sister. Annie can live with ‘sister’. Plus, it kind of fits with making Troy Mr. Bingley, because those two have that thing developing between them, that really cute and shy and sweet little crush on each other they think no one’s picked up on.

Of course, people tend to forget that there’s another Bennett sister. A sister who might also fit Britta; she’s opinionated, and a bit of a know-it-all who’s mostly talk with little to back it up. But, while there’s maybe a little bit of Mary in there, Britta’s definitely not Mary. Because Annie knows exactly who their equivalent of Mary is.

It’s her. Annie’s the group’s Mary.

Annie wants to be Elizabeth, of course. Everyone does. Elizabeth’s the heroine, clever and funny and insightful and just pretty enough to be relatable without being the bombshell everyone worries is completely out of their league. She can cut people down with a clever comment and still have them like her. And sometimes, when she reads the book, she can even fool herself into thinking that she is, just for a little while.

But it never lasts. No matter how she twists things, it always comes back to the simple fact of it; Annie is Mary.

Because Mary isn’t just opinionated, and a know-it-all. Yeah, Mary thinks she’s gifted, and talented, and smart, and she’s totally not. But there’s something else going on as well, something about Mary that hits all too hard for Annie.

Because in truth, Mary just wants to be noticed. That’s all it is. She says stupid things and plays the piano really badly because otherwise, she’d be totally ignored. She’s not pretty like the others, or talented, or as smart as she thinks she is, and deep down, she knows it. She knows it so much it hurts. So she fills her life with stuff she’s only read in books and parrots it back to people so that at least they’ll hear something she says, even if they just roll her eyes about how silly she is. She doesn’t even get a proper ending to the story, everyone just kind of forgets about her. No one falls in love with her, no matter how much she wants them to. No one can fall in love with her, so she just fills her life with activities and projects and extra-curricular activities to fill up the gnawing, painfully empty hole inside, and maybe it’s not that Jeff is Mr. Wickham, maybe it’s just because she’s not someone anyone can lo--

Pain. As she quickly turns the page, the gilded edge cuts into her finger, and she hisses with the sting, Tears well in her eyes. A straight diagonal cut slits awkwardly across her right index finger, welling alarmingly quickly with blood. She sucks her finger, but the blood keeps coming; she gets off her bed (making sure to quickly check the book for bloodstains and close it, placing it carefully on the bed so that it doesn’t fall off; yeah, even when she’s injured, the book comes first; says it all, really). She’s out of her room and in the kitchen in moments, rummaging through the kitchen cupboards and drawers, trying to find the medical box she keeps stocked, but it seems to have been moved...

“You okay?”

She turns. Abed is at the ‘door’ of the blanket fort, still dressed in his Inspector Spacetime costume, his head cocked at her and a frown on his face.

“Paper cut,” she manages to get out through the finger wedged against her tongue. ”Where’s the first aid box?”
“Troy and me were using it as the DARSIT’s primary forcefield generator. Hold on.” Abed hurries into the Dreamatorium, emerging seconds later with the first aid box, now adorned with what seems to be a purple birthday hat and some reels of tape from an old cassette. Annie doesn’t even want to ask. She does, in fact, want to lecture him on moving the first aid kit from where it is ideally positioned for immediately emergency response -- what if the apartment was on fire, or someone got shot, or something? -- but it’s kind of hard to do with a finger in your mouth. She pulls out of a band aid, and tries to open it with her free hand, but it’s tricky and difficult.

“Here. Let me.”

Abed pulls out a bottle of antiseptic from the box, then takes the band aid and efficiently tears it out of the wrapper. She takes her finger out of her mouth to take it and put it on, and after he briefly looks down at her finger he holds it out for a moment, and Annie’s a bit surprised to realize he’s offering to put it on for her.

“Abed?”

“I don’t mind. It looks like it’s in an awkward place.”

It’s not really Abed -- he’s not exactly a neat freak but he’s not wild about germs either, and he generally doesn’t offer to help with these kinds of things. But he’s really been trying to be more helpful and empathic ever since their blowout in the Dreamatorium a few weeks back and the whole “Hospital School” debacle that they’ve mutually agreed that Troy Never Needs To Know About (And Which Isn’t Really Lying Since It’s Just Not Telling Him Something He Doesn’t Suspect Anyway, So It’s Not Going To Ruin Their Friendship Or Anything If He Finds Out, And He’d Be More Pissed At Annie Anyway -- and yes, in the agreement they drew up, they did deem all that important enough to put in capitals despite the grammarian in Annie objecting). And Annie doesn’t want to discourage him, so she holds out her finger and lets him apply the antiseptic and wrap the band-aid around it. He’s surprisingly gentle about it.

“How did you cut yourself?” he asks. It’s impassive and objective as always, like an interviewer questioning a subject.

“I was just reading...”

“Pride and Prejudice?”

“Yeah, just getting some pointers for the paper, seeing if there’s any interesting angles we can take the presentation...”

“And because it’s one of your favourites,” he interjects bluntly. She gives him a look. “When Britta was dissing Elizabeth and Darcy in the study group your eyebrows were doing that thing which I think indicates anger. Suggests it’s something you care about.”

She sometimes forgets that because Abed has difficulty processing these kind of things, it just means he tends to look even harder for them.

“Plus, you know, it’s not exactly a leap. The subject matter is all you.”

“Yeah,” she murmurs. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Your mouth is looking funny. Are you sad? Is this sad? Will you need a hug? Should I get Troy? He’s gone to the store to get some milk but I can text and get him back here --”

“No! No, Abed,” she says, a bit more gently. “I’m fine. It’s just... that’s kind of the problem.”
He frowns, and gives her one of those cocked-head looks of his. “It is? I don’t see it.”

“Well, I mean... of course I love Pride and Prejudice. It’s all me. It’s girly and romantic and fantasy and... not... real. Not now, anyway. Probably not then, either, I guess, but...”

“Real doesn’t matter. Inspector Spacetime isn’t real. That doesn’t mean it’s not kickass. Same with Pride and Prejudice. I mean, for you. In all honesty, I lack a lot of the contexts to truly appreciate the novel as a complete entity, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate that it has merits. In any case, just because something’s not real doesn’t mean it’s not awesome.”

“I know, but that’s not quite what I meant. It’s... you know what? Never mind. I’m just being silly. Just looking for attention.” Her smile takes on a slightly bitter edge. “Just being me. A regular little Mary Bennett.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous. You’re nothing like Mary Bennett.”

She stares at him. “What?”

He just looks at her in that flat, analytical way he has. “Well, like I say, I don’t have a full grasp of the contexts operating in the novel, but from what I do understand I’d say you’re nothing like Mary Bennett. I mean, maybe not nothing exactly; you’re both driven to prove yourselves to others, but she arrogantly demands everyone’s attention because she believes she’s entitled to it when there’s nothing significant about her. You’re intelligent and gifted and you want to share this with other people. She judges people because she believes she’s better than other people when she isn’t, and she’s not interested in improving people. You empathize with other people and you improve yourself first in order to help you improve others.”

Annie opens her mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

“Plus, you just have to look at the characterization; Mary’s flat and shallow. There’s nothing to her. She’s not interesting so the author’s not interested in developing her. Sort of like how Pierce is clearly Mr. Collins in our group. You’re a fully-fleshed out three dimensional character with all sorts of nuances and complexities. Some of those nuances and complexities are flaws, but they just serve to make you more interesting. Sort of like how Troy and Britta seem to be developing that Bingley and Jane dynamic -- and incidentally, I know I was originally opposed to it, but having given it further consideration I have to admit that it does give rise to certain potentially interesting subplots that can be developed...”

This is possibly one of the nicest things Abed has ever said about her.

“Uh-oh,” he says, alarmed. “Tears. And your eyes are doing that thing. Definitely sad. I’m calling Troy. Troy will be here momentarily --”

“No, Abed,” she says, wiping away the tears. “I’m not sad. Really.” She leans over and kisses him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

He looks at her, puzzled. “For what?”

“For saying I’m a... fully-fleshed out three dimensional character.”

“But you are. That’s just stating the obvious.”

“Well, sometimes it’s nice to hear it anyway.”

Something dawns on his face. “Is this an empathy thing? Did I do empathy?”
“Yes, Abed. And you did it very well.”

“Cool. Coolcoolcool. And don’t worry,” he says. “I won’t tell the others about *Pride and Prejudice*. I know you were trying to keep it a secret, and I’ll respect that.”

She smiles, kisses him on the cheek, and turns to go back into her bedroom.

“Even if it is totally obvious,” he adds. She rolls her eyes as she closes the door behind her.

Back in her bedroom, Annie notices her copy of *Pride and Prejudice* still on the bed. She shakes her head and smiles, and goes to put it back on the bookcase when she suddenly realizes that she never found a character equivalent for Abed. In some ways it’s understandable, since he’s not exactly a good fit for the cast of a Regency romance, but it occurs that she at least found one for the others, even if on reflection they weren’t exactly the best fits.

Including herself. Maybe. She’s still not entirely convinced by what Abed said.

But on the other hand... fully formed three dimensional character. She can live with that.

So it’s only fair that she try and find a character match for Abed. She thinks about who Abed might be. It’s tricky. He doesn’t exactly fit the mould. But the more she thinks, a possibility presents itself.

On the surface, at least, he’s cold and stoic and unfeeling. He says rude, potentially hurtful things about people without really caring whether they’re around to hear or what they think if they do. He seems arrogant and distant. You might just think he’s a complete jerk and that’s all there is to it.

If you didn’t know him.

Because when you know him, he’s completely different. He cares so much, and feels things deeply, but doesn’t know how to express them properly when he’s not around people who understand him. You have to work hard at understanding him and figuring him out, but when you do, it’s totally worth it. Because yeah, maybe he’s still kind of a jerk in some ways, but there’s so many other ways in which he’s one of the best people you’ll ever know.

Kind of like...

She looks down at the book. She’s opened it to a page, entirely at random, with an old woodcutting style illustration of Elizabeth and Darcy at the grounds of Pemberley, of Elizabeth realizing that her feelings towards Darcy are warming into love and Darcy trying to demonstrate to her that he’s changed, trying to prove himself to the woman who has inspired such unfamiliar passion within him.

Nah. Ridiculous. She’s clearly reading too much into it. So she puts the book back on her shelves and forgets all about it.

But the next time she opens it up and reads it, the next time she indulges in a little wish-fulfillment and pictures herself as Elizabeth Bennett, it’s not Jeff she sees as Darcy but Abed, stoic and unblinking and seemingly cold and unfeeling, but full of so depth and passion she might not even be able to tell where it ends.

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