Both Alike

by Sandel

Summary

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Notes

Hello Beatrice_Otter!

This was a challenge to write, but I had a lot of fun with it. I hadn't thought to offer Pride and Prejudice before I saw it show up on the sign-up summary, and I debated a lot with myself on whether to offer it or not. In the end I did, obviously, and though it brought me some suffering I'm happy I did, because I learned a lot and did an exciting close study of the novel to get all the facts straight: did you know that Mr Bennet and Mr Darcy aren't ever officially introduced to each other in the narrative, so it took some detective work to figure out when they actually met for the first time.

This story is mainly a character study of Mr Bennet, but Mr Darcy does play an important part. I also tried to add in some bits of character development for Mr Bennet that mirrored the themes of, well, Pride and Prejudice. It's also a bit of a style experiment: there's only one line of dialogue in the whole story, and that line is actually pilfered from the original novel.

I hope you like it! : )
Mr Bennet had long ago acknowledged – at the very least to himself – that he was what his stably master would call an ‘odd duck.’ Mr Bennet wouldn’t mind if Benjy – the stably master in question – said that about him, either. Benjy was an odd duck himself. It was because of some ‘affinity of oddness’ that Mr Bennet had taken a young Benjy in as a stably boy after Benjy’s last master threw him out for “not knowing his place.”

‘Knowing one’s place’ was, by the way, a phrase that had always annoyed Mr Bennet. As far as he was concerned his place was in his library, just as Benjy’s was in the stably, but while society in general seemed to agree with the latter, they took issue with the former. They wanted him out and about, making visits and attending balls day in and day out. But they meant even more than that by ‘knowing one’s place’ – it also meant sticking to interacting with people who were ‘like yourself.’ But Mr Bennet had never found anyone that was ‘like himself.’ In fact, he had quite lost hope of ever doing so.

As a young man Mr Bennet had thought that he was just like everybody else… or at least that he could be, if he just did everything that was expected of him. So he went to some balls, flirted with some young ladies, and took himself a wife (who perchance may have been more charmed by the promise of two thousand a year than by Mr Bennet’s personal address). But only a few years into his marriage he’d finally had to lay his delusions of normalcy to rest, and he soon came to rue the youthful ignorance that had made him chose Miss Jane Gardiner to be his lifelong companion. In her he had no chance of finding his like, neither in sense nor in disposition. Instead, he set his hope to his children.

As a new husband, Mr Bennet had dreamed about a little son to take riding and teach to read, but instead he got five daughters. Inquisitive and vibrant little Lizzy had soon endeared herself to him as his favourite, with calm and sensible Jane as a close second. At one time he’d had high hopes for Mary too, but even though he could still see a lot of himself in her earnest studies and love of books, he’d never gotten close to her the way he had with his two oldest daughters. Mary had never climbed up to sit on his knee like little Jane had, or dragged him off to explore the garden like Lizzy. Instead, little Mary had tensed up and hid in her mother’s skirts whenever he – or indeed anyone – so much as looked at her. And when she got a little older, she had still never come to discuss what she was reading with him like Lizzy always had. Then again, he had never really asked her about her books either. If he was completely honest with himself, he feared that he might have neglected his third daughter in his delight over the second. Perhaps the development of Mary’s sense had suffered for it; now when she did talk about what she’d been reading, she gave the impression of mimicry rather than sense.

But if Mr Bennet thought Mary had turned out rather less sensible than he’d hoped for, that was nothing compared to his disappointment in his two youngest girls, Kitty and Lydia. Sillier girls could surely not be found in all the Empire. He’d lost any hope of them ever having even a modicum of sense even before the time they first yelled “Ball!” Mr Bennet quite doubted that he could have done anything to make them turn out less silly, too – they simply had too much of their mother in them. He could, however, perhaps have been less indulgent with his youngest two. The problem was that each and every thing he’d conceded to them had felt well worth it. A year back, for instance, he’d thought anything in the world preferable to even one more day of Lydia disturbing him in his library to hassle him about being allowed to come out. When he’d at last given in, it had been with a sense of utter relief. His youngest daughter would surely have benefited from a few more years of girlhood – and it wasn’t quite decorous to have five daughters out at once – but even now, as he sat reading in the quiet and calm of his library sanctum, he couldn’t find it in himself to truly regret that decision.

All in all Mr Bennet’s children ranged from the more sensible to the patently silly, but none of them were quite ‘like him’ in the way he’d been hoping for. He couldn’t put his finger on what
exactly it was he was looking for in his fellow humans, but he had the distinct feeling that he’d know it when he found it. Possibly that was just an idle hope, and yet this was why Mr Bennet, against almost every other instinct of his, made sure to make the acquaintance of every new person who moved into the neighbourhood. (It was indeed enough of a novelty whenever this happened that it still didn’t much infringe on Mr Bennet’s much-needed time alone in his library.) So when Mr Bennet’s lady informed him that Netherfield Park had been let at last, the news was accompanied by a small jolt of hope in Mr Bennet’s chest. Yet, this was a hope he’d nourished and watched die over and over again, and so another feeling rushed over him as well, as he listened to his wife, namely resignation. He even toyed with the idea of not visiting this new tenant, a Mr Bingley… and as his wife seemed uncommonly invested in Mr Bennet making their new neighbour’s acquaintance, he happily proclaimed that he absolutely would not.

Mr Bennet did, of course, visit Mr Bingley upon his arrival after all. Hope is a funny emotion; it won’t leave you alone once it has first been stirred. But just like Mr Bennet had expected, the new neighbour was not at all ‘like him’ in that indescribable manner that he had hoped against hope that he would be. Mr Bingley was young; quite too young to be thinking of matrimony, in Mr Bennet’s opinion. The young man’s father had died a few years ago, forcing Mr Bingley to become a man of the world before he was quite ready to fill that role, Mr Bennet thought. As it were, Mr Bennet found Mr Bingley charming enough (and to spare). Their conversation flowed easily, but as soon as they touched on an interesting subject or got into the least bit of depth, Mr Bingley would seamlessly steer the conversation in another direction. He’d also profess his utter agreement with any opinion Mr Bennet voiced, and yet he never seemed to voice any real opinions of his own. All in all Mr Bennet didn’t find him a particularly sensible man, but he also wasn’t silly enough to supply much amusement either. So Mr Bennet went home, thinking that while five thousand a year might indeed be a very fine thing for his girls, he hoped that his wife and daughters would find their own hopes for the young fellow dashed as well.

At an assembly ball a fortnight later, the rest of the Bennet family finally did get their chance to form their own opinions of Mr Bingley. Mr Bennet refrained from going to the ball, as he did as often as he could get away with it. He had planned to be asleep by the time his wife and children came back, but had lost himself in a book and forgotten the time (and perchance a minuscule piece of him was the very slightest bit interested in what his family thought of their new neighbour). So when Mrs Bennet and the girls returned home he was obliged to listen to their stories of the evening. As always, Mrs Bennet had taken delight in what Mr Bennet found irksome, and she was all aflutter over Mr Bingley and the attentions he had paid to their Jane. Mr Bennet found himself more interested in Mr Bingley’s friend, a Mr Darcy. At first the man sounded like quite the reasonable fellow to Mr Bennet, who had nothing but the highest respect for any man who refused to dance at a ball. But he also had no respect whatsoever to offer to any man who refused to dance at a ball. But he also had no respect whatsoever to offer to any man who had the bad taste to slight his little Lizzy, and therefore Mr Bennet was uncommonly happy to agree with his wife that Mr Darcy was a disgraceful cretin.

About a fortnight before Mr Bennet had made Mr Bingley’s acquaintance – and avoided that of Mr Darcy – he’d gotten a letter from a third young man: a Mr Collins, the son of a late relation of his. The late Mr Collins had been a distant cousin of Mr Bennet’s, and they had never gotten along. Mr Collins had been extremely decided in his opinions, and harsh and patronizing towards those who didn’t agree with them. Once, back when he and Mr Bennet were still trying to maintain polite contact, Mr Collins had suggested that the reason the two of them quarrelled all the time was that they were, in fact, very alike. Mr Bennet had been gravely insulted by this suggestion. That had been many years ago though, when Mr Bennet was a young man, and still thought he wasn’t so very different from people in general. Ironically, now that he’d given up the belief that he was like most people, he was much more willing to concede that he and the late Mr Collins might actually have had a similarity or two.
With his father dead, the young Mr Collins was now next in the entail of Mr Bennet’s estate, and in his letter he wrote to tell Mr Bennet that in a month’s time he intended to come and inspect all that would be his once Mr Bennet was dead. That was, at least, how Mr Bennet understood the letter, though there was a passage about “making amends” that he didn’t know what to make of. From the letter it seemed like Mr Collins had adjusted to losing his father by finding a new authority figure who could feed his servility and self-importance, namely the “Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh.” This, like indeed all other parts of the letter, did nothing to recommend its writer to Mr Bennet. He’d been half inclined to reply that no Collinses would be welcome in his home except – quite literally – over his dead body. But after much absentminded stroking of his old-fashioned feather pen across his cheek, he’d instead decided to accept Mr Collins’ purported olive branch, and welcome him to Longbourn.

It was with more hope of amusement than affinity that Mr Bennet greeted Mr Collins when he arrived on the Bennet doorstep, the day after the ball. And this time all his hopes were fulfilled, as Mr Collins turned out to be just as ridiculous as his letter had promised him to be. Mr Bennet had always found conversing easy (though often dull) and Mr Collins’ ineptitude in this area became a great source of mirth for him. He easily lured Mr Collins into conversational traps that he then turned into little jokes between himself and Elizabeth. The rest of Mr Collins’ conduct, however, was a bit too close to Mr Bennet’s own for comfort, or at least a bit too close for him to laugh at. While Mr Bennet flattered himself with thinking he had the gifts of sense and easy conversation, he couldn’t deny that he’d never been as gifted at understanding the social undercurrent of what was being said… or, for that matter, at dancing. And Mr Collins manner of following societal rules to the letter was an uncomfortable reminder of Mr Bennet’s youth, before he had thrown most of society’s rules to the wind. But beside these little worrisome morsels of similarity – and Mr Collins’ repeated intrusions into the sanctuary of Mr Bennet’s library – there were still many things Mr Bennet could laugh about in Mr Collins, and for most of his young cousin’s visit Mr Bennet did not regret letting him come.

That changed when Mr Collins proposed to Elizabeth, and it was made painfully clear what the man had meant by being ready to make Mr Bennet’s “amiable daughters” “every possible amends.” It might be that marrying one of the Bennet daughters hadn’t been Mr Bingley’s explicit design in settling near Longbourn, but that had definitely been Mr Collins’ intention in visiting there.

*His little Lizzy, the wife of Mr Collins?* Mr Bennet would not stand for it. He, more than anyone, knew the torment of an ill-matched marriage, and he would have thought that his wife would be as keenly aware of that particular issue as he was. Not so, apparently; she for some unfathomable reason was quite set on the match. (At least Lizzy herself had had the sense to refuse the man.) Mrs Bennet chided her husband for encouraging Mr Collins’ attentions to his daughter, only to then go and tell said daughter that he’d never speak to her again if she married him. Mr Bennet couldn’t really see how he had encouraged Mr Collins in any way, but he was as unwilling as ever to let his wife see the limits of his understanding, so he let her think that he’d encouraged the poor young man for sport, rather than telling her that he hadn’t even understood the intended purpose of Mr Collins’ visit.

At least Elizabeth was out of danger, but Mr Bennet now feared that Mr Collins would move on to court his little Mary instead. Indeed, he was so afeared of this unhappy possibility that he went so far as to earnestly ponder several ways to intervene. Happily, the matter was resolved by Mr Collins becoming engaged to Miss Charlotte Lucas instead. This piece of news brought with it a wave of disappointment in the Bennet household. Mrs Bennet was disappointed because this definitely meant that Mr Collins wouldn’t marry Lizzy after all; Mary was disappointed in not getting to marry Mr Collins herself; Lizzy was disappointed in her dearest friend for accepting such an odious husband; and Mr Bennet was disappointed in what he had thought to be the good
sense of Miss Lucas. Of the four of them, Mr Bennet was the only one who was able to turn his disappointment into mirth, but then again he had also had the most practice in those matters.

Concurrently with making the acquaintance of Mr Bingley and Mr Collins, Mr Bennet was forced into many other young men’s acquaintance, when a militia regiment was stationed in the nearby town of Meryton. Mr Bennet found it incredibly unlikely that he’d find someone ‘like himself’ in the militia, and he could hardly stand the way his daughters went weak in their knees for any man in a red coat. Still, stand it he must, as the regiment was to stay for the winter. Foremost of the young militiamen was a Mr Wickham, who in time became a regular guest at Longbourn. Mr Wickham had all the charm of Mr Bingley, and the added advantage of firm convictions and a readiness to speak his mind. Still, as expected, he had little with which to recommend himself to Mr Bennet as more than a welcome diversion for his dearest child. He rejoiced in seeing Lizzy match wits with this young man and rejoiced even more when she came out victorious of those duels. This was because while Mr Bennet wished Lizzy every entertainment of a little lovesickness, Mr Wickham was not a very good marriage prospect, and as long as Elizabeth saw him as neither her equal, nor her superior, Mr Bennet had no fear of her falling very deeply in love with him.

Indeed; Mr Wickham’s attentions to Elizabeth came and went, Lizzy seemed to make the most of being a little crossed in love, and Mr Wickham then passed silently out of Mr Bennet’s attention… until, many months later, Mr Wickham sprang back into frightful salience in Mr Bennet’s mind by eloping with young Lydia! This news brought quite a shock to Mr Bennet’s nerves (though he would of course be loath to admit to a complaint of that nature within earshot of his wife). For the first time in all the years of their marriage, Mr Bennet could really sympathise with his wife’s all too common impulse to avoid her problems by staying in bed all day. But such hiding away was not to be for him; Mr Bennet had to go to London.

The less that is said on this sorry matter the better, but in short: after a little more than a week in London Mr Bennet went back home on his family’s insistence, letting his brother-in-law Mr Gardiner take over the search for the young people completely. Only two days later they were recovered; Mr Wickham was then convinced, with some monetary coaxing, to marry Lydia. After a visit to Longbourn, begrudged by Mr Bennet, the young couple was disposed of to the North. All in all things ended as happily as the family could have hoped for. But something had shaken loose in Mr Bennet through the shock of Lydia’s elopement. He had been set in his ways for many, many years, convinced that he always knew better than everybody else, who deserved nothing but his derision and scorn. He suddenly saw how ill he’d been using his neighbours, acquaintances and even his own family. The thought even struck him that the reason that he’d never met someone he judged worthy of the epithet ‘like himself’ might be that he judged other people both too hastily and too harshly. It was a sobering realisation.

Just as Mr Bennet’s new realisations about himself were beginning to sink in, Mr Bingley returned to Netherfield for the early autumn shooting season. In a testament to his willingness to change, Mr Bennet vowed to be more forthcoming and courteous with the fellow from now on; a little more than a week later he even let himself be dragged into a scheme of his wife’s for him and Mr Bingley to go shooting together.

Mr Bennet made a promise to himself to be on his best behaviour for the day, and at the appointed day and time he welcomed Mr Bingley on to his grounds. As the morning went on Mr Bennet found the young man to be pretty good company after all. What Mr Bennet once had seen as Mr Bingley foolishly endorsing any of his conversation partner’s opinions unconsidered, he now saw as a young man unpretentiously conceding that more well-informed people were likely to have more well-thought-out opinions. And it wasn’t that Mr Bingley changed the subject as soon as it
got the least bit interesting – it was that his mind moved so quickly from one subject to another that he just had to get this new thing out before he forgot about it. All in all they spent a very companionable morning together, and at the end of it Mr Bennet even offered Mr Bingley an invitation to join the family for dinner completely out of his own free will, and without feeling the least bit imposed on. And when Mr Bingley asked for his consent in marrying little Jane a few days later, Mr Bennet couldn’t be more happy to give it.

But with Mr Bingley had also come Mr Darcy, and Mr Bennet now, for the first time, got the chance to study and interact with this man who had earned himself the scorn of the whole neighbourhood, not to mention the particular hatred of Mr Bennet’s favourite daughter. After all that Mr Bennet had heard about Mr Darcy, meeting him was a bit of a disappointment. He had expected the man to be dramatic in his arrogance and uncourteousness, but instead Mr Darcy only made a grave and imposing figure who spoke very little, but always politely. Soon, the disappointment gave way to a sense of recognition, however, and with that recognition came an intense discomfort that almost bordered on alarm. Beholding Mr Darcy, with his disgusted silences at subjects he seemed to deem beneath him, and his stiff manners when in the homes of relative strangers, Mr Bennet immediately saw a lot of himself. But what came later, when the two of them got more used to each others’ company, was much worse; Mr Bennet actually found himself very engaged by the younger man’s viewpoints and opinions. The way Mr Darcy thought, the way he spoke, the things he cared about… they all made sense to Mr Bennet in a way that was completely new to him. Mr Bennet fought the realisation as long as he could, but at last he couldn’t deny it any longer: in Mr Darcy he’d finally found that inexplicable ‘likeness’ that he’d been looking and hoping for for so long.

If Mr Bennet had been sobered by his realisation following Lydia’s elopement, he was now utterly humbled. Was this the equal he’d been looking for his whole adult life? Was this the carnival mirror held up so he could see himself – a man his favourite child found not only disagreeable, but outright odious? The vague discomfort Mr Bennet felt over the similarities between himself and the Mr Collinges, both the father and the son, was nothing to this. With them the similarities had been shallow, and Mr Bennet had been able to blame them on their shared blood. With Mr Darcy he instead felt an affinity that went down to his very core. Mr Bennet was ‘like’ Mr Darcy, and what Mr Darcy was was a proud, unpleasant sort of man.

Was this cruel fulfilment of Mr Bennet’s deepest wish a punishment for his overindulgence and neglect of his wife and the younger of his daughters? Even all the things he blamed himself for in his own treatment of Lydia were inversely mirrored in the way that Mr Darcy had, by extension, chased Lydia into a highly unsuitable match by forcing the man who was now her husband into the militia, through denying Mr Wickham his rightful inheritance.

For Mr Bennet the old adage of ‘out of sight, out of mind’ had always proved trusty and true, so he resolved to stay out of Mr Darcy’s way as much as possible when he and Mr Bingley came visiting, and soon Mr Bennet returned to a state of reasonable equilibrium. But then one day, about a month into their acquaintance, Mr Darcy sought Mr Bennet out in the most hallowed of places: his library. Mr Darcy’s appearance was a shock in itself – Mr Bennet had most assuredly not attempted to give him the impression that he was welcome there – but when he explained the subject that he’d come to confer with Mr Bennet about, Mr Bennet got his second largest shock of the year. Mr Darcy wanted to marry his little Lizzy! And then, how the tables were turned: Elizabeth, usually so playful and unaffected, very earnestly explained to him how she’d come to esteem, care for and love this man she’d once thought arrogant and droll. And in Lizzy’s redemption of Mr Darcy, Mr Bennet found hope for his own redemption.

And what was more, Mr Darcy had not at all indirectly sentenced Lydia to a life of misery –
things were quite the opposite way around! Mr Darcy had in fact done everything he could to save her from ruin, and it was his money, not Mr Gardiner’s, that had done the trick in the end! And as he had done it all for his love for his love for Lizzy, there would most definitely be no expectation of recompense. The whole thing was fortunate beyond all belief, but all of that would of course mean nothing if his very dearest little Lizzy couldn’t be happy with the man. Mr Bennet trusted her when she said she loved Mr Darcy, but Mr Bennet himself had once fancied himself in love with young Miss Jane Gardiner. So, even after giving his blessing, Mr Bennet studied Mr Darcy and Lizzy together as closely as he could in the days following, to see if he could find something that would assure him of their prospective happiness. He saw Lizzy respond to a quiet jest of Mr Darcy’s with a smile as wide as the one he remembered getting from her years and years ago, when she’d first managed to read a whole sentence by herself for the first time. And in the more reserved smile that Mr Darcy returned to her, Mr Bennet saw the mirror of the smile that had tugged at his own lips when Mr Bingley had asked for Jane’s hand. For Mr Bennet that was proof enough that there was indeed something there between the two young people that had never been there between himself and his own dear wife.

Mr Bennet was now soon to have three sons-in-law, after having had none as shortly as three months ago! Mr Wickham was, of course, a disgrace, and though Mr Bingley had risen highly in Mr Bennet’s esteem since his return to Hertfordshire, Mr Bennet was still unable to view him as quite his own equal. (And as indulgence had always been his habit, he’d decided to indulge this little arrogance yet. It couldn’t hurt anyone as long as he made sure that no one would know of it.) Mr Darcy, however, was a different matter completely. In him, Mr Bennet felt that he might perhaps even find in a son-in-law what he had once hoped to get in a son. As Mr Bennet wanted to convey all this to his little Lizzy, he said to her:

“I admire all my three sons-in-law highly. Wickham, perhaps, is my favourite; but I think I shall like your husband quite as well as Jane’s.”

Lizzy’s playful smile told him that she had, as always, understood his irony perfectly. Oh, he was going to miss her – and her husband-to-be! – very much when they left to go live in Derbyshire. Very much indeed… but his Lizzy had always loved surprises exactly as much as Mr Bennet himself had always disliked them (at least when he was on the receiving end), so he amused himself with planning an unexpected visit or five, to take place once the new couple had had time to settle down at Pemberley. Besides, Mr Bennet still had two daughters left at home, and he was now finally ready to commit himself to their improvement. After all, he hadn’t been all that sensible when he was younger, so how could he expect his children to be otherwise? With a little instruction he believed that both Mary and Kitty could turn out quite well in the end. He had especially high hopes for Mary.

End Notes

Super thanks to my betas, Niklas and Sam!

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