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Paper 2

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A Woman’s Right to Choose: Refusal in Pride and Prejudice

Walk down any street, and you’ll see technological advances on every corner. Computers that fit on our watchbands, music transmitted on radio waves, or even just having electric lights would be something our forefathers could only ever dream of in their time. Our surroundings may change and modernize, but it is so much more difficult to remodel that of the mind. An ideology is something that is so easily passed on, from parent to child, that mindsets that should have been left behind in the 1700’s still linger to this day. One persistent notion in particular is what I would like to focus on: the troubling idea that women should not be listened to when they say “no” to you. This has been an idea perpetuated by sexists and misogynists for quite some time, and though we may not see it every day, there are still many people who harbor these feelings. However, for as long as there has been sexism, there have been individuals who have fought against it. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel about young women who struggle to be understood and respected in a patriarchal society. Instead of following the norms of the time and simply allow herself to be manipulated like a puppet, Elizabeth Bennet exercises her own agency by giving the men in her life something they would never expect: her refusal. When read from a modern feminist perspective, we can interpret the many accounts of refusal that crop up as Austen pushing the message that woman should have the power and authority to choose for themselves and for their decisions to be respected.

The men of *Pride and Prejudice* are portrayed as a result of the patriarchal society which they have been brought up in. At the time, a woman was expected to hardly do more than marry, have children, and take care of household affairs, and these men uphold those values. A major issue that comes up in the book that exemplifies this prospect is the problem of the “entailment” of Mr. Bennet’s property. Specifically because all of Mr. Bennet’s children are women, none of them can inherit their own father’s land after his death. This is something that is merely accepted and never argued against, not even by Mr. Bennet himself. In this way, women are regarded as objects to be married off, not even respected enough to be able to own property by themselves. They are, in fact, the property. The first instance of refusal found in the novel happens on just such an occasion, at a ball being held at the Lucas house. Sir William, on noticing that Mr. Darcy is without a dance partner and that Elizabeth is free, takes Lizzie’s hand and volunteers for her to be his match, saying “Mr. Darcy, you must allow me to present this young lady to you as a very desirable partner. – You cannot refuse to dance, I am sure, when so much beauty is before you” (p.19). Sir William may imply here that Darcy has the ability to refuse to dance, but does not give a single thought to what Lizzie may want. To this day, women are given little say in regard to matters such as this, and are expected to just go along with it. Elizabeth, however, will not allow herself to be offered up in such a way. She makes her own decisions, and makes the bold and risky move of side-stepping Sir William and Darcy, refusing to dance.

Elizabeth rejects the advances of several men throughout the course of the novel. She has standards for what she wants in a husband, as any woman does, and at the time none of her potential suiters fit that image for her. In perhaps the funniest example in the book, Mr. Collins asks for Lizzie’s hand, is rejected, and is completely oblivious to her obvious seriousness in doing so. He just goes along with it, making the remark 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” (p.77). In this situation, Austen portrays Elizabeth as being the sensible one, the one the audience is meant to sympathize with. She wants us to understand the absurdity of people who act like this, especially toward women. Mr. Collins, on the other hand, is practically a gag character, a caricature that we are meant to laugh at because he is so preposterous. However, that doesn’t make his mindset any less true to life. Sure, his character is blown out of proportion, but there are in fact people who think and behave like this. Though Elizabeth makes it abundantly clear that she has no interest in marrying the man, he continues to persist and completely brush her off. He quite plainly explains to her what he perceives as the standard female way: to refuse without actually refusing. He is actively acknowledging the fact that she has rejected him, and still continues forward without paying it any mind. This is a fairly innocent example, but anyone can see how this sort of thought-process could snowball into larger, more threatening situations.

Men are not the only perpetrators of such patriarchal thinking as this, however. There are plenty of instances within *Pride and Prejudice* that indicate that women themselves can perpetuate the idea that people of their own gender have very limited choice, especially in the romantic world. For instance, Mrs. Bennet (Elizabeth’s mother) is incredibly bothered by Lizzie’s rejection of Mr. Collins. At one point, as she admonishes Lizzie, she states

“But I tell you what, Miss Lizzy, if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead” (p.81).

Here, we get an insight on Mrs. Bennet’s thoughts on women’s rights. Clearly, she believes that no woman could possibly survive without a husband or a man in her life that is there to “maintain” her. Mrs. Bennet is worried that if she doesn’t get a husband fast, she’ll have no one to care for her, not really thinking about the fact that perhaps Lizzie is perfectly capable of taking care of herself. She is not the only woman who wishes to limit Lizzie’s ability to choose either, though this next example is on the other end of the spectrum. Lady Catherine is dead-set on making sure Elizabeth does *not* choose Mr. Darcy. While talking to Lizzie about the rumors surrounding her relationship with Mr. Darcy, the Lady becomes increasingly upset with her because she refuses to promise not to marry him, rudely calling her “obstinate” and “headstrong” (p.243). Lady Catherine is prejudiced against Lizzie, and believes that she has no right to go against her wishes. In this way, Lady Catherine and Mrs. Bennet and a lot like the men who try to control Lizzie. Instead of standing with her as fellow women and allow her freedom, they perpetuate patriarchal practices. It goes to show, women can internalize these thoughts themselves and then project it outward onto other women. Lizzie responds to them very well though. When prompted to give Lady Catherine what she wants by saying she will not marry Darcy, she replies “And I certainly *never* shall give it. I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable” (p.244). Even in the face of other women who try to contain her, Lizzie refuses to be manipulated and forced to do anything that she does not completely consent to.

Elizabeth sets a valuable example for both women and men. For women, she’s a leader who is unafraid of standing up to anyone who tries to belittle her or use her. For men, she gives some insight on topics like sexism from a woman’s perspective. Austen uses her story to make a case against the patriarchal tendencies of our society. Not only does she show how men can project these ideals on women, but also how women can be oppressive to other women. *Pride and Prejudice* is still entirely relevant to today, because women still experience objectification and misogyny. The setting may be different as well as the time, and large strides have been taken since Austen’s time, but prejudice can be difficult to change. Lizzie Bennet is still here, though, and always will be, as she inspires generations of women and girls to put their foot down and demand the respect they deserve.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. “Pride and Prejudice.” *Fourth Norton Critical Edition,* edited by Donald Gray and Mary A. Favret, New York/London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.