

Conflict Assessment: Pride and Prejudice

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May 8, 2013

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Pride and Prejudice (2005), is a movie based on the novel written by Jane Austen. The plot is centered around the affairs of Elizabeth Bennet, the second of five daughters to Mr. and Mrs. Bennet; the Bennet family being of a low to middle social class family. A man named Mr. Darcy visits the village of Longbourn with his best friend Mr. Bingley and Mr. Bingley's younger sister, and the news of their arrival is the talk of the town. The new town guests are wealthy, single, and all outstanding upper-class citizens. Living during a time when social issues and marital status were of utmost importance, Elizabeth's mother desires for her daughters to marry rich men, however, it is looked down upon to marry across social class. Therefore, when Mr. Darcy develops unwanted feelings for Elizabeth, the issue is worthy of conflict. This paper will assess the conflict and struggle between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, two people, not meant to fall in love because of their social standings.

The nature of the conflict is simply that Mr. Darcy meets Elizabeth and her family, is arrogant about his social standing, and speaks poorly of Elizabeth behind her back. Although Mr. Darcy actually has an admirable character, Elizabeth perceives him as self seeking and dreadful. As their relationship becomes more intertwined, because of Mr. Bingley's affection for Jane, Elizabeth's eldest sister, Elizabeth's perception of Darcy becomes even more negative. However, Mr. Darcy harbors affections for Elizabeth. There is no dialogue between the two participants about their perception of the other over a long period of time, so when the *triggering event* occurs, the conflict is more dramatic than it actual is.

There are many events leading up to the *triggering event*. First, Mr. Darcy talks unpleasantly about Elizabeth behind her back and she hears him. Next, Elizabeth hears a rumor that Mr. Darcy wronged a friend of hers, Mr. Wickham. Finally, Elizabeth hears a rumor that Mr. Darcy intentionally split up Elizabeth's sister Jane and his best friend Mr. Bingley. However, the event that brings the conflict into mutual awareness between Mr.

Darcy and Elizabeth is when Mr. Darcy asks Elizabeth to be his wife even after doing so wrong to her. Elizabeth's reaction to Mr. Darcy's proposal is quite destructive and almost ends the relationship completely. However, there are attempted solutions to bring peace between the participants conflicting and the conflict is eventually resolved. These solutions will be explored later.

Wilmot and Hocker (2011) argue that a conflict occurs "between...two interdependent parties" (p. 11). The relationship between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth is ongoing and interdependent because Elizabeth's older sister has developed a relationship between Mr. Darcy's best and closest friend Mr. Bingley. Also, Mr. Darcy has affections for Elizabeth. Some other external events within which their conflict is embedded include; Elizabeth's family is peculiar to Mr. Darcy and sometimes to Elizabeth herself.

Elizabeth's attitude toward conflict is negative, whereas Mr. Darcy's attitude toward conflict is positive. It is not that Mr. Darcy enjoys conflicting with other's, it is just that, unlike Elizabeth, he is able to view conflict as a problem to be solved in a collaborative manner. Elizabeth views conflict as negative in the sense that she is very competitive and views the situation as one that is *win-lose*. In every interaction that Elizabeth has with Mr. Darcy, she attacks his character and criticizes his actions with sarcasm. Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, does his best to understand why Elizabeth is treating him this way. For example, during one interaction, in an attempt to resolve some of the conflict Mr. Darcy asks Elizabeth "Why do you ask such questions?" (Bevan & Wright, 2005).

Throughout the movie there are no specific conflict metaphors used by the participants. However, a metaphor that could be attached to the conflict is *conflict is a dance*. Laurie L. Lyda (2001), asserts in her essay about the function of dancing during the Regency Period (the period of time in which *Pride and Prejudice* is set), that Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship "assumes a pattern of approach and rejection," which is a pattern well displayed in a dance (para., 5). In Elizabeth and Darcy's first initial meeting, Elizabeth approaches Darcy to dance, but he refuses her, establishing independence in relationship

to Elizabeth. Later on, Darcy approaches Elizabeth to dance and she refuses him, using this avoidance tactic to establish power and independence. Eventually, Darcy approaches Elizabeth to dance again and she accepts. During the last dance, Elizabeth can no longer avoid discussing the problems she has toward Mr. Darcy; he asks her questions to understand the reasons behind her negative attitude toward him. Just like their conflict, the dance requires that the participants learn how their partner *moves*. The dance also requires that the participants approach one another, turn away from one another, and walk alongside one another (a constant flow of approaching and rejecting).

The setting of the movie is in England in the early 1800s, during the Regency Period. During this period an individual's reputation and social class played a crucial role in every day life. The differences between a lower class citizen and upper class citizen greatly depended upon family wealth as well as family connection (Ernst, 2007). Also, the accomplishments of women were held to a high standard and the only way a woman could acquire wealth would be if she was already in a wealthy family or if she married rich. Elizabeth's mother's main objective is to have her daughters marry wealthy men. Darcy was in a social class far above Elizabeth, and because there were strict lines drawn between social class, Darcy would be looked down upon if he courted Elizabeth. Although Elizabeth is considered to be in a lower class she takes pride in who she is regardless of her class standing and lack of accomplishments. Therefore, the social classes as well as the gender roles assigned to Elizabeth and Darcy are the driving external forces behind their conflict. The obvious themes throughout the movie are that of pride and prejudice among individuals during that era. The soul of the conflict is the fact that Elizabeth and Darcy want to be in an interdependent relationship, however, their social expectations will not allow it.

The goals of each participant in the conflict are misunderstood and perceived as incompatible by the other party. The conflict between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth occurs over a years time, and the problem could have been solved with a simple discussion. According to Wilmot and Hocker (2011), if the conflicting parties do not have "interaction with the other,

the only information you have is what is going on in your own mind -- your filter doesn't have a chance to get corrected" (Wilmot and Hocker, 2011, p. 59). Elizabeth views Darcy as a selfish rich man whose main goal is to split up Bingley and Jane (Bingley is Darcy's best friend and Jane is Elizabeth's older sister) because Jane is poor. Elizabeth has also heard false rumors of actions that Darcy has committed, and therefore, Elizabeth's view of Darcy's character is skewed.

Darcy's foremost goal is a *topic* goal with an overlapping *relational* goal. Once he puts aside the issues of social class, his goal is to court and marry Elizabeth. The topic goal being marriage and the relational goal being finally discussing who Darcy and Elizabeth are to one another. When Darcy shares his goal with Elizabeth, Elizabeth is not pleased and then Darcy's goal transforms into a *relational* goal with an overlapping *identity* goal. Instead of becoming defensive after Elizabeth criticizes Darcy's character, he explains to Elizabeth that he will not propose to her again (relational) and then he addresses her criticism of his character in an attempt to *save face* (identity).

Elizabeth's underlying goal throughout the entire conflict is an *identity* goal. During the beginning stages Elizabeth's *topic* goals overlap with her face-saving goals. During the later stages of the conflict *relational* goals overlap with her face-saving goals. After Mr. Darcy criticizes Elizabeth's appearance and social class behind her back, she becomes defensive about who she is and uses conflict tactics that give her power and raises her self-esteem. The *topic* goal of the conflict is the fact that Mr. Darcy split up Mr. Bingley and Jane. After Darcy clarifies his goals to Elizabeth, she becomes more understand desires to restore and define their relationship. This shifts Elizabeth's goals to *relational*.

Power is not discussed by the participants in the conflict, but it is one of the driving forces behind the conflict. In terms of perceived scarce resources, power and self-esteem are the main components that are perceived as scarce to Elizabeth. Elizabeth perceives herself as being in a low-power position, and she uses many passive-aggressive low power tactics to gain more power. Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, is concerned with maintaining his

power during the beginning stages of the conflict, however, he soon realizes that no matter who he associates himself with, he will still have power. Mr. Darcy's reputation and wealth is too great to be ruined by a relationship with Elizabeth. When Darcy refuses to dance with Elizabeth at the beginning he is establishing power. Later, when Darcy asks Elizabeth to dance and she accepts, Elizabeth is establishing power by associating herself in a social setting with man highly esteemed.

Elizabeth perceives Darcy as having high-power in their relationship because Darcy's power currencies are *resource control* and *interpersonal linkages*. Darcy has money, is in a high social class, is well connected with other wealthy individuals in the community, and he simply thought highly of in society. Mr. Darcy has the ability to simply ruin Elizabeth's reputation, and in their culture, reputation meant everything. Elizabeth, not having *resources* or *interpersonal linkages*, uses her *expertise* and *communication skills* to gain power. She attempts to take Mr. Darcy down by using her knowledge of his character flaws as well as her sarcastic and persuasive communication abilities to slander his reputation.

Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth express their own personal struggle within the conflict in very diverse ways. Elizabeth expresses her intrapersonal struggle with Mr. Darcy by talking about him to others and then eventually telling him to his face all of the problems she has with him. Elizabeth is also very critical and sarcastic in her interactions with Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy expresses his struggle by defending his actions with words and he writes Elizabeth his condolences in a letter. The way in which the two parties express themselves during conflict episodes points to the specific styles each participant utilizes. Elizabeth's has two dominant conflict styles, *avoidance* and *competition*. She avoids the conflict even when Mr. Darcy attempts to communicate about it, and she is competitive in the fact that she criticizes Darcy, uses sarcasm, and consistently asks Darcy hostile questions. One hostile question example is, "And those are the words of a gentleman?" (Bevan & Wright, 2005). The tactics that Elizabeth uses forces the conflict into an *avoidance spiral*. The avoidance spiral begins

when Darcy hurts Elizabeth by saying he will not dance with her. From that point on Elizabeth complains to a third party saying “I wouldn’t dance with him for all of Derbyshire, let alone the miserable half” (Darcy owns half of Derbyshire, and according to Elizabeth, he owns the miserable half.) (Bevan & Wright, 2005). Elizabeth also harbors resentment toward Darcy and she actively avoids the real issue of him hurting her.

Darcy’s dominant conflict style is *collaboration*. He consistently approaches Elizabeth with questions to try and determine what the relational problem is. He asks Elizabeth questions such as; “So this is your opinion of me?” and “I hope to afford you more clarity (of my character) in the future” (Bevan & Wright, 2005). Darcy also “accepts responsibility for [his] own part in the conflict” by naming his faults and also defending the accusations Elizabeth makes against him (Wilmot and Hocker, 2011, p. 168).

The two conflict styles, avoidance and collaborative, fits well with the conflict as a dance metaphor. The relational conflict style of Elizabeth and Darcy is similar to the *dance of intimacy* as described by Wilmont and Hocker (2011). The dance of intimacy is a relational conflict style in which “one partner specializes in initiating conversation ...bringing up feelings and issues to get them resolved” while the other partner “avoids discussion of any relationship issues” (Wilmot and Hocker, 2011, p. 30).

The rules of repetitive patterns and micro-events that characterize Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth’s conflict are simple; Mr. Darcy initiates conversation, Elizabeth is sarcastic and is reluctant to discuss relational issues, there are no positive or explicit courses of action, and the conflict is not resolved. There are also many triangles involved in the conflict with Elizabeth and Darcy. Elizabeth complains to Charlotte about Darcy, forming one triangle. Elizabeth befriends Mr. Wickham, a man already in conflict with Darcy, forming another triangle. Elizabeth’s older sister Jane falls in love with Mr. Bingley (the relationship Darcy almost ruins), forming yet another triangle within Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship. Elizabeth is very close to her sister Jane, forming a coalition with her definitely affects the conflict between Darcy and Elizabeth. Elizabeth not only complains to Jane about Darcy,

but when Darcy splits Bingley and Jane up, Elizabeth's strong bond with Jane causes Elizabeth to react against Darcy very strongly.

After Mr. Darcy clarifies his goals about the relationship between him and Elizabeth, there is a shift in the ongoing, unresolved, repetitive conflict between the participants. Darcy realizes that Elizabeth had been misinformed about his character and issues behind actions he had taken. Therefore, after Elizabeth reprimands Darcy's wrongdoings, he calmly leaves Elizabeth's presence to contemplate what action needs to be taken to at least end their relationship respectfully. Darcy writes a letter to Elizabeth addressing the issues she brought against him, and he tells her he will not ask her to be his wife again. He will not try to maintain the relationship against her wishes.

Elizabeth forgives Mr. Darcy, and is remorseful for all of the wrong she believed about him. However, she never verbally tells him she forgave him, even though she desires to maintain the relationship. Eventually, Elizabeth visits Darcy's home in Derbyshire and their interaction is much more civil than their last interaction. Darcy, with his collaborative conflict style, makes an effort to befriend Elizabeth. While Elizabeth is in Derbyshire her little sister elopes, leaving her family shamed and with no way to pay for a hasty marriage. Nevertheless, someone paid for the marriage, and Elizabeth later finds out that it was Mr. Darcy. Later, Darcy brings his friend Bingley to Jane and the two become engaged to marry one another. After Darcy commits these two acts of kindness, he visits Elizabeth one last time and asks for her hand in marriage. Finally, the relationship between the two conflicting participants is completely reconciled.

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