

### III.

*Pride and Prejudice* is one of Jane Austen's most popular novels. There are countless numbers of movie adaptations, mini-series, vlogs, and novels that showcase the lasting power of this love story. But what is it about *Pride and Prejudice* that makes it so enduring? One of the answers is the character of Elizabeth Bennett. In five different adaptations, the 1995 BBC, 2005 Keira Knightley adaptation, and the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, and *Death Comes to Pemberley* all tweak Austen's beloved heroine just a little bit to reflect the contemporary ideologies of the given age/era.

#### The Novel

Over 200 years ago Jane Austen describes Elizabeth Bennett as having a "lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 206). This Elizabeth is a character that has her own faults, namely she's blinded by her own prejudices. However, Elizabeth is able to overcome her own prejudices and look past her first judgments. For example, Elizabeth laughs and makes light of Darcy calling her "tolerable, I suppose" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 205) but she leaves with a "no very cordial feelings" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 204) of him, which colors her opinion of him. Elizabeth uses this opinion to prescribe meaning to his stares and his actions. She believes he is looking at her with contempt and looking for flaws when Darcy does no such thing.

Austen's Elizabeth is a character that is timeless. She is playful and fun. She is intelligent, and she catches the eye of a "single man in possession of great fortune [who is in] want of a wife" (Austen, 201). Austen makes Elizabeth a character that readers want to become. Elizabeth is the ideal woman even though she is flawed and imperfect. But

that is what makes her such a powerful character. The audience, whether a reader or a viewer, can picture themselves as an Elizabeth and it does not seem like to much of a stretch. And as the following movies, web series, and adaptations show, Elizabeth is a character that is timeless and easily adaptable.

#### *BBC's Pride and Prejudice 1995*

Austen describes Elizabeth as “lively with a playful disposition that delights in anything ridiculous.” The closest adaptation to the novel is the 1995 BBC mini-series. Jennifer Ehle portrays Elizabeth’s “liveliness” with her small smiles and smirks. For example, the first shot we see of Elizabeth shows her walking home. She looks into the widow at her father, then she rolls her eyes at her mother’s hysterics and smiles.

This adaptation of Elizabeth follows the text a lot closer because there is more time available because it is a mini-series. The mini-series follows the rules of the Regency era where the novel was set. For example, Elizabeth is not as thin as she is in the 2005 adaptation starring Keira Knightley, her hair is not loose, and she has more decorum than Keira Knightley’s Elizabeth does.

This Elizabeth has small smirks and smiles and her eyes are very expressive. This Elizabeth is able to show the playful nature in a quiet demure way that was appropriate for the time period. This Elizabeth is very proper which shows how different she was then most of her family. This Elizabeth is playful in a teasing way. She teases Darcy and it does not seem like she is doing it in a hurtful way.

In the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, Keira Knightley plays Elizabeth as a more sarcastic cutting character. For example, at the dance when they meet Darcy and Bingley for the first time, Elizabeth and Jane have this conversation:

**Elizabeth Bennet:** Now if every man in the room does not end the evening in love with you then I am no judge of beauty.

**Jane Bennet:** [giggles] Or men.

**Elizabeth Bennet:** [laughs brightly] No, they are far too easy to judge.

**Jane Bennet:** They're not all bad.

**Elizabeth Bennet:** Humorless poppycocks, in my limited experience.

**Jane Bennet:** One of these days, Lizzy, someone will catch your eye and then you'll have to watch your tongue.

*Pride and Prejudice*

This Lizzie is more cutting like in this little exchange between her and her most beloved sister. The director's decision to make this is interesting. While Elizabeth is very playful, she seems almost confrontational in this adaptation. Also, in the reactions to almost everything Darcy does, it seems like there is open hostility instead of the carefully guarded disdain that the 1995 Elizabeth displays. And when Elizabeth laughs, it is very loud and almost sarcastic. This Elizabeth does not have any of the sparkle or smirks that the 1995 adaptation does. The audience can see every emotion that Elizabeth is feeling on her face. She does not attempt to stifle or hide any emotion. However, it does make for a more compelling character to a twenty-first century audience. Because this Lizzie is more open with her feelings and with her words, the modern audience is drawn into the story more so than in the 1995 adaptation. Modern audiences crave the emotion and drama that the Regency Elizabeth cannot show and the director changed the script accordingly.

Keira Knightley was the poster child for period dramas. She was cast in movies based on books like *Atonement* and *Anna Karenina* but also fantasies like *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The Knightley craze helped this adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* become popular. This movie was the first Regency-esque adaptation since the 1995 adaption.

Also, this was the second *Pride and Prejudice* movie released that year. Knightley's adaptation was released in November and *Bride and Prejudice*, an adaptation set in India, was released in February. The *Bride and Prejudice* adaptation called attention to how Austen can be adapted to other cultures, that everyone has similar issues that the Bennet's have just with different cultures.

But on the positive side of this adaptation, Elizabeth is more of a strong character. The audience can almost feel her emotions, especially during Darcy's first proposal. The way she defends Jane and displays her anger at Darcy is more powerful than the 1995 calm and polite rejection.

In 2012 Bernie Su and Hank Green created the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. This adaptation of Elizabeth has a bit of both the 1995 and 2005 Lizzie's. Ashley Clements portrays Elizabeth as this funny, playful, and intelligent woman. With this series set in modern suburbia instead of Regency Hertfordshire, it changes the dynamics of what makes Lizzie, Lizzie. For example, this Lizzie has a very sarcastic sense of humor. She is very cynical and she is very black and white. This Lizzie almost refuses to see Darcy as human. For example, in episode 55 "Robot Surprise" Lizzie compares Darcy to a robot.

Lizzie: Can you believe he even asked how my family was doing? As if he didn't know already! He's like a robot with buggy programming for social interaction. I made sure to ask him if he ran into Jane while he was in Los Angeles with Bing and Caroline, and he just, you know-- **acting like a robot and mimicking Darcy** 'Ah, no. Did not encounter sister unit. **Robot noises** . Darcy Bot malfunction.

*Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, episode 55

This excerpt shows that Elizabeth cannot see past Darcy's awkward and slightly rude demeanor. She refers to him as a 'Darcybot' because of his distant and, in her mind, unfeeling attitude. This Lizzie posts these videos and the audience can only see the story

through her mind. Even when she does “costume theater” (a storytelling device where Lizzie takes different outfits, like the newsboy cap and bow-tie, to become a different character) the story is told by her words and point of view.

The *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* Lizzie has more of a clinical view of the world. In one of the last episodes, she says, “Communicating and relating and acknowledging that people do not fit into neat little boxes all wrapped up and tied with string.” She grows through the turmoil during Lydia and Wickham’s elopement that was modernized into a sex tape that was going to be released and understands that she cannot just put people like Lydia, Darcy, or Wickham into their respective boxes in her mind and does not allow them to be human.

However, this adaptation has Lizzie as a twenty-four year old graduate student, which is more accessible to modern audiences. Lizzie’s plight makes more sense than it does in the novel. And that is the beauty of Austen’s novel; by changing Lizzie’s dowry to Lizzie’s student loan debt, it does not change the plot. This adaptation is even accessible because it is on YouTube and anyone can watch them and the language is not the Regency dialogue, which for someone who is not used to it is hard to understand. But Bernie Su and Hank Green have made this classic into something that a modern audience would appreciate. Also, this adaptation changes the race of the characters which makes the series more accessible to a modern audience.

### *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*

This adaptation is the loosest adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, and not just because of the zombies. For example, when Darcy first says that she is “tolerable enough I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me.” Elizabeth leaves the room and cries

by a fire pit. This Lizzie, as strong and capable as she is in the face of the zombie apocalypse, was brought to tears by the words of this man. Which seems to be the opposite of what the original Lizzie would do.

This Lizzie is strong in other ways though. She does fight zombies, and she is very strong. She is also very hard. She does not smile a lot, and she is very harsh with others, especially Darcy. However, in the context of this movie, it seems to work. Lizzie cannot laugh and tease like she does in the other adaptations because in this one she is usually fighting for her life.

However, this proposal scene was one of the best. The dialogue was the same from the source material. But Lizzie and Darcy are physically fighting each other. For Darcy and Elizabeth to fight each other with actual weapons instead of just their words was beautiful. To see the shift from the traditional Regency manners made the scene even more compelling for a modern audience.

### *Death Comes to Pemberley*

This adaptation is a book and a mini-series. P.D. James, a celebrated British mystery novelist best known for her Adam Dalgliesh mysteries, wrote this novel in 2011. This was also the year the *From Prada to Nada*, a *Sense and Sensibility* adaptation was released.

This adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* looks into what happens after Darcy and Elizabeth get married. It opens with an interaction between Darcy and Elizabeth that is reminiscent of the *Pride and Prejudice* characters. This is their interaction:

Darcy: How can a man think with such a racket going on? Could you please ask them to stop?

Elizabeth: That wouldn't be helpful, Fitzwilliam, dearest.

Darcy: It is a fine Pemberly tradition for the master of the house to be irritable on the eve of the ball.

Elizabeth: And for the lady to do everything in her power to assuage him.

Darcy: Quite.

Elizabeth: Perhaps some traditions need updating.

Darcy: They've worked perfectly well so far.

Elizabeth: How dreary that all good things must come to an end.

Darcy: Really?

\*Darcy hands Elizabeth a letter with the note 'I love you. D' written on it\*

Darcy: Shall I disappear from your sight?

Elizabeth: A few hours would be perfect. Mr. Darcy?

Darcy: Yes?

Elizabeth: Not a moment longer. I shouldn't bear it.

Darcy: You are only human.

This adaptation sticks with Austen's original character trait, i.e. Elizabeth's "lively, playful disposition" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 206), and the adaptation shows that Elizabeth has changed Darcy. He is no longer quiet and taciturn, but instead he is able to tease Elizabeth back.

This adaption makes Lizzie question her relationship to Darcy and become really insecure in her relationship with him. However, in the context of the movie, it seems natural. Elizabeth starts to question if Darcy regrets marrying her, even thinking back to his first proposal where he tells her that he loves her despite her social class. The producers bring in the original novel and the first proposal to show that Elizabeth is not over the fact that she turned him down first. Also, this Lizzie laughs a lot and teases Darcy like she does in the original.

This adaption is really good for people who want to see an example of Darcy and Elizabeth's life after the wedding and how they would react if something terrible were to happen. This adaption humanizes Elizabeth by aging her and making her question the love that Darcy has for her makes her more relatable to modern audiences because they

can relate to the doubt instead of having them as the “perfect couple” that nothing bothers them.

The universal themes of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, love and marriage, are still themes that are important today. However, modern audiences will use Austen’s novels to escape into a “simpler time.” They will use this era of manners and courting as an escape from the stresses of our era. Modern audiences like the happy endings because we see so few of them in our lives. However, the ‘simpler times’ that they are nostalgic for are not necessarily so simple. Elizabeth has the same anxieties that modern audiences do: will she find love, is she attractive, and is she going to live happily ever after. Modern audiences romanticize *Pride and Prejudice* because of the ease where we disassociate these themes, love and marriage, from our own lives. However, they still feel the same pressure that Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters feel. It is the complications that Austen writes about surrounding humanity and love that make Austen endure.