

## The Sexually Awkward and Aloof Man Known as Mr. Collins

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The character of Mr. Collins in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* is generally understood to be a very awkward man. His demeanor, mode of communication, and personality displease several characters in the novel and result in his inability to find authentic social compatibility. All of his actions follow a formula that he sees as the norm for a man of his age and stature. However, Mr. Collins' over-emphasis on such a life plan is laughable as he creates a formula to find a life-long partner, something which men are expected to do naturally. Moreover, the deficits in his plan for finding a spouse ultimately backfire and further undermine his initial intentions. While Jane Austen offers no direct cues to explain Mr. Collins' unique disposition, the combination of Mr. Collins' disregard for vital courtship rituals, unorthodox reasons for finding a spouse, and use of feminine rhetorical strategies work to imply that Mr. Collins is not attracted to women.

While many readers will be skeptical of the postulation that Mr. Collins is not attracted to women, a closer examination of *Pride and Prejudice* will help quell the uneasiness generated by this seemingly bold statement. Readers first experience Mr. Collins' lack of sexual inclination at the Netherfield Ball:

The two first dances, however, brought a return of distress; they were dances of mortification. Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologizing instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her [Elizabeth] all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. (Austen 68)

Elizabeth is so mortified by Mr. Collins' actions that it seems as if nothing will make this dancing episode any better. Considering that women in *Pride and Prejudice* are continually

found obsessing over the effects of dancing and its repercussions, there are tremendous implications that come with a terrible dancing technique. In trying to court Elizabeth, Mr. Collins does so in the least romantic way possible. Mr. Collins then amplifies his obliviousness to the situation at hand: “He assured her that as to dancing, he was perfectly indifferent to it; that his chief object was by delicate attentions to recommend himself to her” (Austen 78). This indifference to dancing must come as a total surprise for Elizabeth; throughout the novel she is surrounded by family and friends who so highly regard dancing that Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet’s two dances in the first pages of the novel seem to assure their future matrimony according to several of Jane’s relatives. The titillation experienced by women when discussing dancing rises to an overtone as the novel progresses, and Mr. Darcy best encapsulates such feminine excitement for dancing when he teases, “[Dancing] is a subject which always makes a lady energetic” (Austen 17). This initial contrast between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins not only serves to foreshadow their future relationships—or lack thereof—with Elizabeth, but it also demonstrates one of Mr. Collins’ many follies in trying to formulaically pursue heterosexual courtship rituals. By choosing to ignore dancing, he inadvertently destroys his prospective nuptials as he has ignored that which most “energizes” women.

Indications of Mr. Collins’ questionable sexuality also come to the fore when he explains his reasons for proposing to Elizabeth Bennett:

My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly – which perhaps ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honor of calling patroness [Lady Catherine de Bourgh]. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject. (Austen 81)

The first glaring gap in this laundry list of reasons to marry is that Mr. Collins forgets to factor

love into his reasoning for proposing matrimony. Furthermore, he neglects to mention that he even likes Elizabeth enough on a basic level to tie the knot with her. Such a hole in his explanation does seem to indicate that Mr. Collins has missed the point of this marriage establishment; he works under the assumption that traditional marriage is purely a business proposition. While historically many marriages were indeed set up in a way that ensured financial profitability for both families involved, these proposed unions would at least have been masked with the idea that the spouses have an interest in each other. This element is somewhat essential to marriage; considering that one of the first duties of a married couple is to consummate the union, it would be a difficult task for Mr. Collins to perform if he is not interested in Elizabeth enough as a person to even mention his feelings for her in his list of reasons to propose.

Beyond analyzing that which is not present in Mr. Collins' reasons for marriage, his expressed logic does nothing to quell readers' suspicions of his disinterest in women. His primary reason for marrying—though it is listed third in his succession of motivations—is that Lady Catherine de Bourgh has insisted twice that such actions are the proper thing for a clergyman to do. It is curious that Lady Catherine has told her parish's clergyman twice that he needs to get married. She is so interested in getting him engaged that she specifically sends him on a voyage to find a future wife, so it looks as if Lady Catherine is concerned that if left to his own devices, Mr. Collins might not otherwise take the initiative to get married. As the desire to find a partner is instinctive, the fact that Lady Catherine is pushing what should be innate makes the reader question Mr. Collins' desires and instincts. Furthermore, Lady Catherine is so influential over Mr. Collins that nearly every “opinion” that comes out of his mouth seems to be her own. That Mr. Collins is so subservient to a woman, regardless of her rank, is striking. It

would suggest a feminization of Mr. Collins that further complicates his gender. If he is purely espousing the opinions of a woman, his status as a male in terms of typical gender roles comes into question.

In addition to Lady Catherine's domination, the grammatical style imposed on Mr. Collins by Jane Austen further aids his feminization. Mr. Collins speaks through parentheses—a grammatical device that Austen otherwise reserved for women—twice in this excerpt. The use of parentheses suggests a gossip quality to the words between them; one can almost imagine characters turning to the side and surreptitiously expressing emotions they would not have otherwise presented in normal text. With this in mind, it is important to note that gossip in this novel has also been gendered as a feminine trademark. Men who gossip, such as Mr. Wickham, are severely reprimanded for such actions, whereas women gossip throughout the entire novel unharmed, further suggesting that this trait is specifically female. Moreover, Mr. Collins' use of the parenthetical comes at a time when he is attempting to propose marriage to Elizabeth. The context of this grammatical slip underscores the great humor surrounding Mr. Collins' formulaic approach to women; a situation that is supposed to occur naturally becomes anything but natural. Mr. Collins' gossip-like parenthetical within this situation not only demonstrates him to be unconvincing in his desire to marry Elizabeth, but it also puts his sexuality into question as he seems unable to do that which is supposedly natural for a man by violating the grammatical gender roles established by Austen.

The other grammatical device that feminizes Mr. Collins is his use of the exclamation point. A close inspection of *Pride and Prejudice* reveals that he is the only male character who allows himself to express such peaks of emotion. Otherwise, readers see only women, such as Mrs. Bennett or Lydia, use the exclamation, and when they do so, they almost always

seem to exhibit the stereotype of the “hysterical woman.” Thus, it becomes even more humorous that Mr. Collins would emulate such stereotypically feminine behavior during his courtship of Elizabeth. This humor becomes near-hyperbole upon Elizabeth’s refusal of Mr. Collins’ marriage proposal when he cries out, “You are uniformly charming!” (Austen 83). Overwhelmed by surprise, Mr. Collins abandons his partner-finding formula and any semblance of the male gender norm by reacting in such a hysterical way. His use of the exclamation here becomes the final verdict for Mr. Collins’ prospects of marrying Elizabeth Bennet.

Mr. Collins’ initial proposal to Elizabeth includes a combination of the exclamation and parentheses when he says, “(unasked too!)” (Austen 81). This phrase seems to work as hyperbole, reinforcing the impression that Mr. Collins is unaware of his inability to conform to gender codes. By giving Mr. Collins the distinct use of feminine grammatical devices in what is the distinctly masculine role of courtship, Jane Austen seems to beg readers to take a closer look at this man. Not only does Mr. Collins avoid mentioning an interest in Elizabeth—a seemingly necessary component to the success of his proposed marriage—but his general demeanor suggests a feminine quality that demonstrates a glaring ambiguity in his sexuality.

Disregarding his uncertain sexuality, Mr. Collins decides to marry a woman anyway. Just three days after proposing to Elizabeth, he becomes engaged to Charlotte Lucas. This brash movement from one woman to another suggests a desperate quality in this man; following the cues put forward by Austen, this second proposal could very well be a manifestation of his sexual insecurity. Despite the bizarre circumstances of the Collins-Lucas nuptials, Elizabeth visits her good friend Charlotte at her new home. Upon arrival, Elizabeth finds “that her cousin’s [Mr. Collins’] manners were not altered by his marriage” (Austen 120). Readers’

suspicious have proved to be accurate: even after marriage, Mr. Collins is still a man of a strange and awkward demeanor. Given readers' understanding of Mr. Collins' femininity and disinterest in women, Elizabeth's observation implies that marriage has done nothing to make Mr. Collins manlier. This reality underscores a glaring problem: the new Mrs. Collins cannot be experiencing much—if any at all—sexual pleasure in this union. Readers already have seen the foreshadowing of this outcome at the Netherfield Ball. Mr. Collins demonstrates there that he is not interested in giving any dancing—and thus, sexual—pleasure. His sole motivation is to find someone to take the title of “Mrs. Collins.” Elizabeth's observations give readers little reason to believe that his intentions have shifted at all since then.

All of these doubts about Mr. Collins' sexuality lead readers to question where Jane Austen stands on a woman's right to experience sexual pleasure. In the case of Mr. and Mrs. Collins, the results of sexual repression have already been explored; additionally, there are two other sexual types proposed by the novel. One type is demonstrated by Lydia and Mr. Wickham's marriage, where the Bennet family erupts into a state of crisis management when Lydia runs away with Mr. Wickham, presumably because of her sexual attraction to him. Elizabeth's reaction to Lydia's letter home express the general viewpoint:

Oh! thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia! What a letter is this, to be written at such a moment. But at least it shews, that *she* was serious in the object of her journey. Whatever he might afterwards persuade her to do, it was not on her side a *scheme* of infamy. My poor father! How he must have felt it! (Austen 221)

For the level-headed protagonist Elizabeth to react to Lydia's hedonistic actions in such a violent way suggests that Jane Austen does not approve of this other extreme of feminine sexuality either. Elizabeth is as repulsed by Lydia's actions as she was by those of Mr. Collins. Lydia's following of her sexual intuition leads to a quick and forced marriage between her and

Mr. Wickham; the Bennet family is so upset and ashamed by Lydia's actions that marriage becomes the only reasonable path to pursue. Austen offers no characters that dissent to this outcome, and furthermore, the Wickhams' geographical move to Newcastle, a relatively wild area in northern Britain, suggests that their lifestyle was so unacceptable that they needed to move to an area with an altogether different moral code.

With quiet Kent, a county in southern England, occupied by Lady Catherine de Bourgh and the Collins family, and Newcastle the place of the newlywed Wickhams, Jane and Elizabeth both find themselves in the geographical, and social, "middle." Readers reach the end of the novel knowing that both of the two eldest sisters maintain marriages much to their liking.

Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them [the Gardiners]; and they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her to Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them. (Austen 297 – 298)

Jane and Elizabeth followed all of the rules: they tested their compatibility with men at the various balls; they did not take any drastic measures to seduce the men with whom they felt most compatible, and both ended up content with their situations. The process does not really offer woman liberties to explore their own sexuality, but at the same time these courtship rituals do not entirely deny a woman the ability to conduct an independent search for a partner. The novel has focused on the long time it takes for Jane and Elizabeth to match up with Bingley and Darcy. Because the novel ends in this "happily ever after" way, Austen seems to suggest that this alternative is the preferred one of the three choices demonstrated in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Nevertheless, Jane's and Elizabeth's marriages cannot be seen as completely ideal. Both of these marriages are founded on two principles that are not easily replicable: coincidence and compromise. In terms of coincidence, both women could have easily ended up unwed if one of the chapters had unfolded in just a slightly different manner; imagine if Elizabeth came upon the

Pemberley estate when its natural appearance was not so brilliant as to convince her to pursue Darcy. Had Elizabeth not continued to vie for Darcy's attention, Jane's marriage would not have been possible either. In terms of compromise, both women—more notably Elizabeth—work hard to convince themselves towards the end of the novel that they have chosen the correct marriage partners. Elizabeth's admiration for Darcy becomes apparent to her after she experiences the grandeur of his estate: "Elizabeth, as they drove along, watched for the first appearance of Pemberley Woods with some perturbation; and when at length they turned in at the lodge, her spirits were in a high flutter" (Austen 185). Reacting in a way reminiscent of a woman's response to good dancing, Elizabeth is overcome by feelings so akin to sexual pleasure in this scene that her ability to love Mr. Darcy becomes very apparent in the novel's final volume. Luckily for her, these feelings become so self-sustaining that she does not believe herself to be choosing between stability and sexual pleasure in the way that Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet did. Instead, Elizabeth sees herself as having the best of both in her marriage, but the extent to which this is true seems altogether unanswerable. Nevertheless, the Collins and Wickham couples are in fact on two opposite extremes. Thus, Jane Austen offers Jane's and Elizabeth's marriages—marriages based on coincidence and compromise—as the best option for a woman's sexual pleasure.

#### Work Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.