

Changing Times, Changing Views: Bridget Jones's *Pride and Prejudice*

It is the truth openly acknowledged by Helen Fielding, the author of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, that she modelled the twists and turns of her narrative upon Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the masterpiece of 19th century literature for, and about, women. In turn, *Bridget Jones's Diary* became an international best-selling title more than two hundred years later. Helen Fielding outwardly admitted having 'borrowed' many motifs from Jane Austen's novel, in one of her interviews claiming that :

I decided to use the plot from *Pride and Prejudice* to fit it all together in a shell. Not to say I didn't craft it very carefully, but it was more organic, I guess (*Helen Fielding Is Not Bridget Jones*).

The correlations between both books are numerous, both explicit and implicit. Thus, they can be seen in the name of the main male protagonist (Mr Darcy and Mark Darcy) as well as in the mode of presentation of the mentioned hero. The implied author goes to much length so as not to let the reader overlook the correlation, since when Bridget sees Mark Darcy for the first time, she comments: "It struck me as a pretty ridiculous to be called Mr Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at the party. It's like being called Heathcliff and insisting on spending the entire evening in the garden, shouting 'Cathy' and banging your head against a tree" (Fielding 1997:13).

The implicit similarities are also striking as far as the plot itself is concerned: the main intrigue relies upon forming ill-judged, prejudiced opinion of two main protagonists (interestingly, the intended title for *Pride and Prejudice* was *First Impressions*). Moreover, both novels are concerned with love and courting habits as well as with relationships grounded very firmly in the society of, respectively, beginning of 19th and the end of 20th century. Furthermore, both books exhibit sparkling humour and wit and can be safely treated as a colourful and ironic social commentary, sometimes showing aspects of a comedy of manners. The question that arises is

whether all the visible and traceable points of resemblance are only intertextual game meant to slightly perplex the reader at the beginning and in the end supply much enjoyment in finding out possible links, or whether *Bridget Jones's Diary* relates in more ways to *Pride and Prejudice*, and therefore correlations between these two novels point to some deeper level of correspondence.

The main aim of this paper is twofold. First of all, I would like to claim that although in both novels we encounter different narrative strategies, relying on either first person narration (in the case of *Bridget Jones's Diary*) or third person retrospective narration (in *Pride and Prejudice*) the achieved effect is the same, which I believe to be thorough identification of the reader with the main character/narrator/focaliser. What is more, such strong identification with the teller/focaliser results in influencing, and indeed even manipulation of the readers' perception of, and attitudes to, the presented world. My secondary aim is to try and trace the reason of such enormous interest and popularity of both novels to this extreme subjectivity of experience presented in Austen's and Fielding's fiction.

To enter the world of fiction, to become engrossed in it, to form an intimate contact with its inhabitants means to forget, at least partially, that what one reads has a fictional character. Only then are we able to become fully involved in the narrated events. The obvious condition for such a process, then, seems to be the loss or at least limitation of the specific distance existing between the reader and the book, based on the reader's awareness of the fact that what he is reading is fictitious. First person narration, particularly in the form of the diary, very successfully achieves what Michał Głowiński calls *formal mimesis*: creation of the illusion that the literary text is in fact non-literary, therefore "real" (Głowiński 1997:57). This is done through the use of specific narrative techniques, such as maintaining the parallelism between the time of telling and the narrated time. Hence, in the case of a diary, the action unfolds gradually and the reader is informed about the events soon after the narrator himself gets to know them. Secondly, the graphic division of the novel into diary entries serves the same purpose (Kaniowska 1997:50, 57). Finally, it is not difficult to notice that the literary form of diary is a significant factor in establishing the relationship with the reader and making him deeply involved in the text: the diary being an intimate record of introspective experiences and thoughts of a narrator/protagonist enhances a special, extremely personal bond between the narrator and the reader, which rests upon the illusion of sharing the same "secret." All these points apply to *Bridget Jones's Diary* and can account for the easy identification of a female reader with the narrator/protagonist, up to the point of accepting the narrator's point of view even against the objective facts, which I hope to prove in the course of this paper.

In the case of *Pride and Prejudice* one cannot talk of the first person narration or the parallelism between the time of narration and the narrated time, since narration is third person retrospective. Yet, there is a strong inclination towards identification with and assuming the point of view of Elisabeth Bennet, the main protagonist, although technically this is achieved by the use of different means. First of all, although the narrator is extraheterodiagetic, to follow Rimmon-Kenan's typology, the factor of focalisation is crucial. Extraheterodiagetic narrator is by definition the most objective and "on the outside" of the story; he has also prior knowledge of the events as well as the insight into the thoughts and feelings of all characters. Usually such mode of narration is rather overt, abundant in such traces of the narrator's presence as comments, direct method of characterisation, filling in temporal gaps. Surprisingly, the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice*, although having some of the features mentioned above, does not exhibit many of them: the events unfold gradually, comments relate rather to social matters than to the events themselves and can easily be treated to be "silent thoughts" of Elisabeth, the narrator does not drop any hints about his prior knowledge or judgement of the events, almost no temporal gaps are filled and indirect presentation of characters prevails. Importantly, although focalisation shifts, most of the events are presented from the point of view and as if through, the eyes of Elisabeth Bennet, who is the main lens/focaliser for the story, which leads to strong personalisation of the point of view. I would like to claim that this subjectivity is as deep as it could be if first person narration were used. Even the comments given by the narrator bear traces of Elisabeth's way of thinking, betrayed by slightly ironic, slightly detached attitude. It is helpful to consider one example to illustrate this point. Thus, the novel opens with a famous statement: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in a want of a wife" (Austen 1997:5).

This first appearance of the narrating voice points to the fact that the narrative is deeply set in a specific social microcosm and establishes the tone of the book as rather light, slightly ironic or even satirical. If we compare the above statement with some of Elisabeth's utterances, e.g. "I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb" (74), or: "That is a falling indeed! Implacable resentment is a shade of character. But you have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me" (47), we will detect striking similarity to the statements made by the narrator. The examples of such similarity are quite easy to find throughout the novel. In some later fragments we can detect certain straightforwardness, realistic look, as well as slight detachment allowing subtle or less subtle irony both on Elisabeth's and the narrator's behalf. As a result, it seems justifiable to

claim that equipping Elisabeth with the same mode of speaking and thinking, visible in the more or less subtle use of irony, sometimes self-directed, and satirical outlook at the surrounding microcosm – customs, beliefs, norms – contributes to the effect that the narrator sometimes blends with the main protagonist. Result is similar to the one achieved by first person narration: the loss of the status of omniscient, reliable narrator, subjectivity, and much closer bond between the reader and the main focaliser/protagonist.

In the case of both novels in question such strong identification with the narrator/focaliser leads in turn to the loss of objectivity on the reader's part, since the reader is as if drawn to see the world presented in the novel in the same way that the main protagonist does. Often this perception is slightly or seriously distorted, since subjectivity is one of the most characteristic features of first person narrative (Kaniowska 1997:77), and of, as I endeavour to show, a novel with very strong focalisation factor. As a result, the reader invariably, almost involuntarily, falls in the same traps and pits as the main heroine does, although he obviously can judge better, has some information which could change his attitude, yet he is more inclined to assume the viewpoint of either Bridget or Elisabeth. I would like to examine this claim by close reading of one, central episode in both novels, namely the change in Bridget's and Elisabeth's perception of Mark Darcy/Mr Darcy, and, consequently, exposing of Daniel Cleaver/Wickham as the villain in the novels.

When Elisabeth Bennet first sees Mr Darcy, the impression he makes on her and on all the other people gathered in the ballroom in Netherfields seems to be at first positive: "His friend Mr Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a-year." However, the opinion soon changes, since he becomes an object of social ostracism, for not having followed the social norms, that is not being polite, sociable and talkative, but rather sticking to his own company, and dancing only twice. It might not seem to be a major offence, yet the society pronounced him to be "the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped that he would never come there again" (11). This opinion seems to coincide with Elisabeth's who, after being most terribly insulted by Mr Darcy who described her as only "tolerable" and did not want to dance with her, "remained with no very cordial feelings towards him" (12) and understandably developed a sudden dislike of Darcy, which marks the beginning of her prejudice.

In the fragment that follows we are treated to an account of Darcy's character offered by the narrator and stressing the negative rather than positive aspects of his

nature. Thus, we learn that although clever, he was haughty, reserved and fastidious, with uninviting, though well-bred manners (15). This opinion, although betraying the traces of "higher" knowledge, goes in accordance with the general attitude towards Mr Darcy formed by the families of Bennets and Lucases, but is perhaps a little more balanced. Still, it does not encourage the reader to form an agreeable view of Mr Darcy, and, as a result, the reader is more likely to identify with Elisabeth and to assume her side in the "conflict". What follows is that the later behaviour of Mr Darcy, such as certain gallantry and tact (showing good rather than bad manners) with which he does not let Elisabeth be left alone in the path during the walk in Netherfields or contradicts Miss Bingley when she ridicules and attacks Elisabeth is likely to be overlooked or forgotten.

What also influences the reader's (and Elisabeth's) perception of Mr Darcy is the account of Wickham, who appears as the positive hero only to be transformed into the villain at the end of the book. Telling Elisabeth how badly he was treated and hurt by Mr Darcy, he immediately gains her sympathy and trust, as his confession appeals to Elisabeth's very human need to be confided in and trusted. Probably the fact that Wickham is so handsome also helps Elisabeth believe him unconditionally. It is only later that she comprehends the impropriety of Wickham's behaviour who, claiming that for the sake of the memory of Darcy's father he would not want to expose Darcy to criticism, does precisely the opposite, and, what is more, relates such private matters to Elisabeth when he encounters her for the first time. Then she sees him differently: "She had even learnt to detect, in the very gentleness which had first delighted her, an affectation and a sameness to disgust and weary" (181).

It is fascinating to observe how the account of Mr Darcy in narration changes into gradually more and more positive after the climax of Elisabeth's prejudice, which seems to be Darcy's proposal. The first step in her perception is induced by his explanatory letter. After having read the letter for the first time, her surprise and shock is so huge precisely because it requires a total change of her attitude and perception of both him and Wickham. This is why she at first is tempted to reject it entirely: "She wished to discredit it entirely, repeatedly exclaiming, "This must be false! This cannot be! This must be the grossest falsehood!" (159). It is only after a longer while that she is able to adjust to the truth, and when she does it, she assumes a completely different view. Just as uncritical she was of Wickham at the beginning, so unquestioningly does she accept Darcy's version, which once again points to largely emotional subjectivity on her part: "How differently did everything now appear in which he was concerned! (...) She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (161,162).

Still, the change of Elisabeth's attitude towards Darcy is most exposed when she visits Pemberley with her aunt and uncle: her perception of the mansion greatly shows how she feels about its master. She sees the house and the surrounding area as she now would see Mr Darcy: lofty but handsome, tasteful, elegant, distinguished, noble. She feels that, as to be the mistress of Pemberley might be something (187), so being Darcy's wife could be similarly gratifying. This view is further emphasised by her silent cry of regret: "And of this place- thought she -I might have been mistress!"(188).

This process of recognition is continued when we learn from Mrs Reynolds that Mr Darcy is a good-tempered, generous, caring, considerate man. This positive picture seems to negate completely the vision of him from the beginning of the book when he was generally believed to be extremely proud, bad-tempered and ill-mannered. Elisabeth believes it unconditionally since by now she wants to see Mr Darcy in such a way. Consequently, in the course of narration now only positive things about Mr Darcy are recounted. In his next meeting with Elisabeth he treats her with utmost respect, shows himself as a very agreeable and polite man to Mr and Mrs Gardiner, he even might be called very sociable and hospitable, as if all of his vices have evaporated. It seems justifiable to claim that his presentation goes hand in hand with the change of Elisabeth's attitude towards him, and the reader also follows in Elisabeth's footsteps. This process is not complete until Elisabeth recognises Darcy as a man just right for her, "who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her" (239) which happens at the end of the book.

A very similar story of progress from dislike to love of one person, and from total fascination to almost disgust with another one is offered in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and, as I have mentioned earlier, neither the names of the protagonists nor the structure of the episode are accidental. Here, instead of noble, rich Mr Darcy we encounter the famous lawyer, rich Mark Darcy, who likewise is rather a catch, if we are to believe the people from the establishment. Instead of Mr Wickham we have got cunning and clever Daniel Cleaver, just as charming and handsome as dishonest. Finally, instead of Elisabeth we have got Bridget, who, although probably not having self confidence of the former, falls in the same traps.

When Bridget meets Mark for the first time in the book, he is given quite a lot of publicity by her mother and Una Alconbury. He is presented as a trendy, indecently rich, divorced person who has just bought a house in Holland Park, a top London location. Just as appearance and behaviour created prejudice at the Netherfield ball, they remain a key factor at Una Alconbury's Turkey Curry Buffet. This is when Bridget forms her first impressions of Mark Darcy, and they are not positive. She sees him as unsociable, with bad manners, not being able to maintain an intelligent small talk

conversation, and with terrible taste in clothes (a V-necked diamond-patterned yellow and blue sweater!).

It is perhaps meaningful that Mark Darcy is presented almost entirely through the means of indirect presentation. This is closely related to the form of narrative: writing a diary the narrator/protagonist does not need to sum up or explain the impressions or facts - the diarist writes as if for himself only. However, in literary fiction and in first person narrative the secondary effect (apart from the illusion of authenticity) achieved in this way relies upon the fact that, while the presented reality is filtered through the eyes and mind of the main protagonist, there is the unspoken assumption that the reader, accepting the diarist to be a lens, will simultaneously draw the same conclusions. Therefore, no extra recapitulation is needed. Obviously, the direct consequence of such a narrative is very often certain distortion of the pictured world, which is modelled in accordance with the narrator's system of values and bearing strong blemish of subjectivity (Kaniowska 1997:165).

Thus, Bridget forms a decisive opinion of Mark: he is snobbish, proud and conceited, and does not know how to behave. If we take a closer look at what follows, we will discover that there are no further traces of Mark's negative character. Similarly to equivalent scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* Mark appears to be thoughtful and caring. Thus, he guesses how embarrassed Bridget must be over appearing in the bunny costume at Una's party which was supposed to be a tarts-and-vicars costume party but evolved into traditional social gathering and helps her get normal clothes; he warns Bridget about possible danger of her mother getting involved with Julio and her own with Daniel. Nevertheless, despite these visible traces of his caring nature and good manners, Bridget is so prejudiced against him that she sees him as "bloody Mark Darcy (...), arrogant, ill-tempered, top-flight human-rights lawyer" (Fielding 1996:117).

In contrast, Daniel Cleaver plays the role of Mr Charming. He is handsome, witty, talkative, sexy and very sure of his own attractiveness. He is also so elusive and unpredictable that one never knows what to expect from him. These are probably main features which Bridget finds so irresistible. She is so infatuated that when finally the relationship with Daniel starts, she idealises him so much that she forgets completely his unreasonable and unreliable earlier behaviour. This is also visible in narration: although she briefly relates that all Daniel wanted to do in hot summer Sundays was watch cricket with the curtains drawn and drink beer, much longer parts are devoted to either her fantasies of their future happy times together. Bridget is so determined to maintain a positive picture of Daniel, that despite his obvious shortcomings and her own intuition and suspicions, she chooses to believe him until facts prove that her intuition was perfectly right. Here, unlike in *Pride and Prejudice*, the truth about Daniel is exposed before the reader's eyes quite early in the book: although one can

see all his charm, one can also easily notice the fact that Daniel is irresponsible and unreliable, that he is an incurable womanizer with a drink problem, that his wit is very often malicious and sexist. Yet, identifying with Bridget the reader can easily understand her fascination and as if hopes, together with her, for the happy ending.

It is only later, when Mark's words come true and Bridget's relationship with Daniel is over, that she is able to look at Mark more objectively and appreciate his help in getting her the interview which her job depends on. It is also the moment when the reader starts to see him in much more positive light, which coincides with final discrediting of Daniel, as Mark confesses that he was the reason for Mark's divorce because he had slept with Mark's wife (variation on the theme of Wickham attempted eloping with Mr Darcy's sister). Now, Mark is charming at Bridget's birthday party, suddenly knows how to behave, is very tactful, and, just as Mr Darcy helped to deal with Lydia's elopement crises, so does he save the situation when Bridget's mother escapes with Julio and gets involved into fraud. At this moment Bridget gets emotionally involved with Mark, but similarly to Elisabeth Bennet, she also is scared that Mark would be discouraged by the scandal in her family: "So much wish Mark Darcy would ring. Was obviously completely put off by culinary disasters and criminal element in family, but too polite to show it at a time (277).

Finally, as all is well that ends well, both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* end happily and very much according to social norms: one in marriage, the other in the start of a relationship. Also, in both cases Mr Darcy and Mark Darcy act as godsends, delivering Elisabeth and Bridget from very unsuitable family connections. Elisabeth knows that moving to Pemberley she distances herself from her mother and Wickham, now her brother-in-law, while Mark Darcy takes Bridget away from her dysfunctional family: "Mrs Jones' said Mark firmly. 'I am taking Bridget away to celebrate what is left of the Baby Jesus's birthday.' I took a big breath and grasped Mark Darcy's proffered hand" (305).

Thus, in both novels the reader witnesses and gets emotionally involved with the ups and downs of the fortunes of main female protagonists, sympathises with their hopes and feelings. I hope to have shown that as subjectivity of the vision of the world results in identification with the narrator/focaliser and in certain suspension of disbelief on the reader's part, reader's sympathies and antipathies follow those of the main heroines and the attitudes get easily manipulated. As Kaniowska notices, narrator's comprehension and interpretation of the presented world cannot be always verified in the course of narration – the narrator is, in fact, more or less conscious master of his story. As a result, first person narrator particularly can be held under suspicion (Kaniowska 1997:206). However, very often he is not, since the involvement factor is so deep that the reader suspends, as if, his ability to judge the facts objectively, pre-

cisely because the temptation of identifying with the protagonist/focaliser is so great. The reader also enjoys having this personalised attitude towards the world presented in the book because the events are so deeply grounded in social reality: the I of the narrator/protagonist will always be seen at the foreground of social structures such as family, friendship, establishment as well as certain social norms and expectations, and it is a vision the reader can easily identify with.

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