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Pride and Prejudice: an adolescent fairy tale

Can a literary classic like *Pride and Prejudice* survive in the English curriculum of the 1980s? It has a great deal against it. The public at large and most school administrators seem less concerned with literary tradition and far more concerned with the basics, with proficiency testing, and with the teaching of reading and writing as survival skills. English teachers themselves have less time to devote to literature; even the most traditional teachers must feel the pressures to individualize reading assignments and to widen the curriculum to include such matters as visual literacy and interpreting political and commercial rhetoric. When students do get around to reading a book, they now face many alternatives from nontraditional sources: science fiction, mysteries, radio plays, adolescent novels. In such a world, Jane Austen would seem to have little chance against Judy Blume.

One should not despair entirely, however. Although *Pride and Prejudice* presents a genteel world of carriages and balls, suitors and rivals, letters and repartee, Elizabeth Bennet can still be the source for intense emotional identification and, in turn, imaginative growth for readers. The secret of this success is that at its core, *Pride and Prejudice* remains a convincing reworking of that most enduring of adolescent fantasies, “Cinderella.”

“Cinderella” is basically the story of a young girl trying to redefine her relationship with her parents. At the start of the tale she is cut off from the love and protection of both parents. In the best known version of the story, the one recorded by Perrault in 1697, Cinderella’s father is too much under the control of his second wife, Cinderella’s stepmother, to offer his daughter any protection. The father’s cruel neglect of Cinderella, unexplained in the Perrault version, plays a larger role in earlier versions of the tale. Here the father
wants to marry his favorite daughter after the death of his first wife, and she flees from him or—in Lear-like fashion—he is displeased by her declaration of affection for him, and she is banished. As the story explicitly or implicitly suggests, it is the father's love for his daughter or her subliminal wish for such love that precipitates her estrangement. At the center of the tale, therefore, is a central irony of adolescence: a daughter is emotionally too close to her father to be able to rely on him for guidance, much less protection.

This central irony explains much of the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth is clearly her father's favorite, yet, despite his keen perception of character and piercing wit, he proves to be of no help whatsoever to Elizabeth in her greatest difficulties. For example, he can accurately read Mr. Collins' character in his letter but is unable to see the true extent of Elizabeth's involvement with Wickham. “Let Wickham be your man,” he teases. “He is a pleasant fellow, and would jilt you creditably” (Ch. 24). Later in the novel, he falters at another crucial moment, in teasing Elizabeth about her affections for Darcy: “Never had his wit been diverted in a manner so little agreeable to her” (Ch. 57). The menacing quality of Cinderella's father is absent in Mr. Bennet, but neither father is able to help guide his daughter through a difficult period of adjustment.

A second crucial element in the “Cinderella” tale is the role of the stepmother. The stepmother invariably favors the daughters created in her own likeness and promotes them to the disadvantage of Cinderella. The psychological implications of this aspect of the tale are clear: In going through adolescence, the daughter feels estranged from her mother of infancy and childhood. The mother of memory becomes an idea, the good mother, later to appear in the tale as the fairy godmother. The mother in reality, who is now a rival, becomes the bad mother—or evil stepmother—of the tale. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is troubled by two stepmothers and two corresponding sets of stepsisters. Mrs. Bennet, in her comically bumbling but not entirely ineffectual way, does as much to spoil Elizabeth's happiness as does Cinderella's stepmother, and in keeping with the spirit of the fairy tale she does her best to promote the daughters formed in her likeness, mainly Lydia, at the expense of her husband's favorite. Later in the novel, it is Lady Catherine de Bourgh who takes on this role, furthering the claims of her daughter, while doing her very best to keep Elizabeth in a subservient position.

The good mother, dead to Cinderella since her passage into adolescence, always manages to reappear in spirit form as an aid to Cinderella in her trials. In the earliest, Chinese version of the tale, the spirit of the mother is in the form of a large fish; in the Scottish version, it is a calf; in Grimm's version, it is a white bird which lives in a tree that grew from a twig planted by Cinder-