The Question of Narrative in *Pride and Prejudice*

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The act of telling stories is one of the most fascinating aspects of literature. Brazilian critic Antonio Candido expresses the importance of discussing this matter by affirming that no human being can live without the possibility of getting in touch with it.¹

According to Claude Levi-Strauss², the main function of a narrative is to convert odd elements into a sensible perception. In order to realize that goal, it is necessary to organize facts from an experience and put them in order through relations of cause and effect.³

The goal of this essay is to discuss the matter of narrative throughout Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. The analysis will consist of taking a closer look into a central issue concerning Ms. Austen’s narrative: its selective characteristic, focusing on the discussion not only of what is selected to be told, but most importantly, on what is selected to be omitted.

According to Raymond Wiliams, the community described by Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* was chosen in a rather selective way⁴. While some may affirm that she does not approach the main events of society in most of her narratives, it is clear that she makes a cold portrait of the reality concerning private relations, which are a reflection of what happens in the public ones. Her taste for portrait painting is constantly mentioned in her letters⁵, in which she even compares some of the works she saw in exhibits to her own characters.

As mentioned above, the selectiveness of Jane Austen is important not only because of what she chooses to portray, but also of what is chosen to be left behind. There

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are three important issues that are a shadow in the narrative of Pride and Prejudice, and will be discussed in this essay: the question of work, the question of patriarchy and the question of the body.

Concerning the first topic to be discussed, it is also Raymond Williams that lead us to the interpretation about who the novel is wishing to portray. “In Jane Austen, the neighbours are not the people who live closer; they are the people who live in a little longer distance and, in terms of social recognition, may be visited. (...) Being face-to-face in this world implies belonging to a determined class. No other community, in terms of physical presence or social reality is recognizable under any aspect”.

Williams’ analysis is accurate due to the fact that characters that belong to lower societies, such as the workers inside the houses, do not receive the same care in the constitution of characters as the other ones. In fact, they are scarcely mentioned, and are not even entitled to receive names. Being the novel a very delicate portrait of society, this “lack of care” towards these characters can only be considered intentional, as will be discussed later throughout this essay.

The second matter, the question of patriarchy is a central issue in order to understand Austen’s narrative technique throughout the novel. According to Phillipe Ariés, women in a patriarchal society can only be described by two antagonistic views: they can be either apt to marriage, show submission to the husband, solve all their problems with affection and belong to the domestic environment; or be marginalized, present autonomous behaviour, sexual desire and be inserted in the street environment.

The most important issue in these descriptions that concern Pride and Prejudice is women’s submission to men, most importantly when it comes to decision making. Although many can argue that Elizabeth does not follow that pattern, in the following extract the heroine herself questions her own sense of judgement: “How differently did everything now appear in which he (Mr. Darcy) 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. ‘How despicably have I acted!’

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she cried; ‘I, who have prided myself on my discernment! (...) Till this moment I never knew myself.’"

As clearly seen above, the role of making decisions is strictly associated to men in a patriarchal society. “So, women in Austen’s novels are entrapped in a world of meaning beyond their control, and they have to learn to live with it, all the while maneuvering the central institution of marriage.” Moreover, the marriage that does not follow the specific rules of society (the union of Wickham and Lydia) is always characterized as a less valuable one, not only for the ill character of Mr. Wickham, but also due to the way it happened. Lydia’s eloping is not an example of freedom of thinking, but it is frowned upon for it follows some of the characteristics of Ariés description of the second type of woman, that expresses desire and is not present in the home environment.

The only environment where women are free to do as they will, is the dance floor. Which leads this analysis to the the last topic of discussion, the omission of corporal elements in the characters actions.

Although the dance floor is clearly a space where women are allowed to act slightly different from social conventions, while comparing the dances to others in 19th century literature, such as Tolstoy’s, one can notice that all the problems are raised and solved through the use of language, and there is no evidence of desire influenced by corporal elements. Elizabeth is offended in the first dance by a comment made by Darcy, that solves the matter with argumentation and proper use of language. This issue not only reinforces the concept presented above, but also shows marriage as a cold institution that is related much more to a social matter (that can be solved by argumentation) than to a matter that concerns feelings.

In a nutshell, one can affirm that, in order to paint the portrait of the social movement that was happening in the period of time of the novel by characterizing the private sphere, Austen selects some aspects that would be interesting to be left behind. This happens not due to naiveness of the author, but due to her narrative prowess. The point of view of the narrator excludes those matters because the society described does the same.

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The author reinforces the verisimilitude of the portrait she is painting by using the narrative form and point of view to reinforce the meaning.

Bibliographical references


GINZBURG, C. Sinais: Raízes de um paradigma indiciário. In: Mitos, emblemas, einais.


