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AP Literature and Composition

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Comparison of Romantic Heroines in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Twilight*

Although they were written two centuries apart, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Twilight* both contain strong romantic heroines that reflect the author's culture and a female's influence during the authors' respective time periods of the 19th and 21st centuries. Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* and the star of *Twilight*, Bella Swan, are two of the literary world's strongest and most opinionated heroines. Both author's, Jane Austen and Stephenie Meyer respectively, used their female leads as outlets to demonstrate a woman's role in their society.

Pride and Prejudice is commonly referred to as a comedy of social manners. Jane Austen packs a considerable amount of irony, wit and satire into her novel. Jane Austen crafted her novel *Pride and Prejudice* to mirror and mock a woman's role in early 19th century England. Women lived without many of the rights we now take for granted. They were not allowed to vote, had no voice in court, were expected to give up all of their property to their husband once they were married, and they were not allowed to study at institutions of higher education. Women were expected to obey the codes of society and observe a subservient role with their husbands and fathers (*Women in the 19th Century*). Jane Austen defied the typical image of an early 19th century woman. Although the focal point of her six novels, including *Pride and Prejudice*, was marriage, both she and her sister Cassandra remained spinsters until their death. Jane did not agree with society's rules that women had to marry to remain financially stable and refused her only marriage proposal from wealthy Harris Bigg-Wither in 1802 (Grey 280). Unfortunately, due to the death of their father, the Austen women were forced to rely upon Jane's brothers Frank and

Edward for support. Consequently, Jane used her writing to reflect her criticisms of society with the infusion of satire and mockery of social manners (*Austen, Jane- Introduction*).

In her most popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen gives her heroine Elizabeth Bennet strength through several literary devices. Jane Austen effectively uses narration to demonstrate Elizabeth Bennet's opinionated and romantic personality. Austen writes with an omniscient narrator, which allows the reader to see Elizabeth's strength as a character because she is contrasted with all of the narcissistic, weak minded females in the novel. Austen created Elizabeth as a model to represent her image of what the early 19th century female should have been. Elizabeth is a foil of Charlotte Lucas, Lydia and Kitty Bennet, and the other foolish subservient women in the novel. Elizabeth contrasts greatly with her best friend, Charlotte Lucas. Contrary to society and her mother's wishes, Elizabeth refused Mr. Collins's, her cousin who would inherit the estate, seemingly appropriate proposal of marriage simply because she did not love him. She realizes that to him, marriage is no more than a business transaction. Austen satirized the slim pickings young women had in the early 1800's for a future and demonstrated Elizabeth's strong will and independence. Charlotte picked up Elizabeth's leftovers and chose to marry Mr. Collins, out of desperation and necessity. She entered into a loveless marriage to secure her financial well-being. Elizabeth, being a romantic, does not understand how her friend can be happy in such a marriage. Austen uses this event to mock society and display the limited choices females had in the 1800's. Additionally, she mocks women for giving in. Charlotta Lucas' thoughts regarding her marriage to Mr. Collins demonstrated women's limited opportunities and Austen's displeasure and disdain for women's current lack of strength and willingness to stand up for themselves. Austen commented that

“Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible or agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. Without thinking

highly of either men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune” (Austen 107). Austen uses Charlotte as a tool to demonstrate the pathetic choices women had in the 1800's as well as the pathetic decisions they made. Charlotte and the run of the mill middle class woman weren't strong enough to make decisions based on what they really wanted. Austen uses this scene to mock the stereotypical, weak female. Jane Austen reaches out to her predominantly female audience through Elizabeth. Austen satirized the slim pickings young women had in the early 1800's for a future and demonstrated Elizabeth's strong will and independence.

Thanks to the feminist movement, women in the 21st century have acquired infinitely more freedoms than their counterparts in early 19th century England. In Jane Austen's world it was considered prudent for a woman to marry and now, sadly, the divorce rate is almost as high as the marriage rate. *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer embodies the modern woman. She is a career woman who is happily married and has three kids. She took advantage of a woman's right to a higher education and earned the prestigious National Merit Scholarship, giving her a free ride to attend Brigham Young University. Even something as simple as Stephenie choosing to be a vegetarian exemplifies the abundance of freedoms women now possess and are reflected in her writing. For example Stephenie own choice is reflected in her portrayal of the Cullens as vegetarian vampires (*Stephenie Meyer – Biography*).

Stephenie Meyer created her heroine Bella to reflect the emotional depth of her ideal, modern teenage girl. *Twilight* was written in first person narration. Having Bella Swan as the narrator allows the reader to have full access to Bella's thoughts and insights. The reader is able to fully appreciate Bella's strength of character by being allowed inside her head. Immediately readers can see that Bella isn't like other girls at school. Bella has a clear concept of who she is and what she wants. She is clear about every aspect of her identity, right down to her name.

“You're Isabella Swan, aren't you?” It was like the first day of school all over again.

“Bella,” I sighed (Meyer 119).

Bella is modest and doesn't like all of the attention she receives when she is the “shiny new toy” at Forks High School. Bella is opinionated and speaks her mind. Like Elizabeth Bennet, she is able to refuse the offers of men and retain her independence. She doesn't feel that she needs to fall into just any relationship just to feel secure. In fact, before she meets Edward, she prefers to be alone. She declines both Mike Newton and Tyler Crowley's invitations to the school dance. She isn't concerned with trivial matters and makes decisions based upon her heart, not to please others.

Dialogue is a key component in *Twilight*. Through interactive conversation Stephenie Meyer effectively allows the reader to draw a contrast between Bella and the other girls in school, such as Angela, Jessica, and Lauren. Bella enjoys spending time with her friends but could honestly care less about the trivial school gossip. Bella has the best of both worlds. She enjoys shopping with her friends in Port Angeles but is also very intelligent and loves to read. Interestingly enough Bella adores Jane Austen. She said, “My favorites were *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*” (Meyer 148). During the Port Angeles shopping trip with Jessica and Angela, Bella feels the need to escape to a book store after several hours of small talk. She realizes the importance of words and what you don't say is just as important as what you do say. Meyer uses Bella to send a message to teenage girls that it is important to read, do well in school, value family, and not be afraid to stick up for yourself and what you believe in.

Although critics often complain that Bella is depicted as the typical “damsel in distress”, others view the situation a little differently and see Bella as a strong girl for the age of seventeen who is able to stand up for herself. She confronts Edward about being a vampire and isn't afraid to learn the truth. She is determined to not let Edward get the best of her. She knows her own

strengths and is able to trust in other's strengths. For example, she knows that Edward would never intentionally hurt her. Meyer used Edward as a lesson that girls should face their "monsters" and their fears.

The reader is allowed access into Bella's head. Consequently the reader can get a feel for how Bella deals with her emotions. Bella is very intra-personal and interacts more with herself than with others. She appears to be much more mature than her seventeen years of age. She is always looking out for her father, Charlie. She takes on the role of a caregiver and a full grown adult. She cleans the house and always cooks for him. Additionally she comprehends complex emotions well beyond her years. She understands the importance of family, self-sacrifice and love. Bella realizes that family is the strongest tie and puts her life in danger to save Charlie from Victoria and the other tracker-vampires. When Bella receives a phone call from Victoria's mate, James, threatening her mother's life, she immediately vows to sacrifice herself for her mother. With these scenes Stephenie Meyer is able to convey her views about the importance of family in our society. Bella is in check with her emotions and can comprehend the intense feeling of love, from family to her love for Edward.

"I love you more than everything else in the world combined. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes it is enough," he answered, smiling. "Enough for forever" (Meyer 498).

Although it may be hard to see at first, the heroines in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Twilight* have a lot in common. Both Elizabeth and Bella fall in love with a boy with whom they experience awkward first impressions. In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr. Darcy is rude to Elizabeth because he thinks "she is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*" (Austen 9). Elizabeth was unfortunate to hear this snide remark. Similarly, Bella Swan has to endure Edward's obvious attempts to steer away from her. He even went as far as to attempt to change his school schedule to avoid her. At the same time, both Edward and Mr. Darcy are attracted to the heroines even

though they know they shouldn't be. Elizabeth's social status and family were seen as inferior to Mr. Darcy's, making it an improper match. Edward Cullen knew that he would be putting Bella in a dangerous position should he pursue their relationship. Both Austen and Meyer satirize human relationships to display society. In *Pride and Prejudice* the contrasting temperaments of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet lead to a lack of communication in their marriage, which is ironic because Mrs. Bennet is so concerned with marrying off her daughter that she neglects her own marriage.

About three things I am absolutely positive. First, Elizabeth Bennet is a shining example of Jane Austen's ideal opinionated and romantic female in early 19th century England. Second, Stephenie Meyer created Bella Swan as a model for the modern romantic heroine. And third, I am unconditionally and irrevocably sure that both Austen and Meyer designed their heroines with the intention of creating model leading ladies. Jane Austen used irony and Elizabeth's quick wit to criticize society's limited view of women and social customs. Stephenie Meyer let her heroine shine through insightful dialog and first person narration. Both novels contain similar themes such as "men and women finding each other, finding themselves, and overcoming the problems imposed on them by their families and society" (Kinney and Kinney).

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Outline

Thesis: Although they were written two centuries apart, "Pride and Prejudice" and "Twilight" both contain strong romantic heroines that reflect the author's culture and a female's influence during the authors' respective time periods of the 19th and 21st centuries.

I. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that..."

A. Elizabeth Bennet and Bella Swan are two of the literary world's strongest and most opinionated heroines. Both authors used their female leads as outlets to demonstrate a woman's role in their society.

II. Pride and Prejudice

A. Jane Austen gives her heroine Elizabeth Bennet strength through several literary devices

i. Narration

a) Austen employs an omniscient narrator.

b) This lets the reader see Elizabeth's strength as a character because she is contrasted with all of the other narcissistic, weak-minded females

- Charlotte- chose to marry Mr. Collins out of desperation. She picked up the leftovers from her best friend.

- Lydia and Kitty Bennet

ii. Irony, wit, satire

