

## **Pride and Prejudice's Mr. Collins: A Confluence of the Stupid and the Sinister**

Heather Newman

### *Excerpt*

In studying the character of Mr. Collins, it is first important to note that he appears to lack dimensionality—he is principally defined by his fatuousness, silliness, and stupidity; however, an analysis of the means by which Austen executes the portrait of Mr. Collins reveals a careful and layered artistic endeavor in characterization. Austen inaugurates this portrait by explicitly informing the reader of the traits that, however odious, culminate in the comic figure that Mr. Collins comes to represent: “Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society” (69). It is the very flatness of Mr. Collins’s character that qualifies him to be the object of Austen’s caricature, the most immediate target of which appears to be his burlesqued vernacular. That is, the impression of Mr. Collins’s stupidity largely derives from the manner in which he expresses himself rather than from his actions. His speech displays a tendency towards garrulity, extreme formality, and fastidiousness, and it is this stilted and effete language that establishes Mr. Collins as foolish from the outset.

The reactions displayed by Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth upon reading Mr. Collins’s conciliatory first letter, for instance, provide evidence that the stupidity inherent to his character can be gauged solely through exposure to his writing. Characteristically wry, Mr. Bennet remarks that “if you will listen to his letter, you may perhaps be a little softened by his manner of expressing himself” while Elizabeth keenly observes that “There is something very pompous in his stile” (61, 62). It is apparent to them, from this first letter, that Mr. Collins has been indoctrinated with the idiosyncratic formalities and niceties exacted by his society—a society predicated on mannerly behavior.

Mr. Collins thus represents an extreme reaction to his social context, particularly, his exposure to the Olympian Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who inspires in his character a servility

that runs counter to his vanity. In awe of the rarefied upper echelon that Lady Catherine ostensibly occupies, Mr. Collins comes to revere her in a manner best described as fawning: “The subject [of Lady Catherine] elevated him to more than usual solemnity of manner, and with a most important aspect he protested that he had never in his life witnessed such behaviour in a person of rank—such affability and condescension, as he had himself experienced” (66). Mr. Collins’s glorification of Lady Catherine alone contributes to the absurdity of his character, but his unbounded deference towards her elevates such absurdity to the status of stupidity. This effect can be attributed to the calculating nature of Mr. Collins’s acts of deference, which are employed in an attempt to ingratiate himself into Lady Catherine’s favor. For instance, he describes the compliments that he issues of Lady Catherine’s daughters as “the kind of little things which please her ladyship, and...the sort of attention which I conceive myself peculiarly bound to pay,” thereby directly implying the motivated nature of such compliments (66). Thus, the panegyric of Lady Catherine, in its own right, contributes to the burlesqued portrait of Mr. Collins.

### **Bibliography**

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Vivien Jones. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

## *Editor Commentary*

Regina Zeng

This essay, written for an English class on Jane Austen, provides an in-depth analysis of the character of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. However, Heather goes beyond the more obvious portrayals of Mr. Collins as the ultimate representation of stupidity, and argues that he actually possesses a keen awareness of his own social status and behaves in a way that reflects this awareness, revealing the more sinister undertones of stupidity.

The paragraphs excerpted are from the first section of Heather’s paper, titled “Language as the Target of Austen’s Burlesque,” which focuses on establishing Collins’s stupidity. We have selected this excerpt because it demonstrates an excellent balance of the use of evidence and analysis. The majority of the evidence comes in the form of direct quotation from the novel, and although the evidence might appear relatively sparse, each quote is immediately followed with ample analysis that directly supports the claim made in the paragraph’s topic sentence. The evidence Heather employs in this section is also diverse and varied, in that she incorporates quotes from the narrator, Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth (who are introduced to Mr. Collins for the first time in the novel), and Mr. Collins himself. Thus Heather provides the reader with a collection of different opinions that, taken together, help to prove her argument about the cunningness of Mr. Collins’s stupidity.

For example, near the beginning of this excerpt, Heather presents this piece of evidence from the narrator: “Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society.” From this quotation, Heather makes the very astute observation that “the impression of Mr. Collins’s stupidity largely derives from the manner in which he expresses himself rather than from his actions.” Heather then continues this line of argument by providing an example of “the manner in which [Mr. Collins] expresses himself” in the form of a letter that he sent to Mr. Bennet. It is this constant interplay between textual evidence and her own scholarly voice that makes Heather’s essay a prime example of the good use of evidence and analysis.

## *Author Commentary*

Heather Newman

In writing this paper, I attempted to parse Jane Austen's expert execution of Mr. Collins as a character whose defining trait is generally agreed to be his stupidity. I identify three aspects of Austen's characterization that lend credence to the impression of Mr. Collins's stupidity: his overly burlesqued language, lack of *savoir faire*, and piteous state of self-deception. Additionally, I discuss the sinister implications of a character who, on the surface, seems to be harmlessly comical.

When selecting pieces of evidence for this paper, I primarily resorted to dialogue rather than to narration because I felt that the former best illuminated what, exactly, contributes to the impression of Mr. Collins as foolish. As I wrote the paper, I realized that this impression derives largely from appearances—Mr. Collins is not actually unintelligent, but he acts and speaks in ways that *seem* foolish. Much of this paper is therefore concerned with dissecting Mr. Collins's

dialogue on the level of word choice to unearth *how* Austen achieves the portrait. Throughout, I tend to center each paragraph on a single instance with a few supporting quotations in order to establish a balanced interplay between evidence and analysis. I think that my close reading of the novel most forcefully contributed to the successful use of evidence and analysis in this paper.

*Preceptor Commentary*

Rosalind Parry

Jane Austen is not kind to stupid people. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the butt of many of her jokes is the ever-buffoonish Mr. Collins. He writes letters inelegantly, tells the wrong kinds of stories, and, worst of all, proposes marriage badly. As Heather Newman shows in this character analysis, however, he is far more than innocuous comic relief. In fact, his mannered demeanor conceals someone quite canny about his place in the social hierarchy. Digging under the polite surface of his many speeches, Newman ultimately finds in him a man who speaks some of the ugly truths about marriage, power, and class that the rest of the characters in the novel are too afraid to voice.

As described by Newman, Collins is scheming yet clueless, civil yet rude, affable yet pompous. The trouble with a character so paradoxical is that it is hard to gather the appropriate kinds of evidence. Add to that a narrator as consistently ironizing as Austen, and the task gets harder. To get at his many complications, Newman incorporates quotations from nearly every scene that Mr. Collins appears in. She almost never goes more than a couple of lines without incorporating at least some phrase or sentence from the novel, so that this essay is brimming with textual support. We leave with a multifaceted sense of this character, who is both smarter and more sinister than he might at first appear.