1999. The eighteenth-century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, “No body, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguing thing it is to have a man’s mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time.” From a novel or play choose a character (not necessarily the protagonist) whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each of the two conflicting forces and explain how this conflict with one character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. You may use one of the novels or plays listed below or another novel or work of similar literary quality.

Inner Conflict in *Pride and Prejudice*

British author Laurence Sterne once wrote that “No body, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguing thing it is to have a man’s mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time.” This concept of inner conflict is a common thread among many well-known novels. It provides a way for the reader to connect with the plot, as many people can relate to being in that situation. In *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, Mr. Darcy suffers through such a conflict for much of the novel as he is forced to choose between the standards of society and true love. Mr. Darcy’s inner conflict regarding his burgeoning love for Elizabeth Bennet contributes to Austen’s idea that love can overcome the most difficult obstacles and cross the most rigid social boundaries.

As a respectable man of society, Mr. Darcy sees falling in love with Elizabeth as possibly jeopardizing his reputation and social standing. During the time in which the novel takes place, English society placed a high value on land ownership; owning land was important when trying to fit into the upper classes (Moss and Wilson). Being the owner of the beautiful and highly
regarded estate, Pemberley, Mr. Darcy holds a place in the upper class and wishes to remain there. At that time, marriage was the key to holding your place in society. In his book Jane Austen, Tony Tanner remarks “but everything tends towards the achieving of satisfactory marriages---which is exactly how such a society secures its own continuity and minimises the possibility of anything approaching violent change” (105). Society functioned on a very strict routine and set of rules that resisted anything remotely close to change. Intermarriage of any kind was unacceptable, and there were individuals who took it upon themselves to uphold the rules of society. Lady Catherine is a prime example from the novel. At one point, she goes so far as to assume that Elizabeth wishes to marry Darcy and attempts to put an end to it. While the pair are taking a walk, Lady Catherine says to Elizabeth, “and now, at the moment when the wishes of both sisters would be accomplished, in [Mr. Darcy’s and Miss de Bourgh’s marriage,] to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family” (Austen 344). Her apparent disdain for a marriage between two people of different social classes represents the views of most of the upper class. As Lady Catherine is Darcy’s generous yet overbearing aunt, he must have some respect for her and her wishes. He knows of his unofficial betrothal to his cousin and how much it means to his aunt. However, it is at Rosings, Lady Catherine’s estate, that Darcy finally decides to propose to Elizabeth which shows, somewhat ironically, that he has overcome whatever social pressures he suffered from previously.

Contributing to Mr. Darcy’s reasoning for avoiding Elizabeth is that she is the opposite of many qualities that were valued in women at the time, making her seem disagreeable and impertinent. Elizabeth’s demeanor is quite unusual compared to most women. The assurance she has in herself combined with a fiery, outspoken personality makes her stand out in many ways.
Elizabeth is by no means submissive to the wants and desires of men if she doesn’t feel that they are right, which gives Mr. Darcy reason to judge her as disrespectful and ignorant of her place. Another issue that separates Elizabeth from women of the upper class is her education. Typically, the education of young, upper class girls “consisted of “accomplishments” that would lead to the maintenance of good homes and social contacts. Young girls learned music, singing, drawing, and sewing, along with reading and writing. Oftentimes the arts were taught by masters whom young women would visit” (Moss and Wilson). The Bennet girls never had governesses or masters and resulted to educating themselves for the most part. This is not to say, however, that Elizabeth is unintelligent. In fact, Elizabeth is extremely capable of holding an intelligent conversation as well as performing many of the skills necessary to be a wife and mother. This is evident in her exchanges with Mr. Darcy and when she nurses Jane at Netherfield. Despite this, Darcy may sense Elizabeth’s lack of a “proper” education, and views it as yet another cause for avoiding her.

While Mr. Darcy tries to resist his feelings for Elizabeth, he knows he is falling in love with her and sees that perhaps his social standing is not worth depriving himself of a happy life. When Darcy is first introduced to Elizabeth “he says coldly, “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me.” This remark reflects accurately his consciousness of his position and of his responsibilities” (Drew 357). It is possible that Darcy’s initial coldness is due to what he experienced between Georgiana and Wickham. He wishes to avoid anyone not of his stature in hopes of keeping himself out of the same situation. In doing this, Darcy comes off as full of himself, but this pride “may be set down in part to his own chagrin at his own susceptibility when he had thought himself immune from temptation, in part to the painful knowledge that he had formed and was indulging precisely the kind of attachment from which he had rescued
Georgiana” (Drew 357). Darcy obviously knows that it is expected that he would marry within the upper class anyway, but part of him must realize that the price of giving up love out of suspicion or responsibility is his own happiness. This change in Mr. Darcy’s perceptions parallels a real life shift in thinking taking place in England during the 19th century. People began to view intermarriage between classes as a much smaller issue and the social class system became much more fluid. Of course opposition to the rules of the social classes began much sooner than the 19th century and was lead by female revolutionaries such as Mary Wollstonecraft. In her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft visited ideas such as “…the equal intellectual abilities of women and demanded equal education and social opportunities for her gender” (Moss and Wilson). These beliefs, after being added on to over the next one hundred years, contributed to some of the changes taking place in society’s rigidity and composition. *Pride and Prejudice* brings new light to these changes through the resolution of Darcy’s inner conflict that comes full circle at the end of the novel.

Even though Elizabeth seems to be so different from the qualities that were acceptable in women of that time period, these differences are part of what attracts Mr. Darcy to her. Near the close of the novel, Elizabeth asserts this herself when she says, “You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking, and looking, and thinking for your approbation alone. I roused and interested you, because I was so unlike them” (Austen 367). For Darcy there is so much mystery surrounding Elizabeth’s strange demeanor that he has no choice but to be intrigued. Compared to women like Miss Bingley, Elizabeth is a real treasure. Darcy would be a fool to let a woman like her get away. There is a famous notion that opposites attract; Darcy’s attraction to Elizabeth makes sense based on that simple fact alone. James Sherry expands on this idea in his article “Pride and Prejudice: The Limits of Society:”
There has been a tendency in such discussions of the “individual” and “society” to allegorize Elizabeth and Darcy into representatives of those respective terms. Elizabeth, then reveals the energy, the impulsiveness, the respect for personal merit which characterizes individualism, while Darcy, with his sense of propriety and his noble family connections, stands for “society” or the established social codes. (611)

Using Sherry’s assertions, we can see that Darcy and Elizabeth are very much opposites and aren’t the most likely couple. In spite of this, they are able to see the balance that they create in each other. That combined with the lack of people trying to force them to be together gives them a freedom to love one another that fuels the relationship and enables it to grow.

After Elizabeth refuses Mr. Darcy’s first proposal, he resolves to prove that he isn’t as terrible as she imagines, showing the first signs of overcoming his previous opposition to such a marriage. In reading from Elizabeth’s point of view, the reader isn’t always able to see Mr. Darcy’s conflicting feelings clearly and is blinded by “[an extrapolation of] Darcy’s few remarks or actions… [that resembles] those of the people who are so much his companions.” (Sherry 614). Darcy seems pretentious and proud but in reality he is just a guarded man suffering from conflicting feelings. Elizabeth’s rejection makes him see the way he has been portraying himself, and he realizes that he must show her kindness in any way possible. This begins with his letter, which softens Elizabeth’s prejudices against him, and continues through Elizabeth’s visit to Pemberley. There, the couple seems to make a connection that had the fiasco with Lydia and Wickham not occurred would have blossomed much more quickly. Mr. Darcy’s involvement in the Lydia-Wickham situation also leads to a happy ending with Elizabeth. This shows a visible compassion in Darcy that hasn’t been seen before, helping not only Elizabeth but also the reader
to see that Darcy has in fact “[crossed] the social space which, in the eyes of society (and in his own up to a certain stage) exists between himself and Elizabeth” (Tanner 129).

The resolution of Mr. Darcy’s conflicting feelings between falling in love and respecting social limitations illuminates Austen’s central idea that true love can conquer anything in its path. Although he has to go against the strict boundaries of society, Darcy ultimately finds a happiness he couldn’t have had with anyone but Elizabeth. The opposition that the couple faces ends up strengthening their love and reinforcing their relationship. As James Sherry artfully puts it, for this to occur, “both Darcy and Elizabeth must undergo some changes of heart and of opinion before the novel can reach its beautifully poised and profound resolution in their marriage” (608). The two must set aside their differences in order to overcome adversity, but more importantly, Mr. Darcy has to first resolve his own qualms and make the choice to fully give himself over to the ups and downs of love.
Works Cited


