Pride & Prejudice and Zombies: An Exercise in Postmodernism

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Why We Need Jane, Any Way We Can Get Her: 
Postmodernism and the Greatest Love Story Ever 
A Valediction, by Laura Jane Kuhlman

When I first arrived at Ball State as a freshman, my first college class ever was also the first class I took in my major—English 210, at 9 am on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday with Dr. Fred Johnson. Every moment I sat in that room, RB 115 on the corner, I can only imagine that the excess brain cells of others flew up my nose and lodged themselves somewhere up there. I was the average freshman-- scared to death-- and coming from a high school where I was supposed to be quite smart, found myself feeling astonishingly stupid. When asked the meaning of the word “hegemony,” all I could think was, “Erh... like the cricket?” Never before in my life had I heard so many people use the word “arbitrary,” and I learned that my grammar was atrocious. So I worked hard and made it through. But that is not the point. The point is that out of the stacks of scholarly articles I have waded through during my undergraduate career as an English Literature major, there is one I have always come back to in my mind, and that is one we read in 210 on the first week of class by J. Hillis Miller. The gist of it was this: we need stories. We need the same stories, over and over, and when they are not enough, we need new stories, over and over, forever.

A story is not just a story, it is a narrative. A narrative can be anything, really, like the plan I made for myself when I left high school: go to college, kick some academic butt, go on to grad school, kick some more academic butt, hopefully get a job as a professor and continue to do as you would expect of me by that point. Then there were other narratives. The narrative is the master plan we have made, or that has been made for us. Ideologically, there are the narratives that govern our relationships to each other by gender, race, social class, and so on. In some ways,
it is what you think when you are not thinking—it is the way of the world. But if the narrative was never broken, 1) life would be rather boring and 2) our stories would all be the same story, the one story: this is life, accept it. Stories are how we make sense of the world. To some extent, the human condition is one story; we all feel the same things, though in different contexts. If we did not, books would not be worth reading. We would not understand each other, we would not empathize with one another, and we might not care for each other, only ourselves.

Let's focus on the why: why do we need these stories? Why do we read?

Those are big questions. Let's start with the specific—let's start with Jane Austen. *Pride & Prejudice* has made more women cry than perhaps any other book ever written. I do not mean to be stereotypical; I am sure plenty of men had a sniffle as well, but my point is that it is famous, and it is famous for a reason. It has been argued that *Pride & Prejudice* is the greatest love story ever written.

The protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, is a spirited girl who loves her sister Jane, her father, and the rest of her family. She is not rich, or outstandingly beautiful, but she is clever. While the goal of her mother's life is to see that her daughters are married to men of some fortune, Elizabeth will only marry for love. A certain Mr. Bingley, of some fortune, moves into their social circle and soon falls in love with Jane, who loves him in return. Mrs. Bennet, their mother, and the younger Bennet sisters are particularly unrefined in polite society, however, and in conjunction with the family's comparatively smaller income, the match between Jane and Mr. Bingley is frowned upon by Mr. Bingley's tall, dark, handsome, and brooding friend, Mr. Darcy, who advises his friend against the match and spirits him off to London.

Elizabeth was previously given reason to dislike Mr. Darcy, for having insulted her at a ball. After Darcy's efforts broke Jane's heart, Elizabeth loathed him. Mr. Darcy, however, only
loathed Elizabeth’s family and the effect they had on her social status; he found the rest of her quite pleasing, despite himself. Mr. Bennet’s cousin, the revolting Mr. Collins who will inherit the Bennet estate after the death of the father (and may subsequently turn out the widow and daughters), asks Elizabeth to marry him (and save her family from the destitution possible by the entailment), but she refuses, because she could not possibly love him. She goes to visit her best friend Charlotte, who was Mr. Collins’ second choice, and comes into the acquaintance of Lady Catherine, Mr. Darcy’s very proud aunt and Mr. Collins’ condescending patroness. Elizabeth meets a soldier by the name of Mr. Wickham, who tells Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy’s late father favored him and intended to help set him up as a clergyman, but in his jealousy Mr. Darcy did not follow his late father’s wishes and threw Wickham out on his ear. Elizabeth is quite enamored by Mr. Wickham and his story makes her hate Mr. Darcy all the more. When Mr. Darcy shows up at Lady Catherine’s and meets her by surprise, Elizabeth is aghast, but even more so when he suddenly proposes to her! Even in his proposal, he insults her, by saying that it was against his better judgment to like a girl of such low birth, with so little money, and with such classless family. She gives him a piece of her mind.

After this, he gives her a letter explaining that it was Wickham who was the scoundrel, who tried to run off with Mr. Darcy’s little sister, and that he did not think Jane particularly cared for Mr. Bingley… plus, she was still comparatively poor. Elizabeth grows to dislike Mr. Darcy less and less, until she meets him again after a trip with her aunt and uncle brings her to visit his estate, Pemberley. There, despite the chewing-out she gave him earlier, Mr. Darcy was very civil, both to Elizabeth and to her aunt and uncle. After spending some time in his company, she realizes that she could have loved him after all. Then she gets another letter—Lydia has run off with Mr. Wickham! Given what she knows about Mr. Darcy’s little sister,
Elizabeth is stricken with guilt. Mr. Darcy finds her as she is reading and learns what is amiss.

As Elizabeth leaves to tend to her family, Mr. Darcy saves the day. He forces Wickham to marry Lydia, restoring both her honor and the honor of the Bennet family, more or less pays Wickham off and makes sure Lydia will not starve to death with her worthless new husband, and swears Elizabeth’s uncle (who was also there, trying to help) to secrecy, that he may never be discovered as the hero. Elizabeth’s aunt clues her in, though, saying that she supposes it was done for her sake. After this, Mr. Bingley comes back to Netherfield, proposes to Jane, and everyone is happy again. Mr. Darcy finds Elizabeth, who thanks him for what he has done. He proposes again, and BAM! They’re in love. There is a double-wedding, the mother is overjoyed, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Whew! For those of you who have not read *Pride & Prejudice*, that is the story in a page and a half. “That’s some plot! Ha ha!” you might be saying, “but why is that the greatest love story ever? Why do I care?” I would argue that one of the most important features of this story is that it gives us hope. If we were to set the plot up and chart our mood while reading, it would look roughly like the black diamond slope at a ski resort. Things get bad. Things get really bad. But even when things get bad, you know they are going to turn around.

Even when Elizabeth thought she lost the one man she could truly love and respect forever, he was out there saving her sister and family honor. Even when Mr. Darcy got rejected by the woman he loved, he became a better person for it and had a chance to set the past to rights. We learn that first impressions can be very wrong (and get worse) but that there are second chances. *Pride & Prejudice* is a love story in which, despite everyone’s efforts to the contrary, there is a happy ending. I believe part of the appeal of this novel is just how black it gets before dawn, and just how very worth the wait the ending is.
That is not to say that the first 7/8th of the book is a battle—Austen's voice is witty to the utmost degree. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are hilarious, and everyone loves to hate the thoroughly unromantic Mr. Collins. This is a great book all the way through—but what do we get out of it? What we get is Elizabeth Bennet, a strong heroine who believes in the importance of love when all the marriages around her seem to be about money. Elizabeth is a young woman who defines herself by being a devoted daughter and loving sister, who loves to read and read others' character—a woman who is loving and smart, when women were considered accomplished only if they could play instruments, net purses, paint landscapes, and reach a level of education that only money can buy. Elizabeth is a poor girl who wins the heart of a rich man, not because she is a great beauty, but because she has a great spirit.

Perhaps it is because of this strength in a somewhat ordinary vessel that so many women relate to Elizabeth. I have noticed that there is a trend in postmodern Austen adaptations in which women trade places with Elizabeth or other Austen heroines. There is a desire to live her story, to experience the romance and civility of the time that many women find to be particularly appealing. One such example is Lost in Austen, a 2008 film in which a normal modern girl, Amanda Price, walks into her bathroom one day to see that Elizabeth Bennet has entered her world through a portal in her shower—one that goes both ways. Amanda is generally dissatisfied with her very unromantic life, which includes a boyfriend who proposes to her with a diamond ring beer bottle opener, and she reads Pride & Prejudice to escape.

I believe Amanda Price speaks very well to why we need Jane Austen and the courteous society of the Regency period: “...It is a truth generally acknowledged that we are all longing to escape. I escape, always, to my favorite book- Pride & Prejudice. I’ve read it so many times now, the words just say themselves in my head and it’s like a window opening.... It’s like I’m
actually there. It’s become a place I know so intimately; I can see that world, I can touch it—I can see Darcy.” Something permeates Austen’s world that is difficult to find in the real life of today. For some, perhaps it is romance, and a love stronger than mistakes. Even in *Pride & Prejudice*, there is a debate over whether or not love is even possible or necessary. When Elizabeth refuses to marry Mr. Collins despite her mother’s wishes and the financial situation of her family, it is because he is creepy and abhorrent—and she could not grow to love him. For her best friend Charlotte, however, who is already twenty-seven years old—practically an old maid back then—marital happiness could exist outside of love; it could exist in being the mistress of her own home, in being financially stable, in being comfortable enough to be happy—if never to know true love. We need heroines that can stand up for love, because without them, the outlook would be rather grim. Amanda Price has a similar conversation with her mother, who presses her to marry her unromantic boyfriend because he has no serious flaws, like being abusive or alcoholic, and Amanda is getting older. She goes on to accuse Amanda of being too lost in her head with Mr. Darcy, to which our heroine replies: “I am not hung up about Darcy. I do not sit at home with the pause button at Colin Firth in clingy pants, ok? I love… the love story. I love Elizabeth. I love… the manners, and the language… and the courtesy. It’s become part of who I am and what I want. I’m saying, mom, that I have standards….”

Books are important, because they are part of the narratives that govern our lives. Often fairy tales (and Disney movie adaptations) are blamed for giving girls an unrealistic standard for men—the quest for “Prince Charming” rather than “Mr. Good Enough.” In some ways, I suspect we need Mr. Darcy in the same way we need Prince Charming—to know what could be, and to understand the reality of what is. How do you know true love unless you’ve felt it, and seen it? How do you know that once you meet that person, you live “happily ever after?” The stories of
our culture, the stories we tell ourselves, help us believe that there is someone for everyone—no marrying your father’s creepy cousin necessary.

Another element of *Lost in Austen* that I appreciated was the Narnia narrative—find a magical door somewhere unusual and go through it to the magical world of your dreams. For Amanda, this was to travel into the world of *Pride & Prejudice*. For the less fictional of us, there is *Lost in Austen: Create Your Own Jane Austen Adventure*, by Emma Campbell Webster (2007). This book is unique, because it allows you the opportunity to step into Elizabeth Bennet’s shoes and actively make choices—to create a new narrative for this strong character based on the plots of *all* of Jane Austen’s novels. It is not exactly easy, either—I died the first two times I went through it! I do like the idea of a more personalized narrative; it would be difficult not to relate to a heroine that made the same choices you would. You may learn something as a result of these choices, too, so the narrative holds up to one of its primary functions, besides being extremely entertaining.

Speaking of entertaining—what about the zombies? Maybe women (and men) today do need to escape into a simpler time, and maybe we do need a story to help us believe in true love, but why do we need zombies? Monsters in literature often represent certain cultural fears, and zombies, as the undead, could represent our fear of death, the uncertainty we have concerning what happens after death, or even the fear that we are becoming a bit too “wired” and out of touch with the world around us. In the past several years, zombies and vampires have both been very popular in movies, books, and television shows, and in some ways, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* cashes in on that popularity for the sake of bringing a classic novel back into the spotlight. While some might say that Jane Austen is rolling in her grave right now, I believe there is something noble about this enterprise—by writing the book that he did, Seth Grahame-
Smith asserted that the narrative of *Pride & Prejudice* needs to be read today. By launching at least a very good part of the original story onto the *New York Times* Best Seller List, more people read it and were familiar with at least the general story of Elizabeth Bennet's life. And if zombies *do* represent a culture so brain-dead from endless television and internet revelry, is there not something noble about using them to popularize a book?

What I enjoyed most about the zombies is that they made Elizabeth into a stronger heroine than in Austen's original. In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Mr. Bennet has trained his daughters into five of the strongest warriors in all of England, who fight to protect their beloved Hertfordshire from the stricken masses. This is ennobling, because a certain amount of fighting skill is comparable to those "accomplishments" so prized by cultured ladies in the original, like skill with music or the ability to net a purse. Fighting is different, however, between both classes and genders. Mr. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine, is known as the greatest fighter in all of England; Georgiana Darcy is also very accomplished, having studied at the finest dojos abroad. Instead of getting governesses for their daughters, as in the original, the nobility sends their children off to Asia, to study in China and Japan (although the Bennets are looked down upon for having trained in China, as Lady Catherine insists upon Kyoto as the ultimate training ground). Whereas in Austen's original, Mr. Darcy values Elizabeth's love of books and reading as a passion they have in common, in the adaptation, they are both highly skilled warriors. In a time during which women did not have much influence vocationally, Austen's heroine is one who can match her man intellectually, whereas Grahame-Smith's heroine can kick just as much butt as any boy—and probably more.

Another function of the zombies, as I have mentioned before, is to draw in a larger male audience. I know that even here, I allude to *Pride & Prejudice* as more of a book for women. If
women need a heroine like Elizabeth Bennet, perhaps Seth Grahame-Smith believes that men need a hero like Mr. Darcy—a man strong enough to own up to his faults, to repair them, and to act selflessly to protect those that he loves. Perhaps it also helps to send the message that men should look for a woman like Elizabeth, and value intellect and wit over more shallow traits. While I do not know how many men as opposed to women read *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, it was first loaned to me by a girl friend who said, “you’ve got to read this!” So read it I did, in the main lobby of Botswin. What I *did* notice is that more guys than girls stopped to look at the cover of what I was reading. Several of my guy friends said, “*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies?* Cool! I want to read it!” and my boyfriend at the time practically read it over my shoulder.

No matter what purpose an author has in mind when he or she writes a book, it is intended to be read. For this reason, I do not think Jane Austen is rolling in her grave; I think she would be flattered and maybe proud that people love her story enough to want to make something with it themselves. While the zombies are rather present, they do not mess up the story. In fact, there are a few foggy points in the original that I believe the zombies brighten up. For an author writing in wartime, Jane Austen has been criticized for writing apolitically. Even though the troops are present in the original, without looking into the historical context, it is not exactly clear just why they are so active. In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, the troops have been dispatched to take care of the zombie problem, and bury the beheaded corpses, which rounds out the war issue. Charlotte Lucas is stricken and slowly starts to turn into a zombie, and we are better able to justify her decision to marry the disgusting Mr. Collins by the fact that she wants a happy last few months of life and a husband to take care of her proper Christian beheading and burial. After his wife dies, Mr. Collins takes the liberty of hanging himself, which
quite surprised me the first time I read this, but I would not say that this was unbearable. Elizabeth's "visit" from Lady Catherine turns into a duel, which I must admit was delightful, and I quite like the idea of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy fighting side by side. As a whole, I would say that the story works—zombies or no zombies—and which version I will reach for when tempted to read *Pride & Prejudice* again will purely depend on the whim of the day.

Since that first day in 210, I have taken a lot of lit classes, and I have learned more than I ever thought possible. I have read and listened to millions of stories throughout my four years here. This is one of the reasons that I love the humanities; every professor and student involved, whether they think about it or not, is full of stories and eager to share them. In my German Literature classes, we read a lot of really neat things, but some of the stories I like the best are the little offhand stories Dr. Warner tells about his life as a soldier in Germany during WWII. I have had other professors spend literally a quarter of our class time telling us about the silly things their children did or just why they think the political system is on a highway to hell or what life was like when they were college students. I love the way people get excited when they have something funny to share, and the almost haunting kind of sadness that comes from a story born in true tragedy.

What have I really done, these past four years? What have I learned?

Well, here's a story.

The one day of class that meant the most to me out of an entire four years as an English major was one spring day in my sophomore year. We were just getting our papers back in 250, and as a class, our performance was a little less than inspiring. Okay, a lot less than inspiring. After I graduated from being a scared little freshman, I grew into a still impressionable perfectionist sophomore, and let me tell you—I was horrified. My grade was ok, but what scared
me was that Rai got so disappointed by what we'd done that the lecture that day was cut short in favor of a discussion of, "What are we really doing here?" Why did we pick English? What can we possibly contribute to these thousands of years of collective experience? What is the point?

What the hell are we doing here?

The scariest thing was, I didn’t have an answer.

Maybe I still don’t have a solid answer, to why we devote our lives to this, to why I devoted my working life to this—but I for damn sure have the question.

From that day on, that question has been in the back of my mind with everything I work on, and I suspect that I will carry that most slippery, most important question with me until the day I die.

In the grand scheme of things, the hundreds of papers I have written here at Ball State have been or will be lost to my fried hard drive, to the beaten-up folders shoved into my bookshelf, to the moving boxes to come all too soon in my future. How can I possibly say that I have written anything that will be remembered? Half of the time, I can read a really amazing book and love every second of it, but three years later, I probably will not be able to remember enough to give a reliable summary of the plot. Some of my favorite books, I’m foggy on. I love Pride & Prejudice enough to make a pop-up book version, and even that page and a half summary at the beginning took a bite out of my memory.

But how do I know that I loved it? Because I got a lot out of it.

We get more from stories than a plot, than a connection to characters, than a living piece of the historical record, than a connection to someone who perhaps lived two hundred years before us, from the person telling us the story from two feet away.
We are our stories. We are the sum of our own experience and the sum of the collective human experience from the day human eyes first opened to the sun.

What little I know of my great-grandparents comes from stories, and all that my great-grandchildren will know of me will come from stories told long after I’m gone. But I do know that a book of poems scrawled out in beer-can-short line by a man who would eventually drink himself to death can inspire a girl fifty years in the future to study books for the rest of her life. And I know that behind each and every critical article, there is a man or woman who really got something from a book that stuck with them, something that had to be shared. And each and every one of those books began as a story that had to be shared, and shared with as many people as possible.

These are our dreams, our hopes, and everything we’ve built. These are our disappointments and our successes, the times we’ve learned that we were mistaken, the times we’ve kicked some serious butt, the times we fell in love.

This is powerful stuff. Really, it’s like heroin without the itching, plus the side effect of making us better people. I think Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith would agree with me that the more people have access to these stories, the better, whether or not it takes a whole hoard of zombies and a handful of paper cuts.
A Note on the Production of this Pop-Up Book

Before I learned to make pop-up books, I learned to make flat books. I class this knowledge among the top ten coolest things I’ve ever learned, easily. This was part of my senior seminar for my English major, ENG 444. We wrote and self-published our own manifestos. Mine was called *The Virtue of Verisimilitude*, which was essentially a call to seek truth and consistency in all things, and to let what is right be your guide through life. I learned leather-tooling and decked my finished product out to look rather old-fashioned, though like the truth, my book was not simple—after my manifesto was through, I hollowed out the next million pages to make room for a tiny carousel book, *Truth* (sometimes you have to dig for it). I also made several blank journals and picked up a hobby. I had so much fun in my senior seminar that I decided to make a book for my Senior Honors Thesis Project as well.

In making a pop-up book, I was first inspired by Maggie Bateson and Herman Lelie’s *A Victorian Doll House*. This is a carousel book, and when the covers are tied back and together, eight pop-up rooms spring into being. The best way to describe this is as a two-story house, with each signature holding two rooms separated by a flap that folds down to be the top story’s floor. This “floor” makes tabbed pop-outs possible, and adds dimension. Whereas most pop-ups require the center fold of a signature to create the motion, somewhat limiting the total area that can be effectively covered, this style makes a horizontal center fold of sorts. Since real life works with gravity, this works out especially well for house-like settings, because everything can use the floor to stand upright.

*Pride & Prejudice and Zombies: A Pop-Up Book* was patterned after this, although I chose to make two “floor” pieces. This allowed me to furnish both the upper and lower rooms with furniture and to populate them, although it did allow my paper a greater chance to curl. In
terms of research, I worked through Paul Jackson’s *The Pop-Up Book* over the semester.

Although most of the pop-ups require the vertical center fold to move (the motion of which would be inhibited by the “floor” pieces), I did draw on some of this knowledge to make the staircase in the Bennet family’s kitchen, the rafters in the Bennet family dojo, and the tabbed furniture throughout the book.

*A Victorian Doll House* was one of my favorite books as a little girl, although it did not actually come with paper dolls. This was a fancy book for me at that age, so my mom would usually tie it back carefully and put it on the floor for me to play with... which primarily consisted of me hallucinating/imagining/call it what you will a family to live inside. What I like about *Pride & Prejudice and Zombies: A Pop-Up Book* is that you can follow Austen and Grahame-Smith’s stories from scene to scene, since I also illustrated the main characters (and set them upright as tabs to the folding floor). For those who have not had the pleasure of reading either Austen’s original or Grahame-Smith’s adaptation, I abridged the main plot line along with quotations from Grahame-Smith’s novel and included these in a text box within each scene. And if you have not read either of these books, but loved the pop-up, what are you waiting for?
Works Cited


Pride! Prejudice! Zombies!

This is a pop-up book that has it all!

Inspired by Seth Grahame-Smith's undead adaptation of Jane Austen's immortal Pride & Prejudice, Pride & Prejudice and Zombies is a pop-up book that brings eight beloved scenes to life. Follow Miss Elizabeth Bennet as she kicks some serious butt and finds true love in the process.

Jane Austen is the author of Sense & Sensibility, Pride & Prejudice, Northanger Abbey, and other literary masterpieces. Seth Grahame-Smith wrote Pride and Prejudice and Zombies and is the author of the New York Times bestseller exporting.

Laura Kuhnken is an English major who has read most of these.