SYMBOLISM & MOTIFS

Symbols in Pride and Prejudice

Letters, Estates, the Piano, and the Walk: Austen's Visual Language

Jane Austen • Pride and Prejudice • 1813

How Austen Uses Objects and Spaces as Moral Symbols

Austen's symbolism is famously understated. Unlike the Gothic novelists of her era, she does not use stormy landscapes or crumbling towers to signal moral states. Instead, she uses the ordinary objects and spaces of domestic Regency life — estates, letters, pianos, walks — and charges them with precise moral and psychological meaning. Each symbol in the novel functions as a test of character.

1. Pemberley — True Nobility

Darcy's estate is the novel's richest symbol. When Elizabeth visits Pemberley in Chapter 43, the house and grounds become a direct expression of Darcy's inner character. The landscape is natural rather than artificially engineered; the rooms are elegant but liveable; the housekeeper's testimony is uniformly affectionate. Pemberley is not a symbol of wealth — it is a symbol of how wealth can be held with integrity.

> *e building, standing well on rising ground, and backed*
> *nd in front, a stream of some natural importance was*
> *er, but without any artificial appearance."*
>
> **— Narrator, Chapter 43**

The phrase 'without any artificial appearance' is Austen's shorthand for Darcy's character: his pride is genuine, not performed. Compare this to Lady Catherine's Rosings — all imposing facade and social terror — and the contrast between legitimate and illegitimate aristocracy becomes architectural.

2. Letters — Truth Delivered Indirectly

Letters in Pride and Prejudice are always more honest than conversation. The social world of the novel runs on performance — politeness, wit, display. But letters, written in private and read in private, allow characters to say what they actually mean. Darcy's letter to Elizabeth in Chapter 35 is the novel's most important document precisely because it could not have been said aloud in company.

> *on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its*
> *se sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were*
> *night so disgusting to you."*
>
> **— Darcy's Letter, Chapter 35**

Jane's letters to Elizabeth during Bingley's absence, Miss Bingley's cold letter ending all contact, Lydia's breezy note announcing her elopement — each letter reveals character more nakedly than its writer intends. In a novel about misreading, letters are the one medium that resists misreading.

3. The Piano — Female Accomplishment as Social Commodity

The piano at Rosings and later at Netherfield functions as a symbol of the 'accomplished woman' — the Regency ideal of female education as social performance rather than genuine development. Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine both invoke accomplishments as markers of marriageability. Elizabeth's attitude to her own playing is pointedly different: she plays for pleasure, not display.

> *his instrument in the masterly manner which I see so*
> *ot the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the*
> *e always supposed it to be my own fault — because I*
> *t take the trouble of practising."*
>
> **— Elizabeth Bennet, Chapter 3**

Elizabeth's self-deprecating honesty here is itself a form of superiority: she refuses to perform competence she doesn't have. This is the piano as anti-symbol — Austen using a standard marker of female accomplishment to illustrate Elizabeth's refusal to be defined by such markers.

4. Walking — Independence and Freedom

Elizabeth walks — often, far, and alone. In Regency England, a young woman walking three miles through muddy fields to visit a sick sister was a minor social transgression. Miss Bingley's contempt ('She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker') is exactly the wrong reading: Elizabeth's walking is Austen's visual symbol for her refusal to be confined by propriety.

> *never forget her appearance this morning. She really*
> *looked almost wild."*
>
> **— Miss Bingley, Chapter 8**

Darcy, pointedly, does not share Miss Bingley's contempt. The muddy petticoat that horrifies the Netherfield party is the detail that makes Darcy look at Elizabeth with 'admiration.' Walking, in Pride and Prejudice, is freedom — and freedom, Austen suggests, is always attractive to those who have the intelligence to recognise it.

5. Netherfield vs. Longbourn — Aspiration vs. Home

The contrast between Netherfield (rented, fashionable, temporary) and Longbourn (owned, modest, permanent) maps the novel's central tension between social aspiration and domestic reality. Bingley rents Netherfield because he has no ancestral estate; the Bennets cling to Longbourn because it is all they have. When Bingley eventually buys an estate near Pemberley, the symbolic resolution is complete: aspiration has found its permanent form.