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**Beyond Sensibility: Shame, Affect, and Emotional Regulation in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice***

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**Abstract:** While eighteenth-century sensibility culture celebrated strong emotional responses as signs of virtue, Jane Austen, through her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, shows how shame functions as a social control that moves between bodies and spaces, particularly affecting women. The paper examines concepts of affect, emotion, and sensibility in the aforementioned novel, drawing on Sara Ahmed's affect theory to illustrate that shame is a central, coherent, and organising force in the novel's emotional world. Using Ahmed's concepts of emotional circulation, sticky objects, and emotional labour, the study analyses how shame spreads through the novel's social world, attaching itself to certain bodies and families while others remain protected by class privilege. Through in-depth reading of the Bennet sisters, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and Charlotte Lucas, the paper substantiates how shame appears both as a bodily experience and as a social force that requires defensive strategies shaped by gender and class. The paper revisits Austen's sensibility by exploring how social vulnerability requires emotional regulation rather than emotional openness. Elizabeth's wit works as what Ahmed calls 'feminist killjoy', an emotion that disrupts false happiness; Charlotte's practical choices confirm her survival through emotional management; Jane's excessive sweetness reveals the exhausting work of absorbing negative emotions from others. The novel supports composed emotions, while distinguishing that the balance is limited by gender inequality and the social movement of shame.

**Keywords:** *Affect Shame Sensibility Emotional Labour Feminist Killjoy Sticky Affects*

## Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, is a seminal novel in English literature, widely admired for its wit, social observation, and nuanced exploration of marriage and class. Beneath its light and playful syntagms, however, the novel reveals a complex emotional world shaped by shame, anxiety, and social regulation. This paper examines affect, emotion, and shame in *Pride and Prejudice* through Sara Ahmed's affect theory, arguing that shame functions as a central organising force that circulates through bodies and social spaces, with particular consequences for women in early nineteenth-century England. The novel emerges from a historical moment when sensibility, an eighteenth-century cultural movement that venerated heightened emotional responsiveness and refined feeling as signs of moral virtue, was both influential and increasingly interrogated. Writers of sensibility such as Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau celebrated emotional openness, suggesting that the capacity to feel deeply reflected ethical superiority. By the time of Jane Austen, however, sensibility had become associated with emotional excess, especially among women, whose social and economic vulnerability made emotional regulation a necessity rather than a personal choice. The legal doctrine of coverture denied married women an independent legal identity, while unmarried women faced limited economic options. Women were expected to display feelings appropriately; responsive but restrained, expressive but not excessive, and to manage not only their own emotions but also the emotional atmosphere of their families and communities. The humongous emotional labour was both compulsory and largely invisible, essential to social order yet rarely recognised as work. While the culture of sensibility celebrated strong emotional responses, Austen exposes how shame operates as a powerful mechanism of social control. Shame moves between bodies and social spaces, sticking to certain families and individuals while others remain shielded by class privilege.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concepts of affective circulation, sticky emotions, and emotional labour from *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, this study deliberates on how Austen represents emotion not as individual psychology but as a social force shaped by power and hierarchy. Building on psychoanalytic readings that identify shame as a key structuring element of the novel, the study relies on Ahmed's notion of affective economy to demonstrate how emotions circulate and accumulate value. Through a comprehensive understanding of the affective economies of the Bennet sisters, Charlotte Lucas, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, the paper explores how Austen revises the discourse of sensibility by revealing how social vulnerability, especially for women, demands emotional regulation rather than emotional transparency. The novel discards both unchecked sensibility embodied by Lydia Bennet and emotional repression represented by Charlotte Lucas. Instead, it gestures toward a careful balance between

genuine feeling and social awareness, a balance that remains shaped and constrained by gendered power structures and the persistent circulation of shame within the social body.

## Methodology

The study draws primarily on Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* to analyse how emotion functions in *Pride and Prejudice*, not as private feeling but as a social and political force. Ahmed challenges the idea that emotions are internal psychological states; instead, she argues that "emotions do things" (Ahmed 8) by aligning bodies with social norms, communities, and power structures. This approach allows the novel's emotions, particularly shame, to be read as forces that circulate between bodies, create social boundaries, and reinforce hierarchy. Central to this methodology is Ahmed's concept of affective economies, which understands emotions as working like capital. They circulate, accumulate, and acquire value through repeated movement. In *Pride and Prejudice*, shame operates within such an economy, attaching itself to certain families, names, and bodies while leaving others protected by class privilege. As Ahmed explicates, emotions are not simply 'within' subjects but help produce the very boundaries between self and society (Ahmed 10). This framework clarifies how Elizabeth Bennet's shame about her family simultaneously distances her from them and binds her to them through affective intensity. Ahmed argues that shame intensifies both bodily sensation and self-consciousness, turning the subject against itself. In the novel, shame appears physically in blushing, silence, and bodily discomfort, and psychologically, through self-reproach and defensive behaviour. Importantly, Ahmed notes that shame requires a witness whose opinion matters. This insight explains why Elizabeth's shame is especially acute in Darcy's presence; his regard carries affective weight because she is already emotionally invested in how he perceives her. The concept of 'sticky objects' further informs this reading. Ahmed suggests that emotions attach themselves to objects, places, and bodies through repetition, accumulating affective meaning over time.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet family name becomes increasingly 'sticky' with shame as incidents of accumulated social embarrassment, while Pemberley, Darcy's abode, gathers positive affect- dignity, beauty, and security. These contrasting affective associations shape Elizabeth's emotional responses and social possibilities. Ahmed's concept of emotional labour provides a crucial gendered dimension to the analysis. She argues that women are often expected to absorb negative affect and generate positive emotional atmospheres for others, a form of labour that is exhausting yet socially invisible. This framework illuminates how characters such as Jane Bennet and Charlotte Lucas manage shame through self-suppression, composure, and strategic emotional restraint, revealing the unequal affective burdens placed on women. Finally, Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy offers a lens for reading Elizabeth Bennet's critical wit and resistance. The killjoy is the figure who disrupts enforced happiness

by refusing silence or emotional compliance. Elizabeth's refusals of Mr Collins, of Darcy's first proposal, and of her father's irresponsibility function as moments where critical affect exposes uncomfortable truths beneath social harmony.

### **Women and Emotional Regulation in Regency England: Historical Context**

The analysis situates *Pride and Prejudice* within the historical conditions of Regency England, where women faced severe legal and economic vulnerability. Under the doctrine of coverture, married women had no independent legal identity, while unmarried women without wealth or inheritance faced social insecurity and the threat of poverty. For the Bennet sisters, the entailment of Longbourn intensifies this vulnerability, making marriage not merely a romantic proposition but essential to survival. Austen was writing at a moment when external religious discipline was increasingly replaced by internalised social regulation. Shame thus emerged as a key mechanism of control, particularly for women. While men could retreat, detach, or express contempt without consequence, women were expected to maintain emotional composure and manage others' feelings. The culture of sensibility, which celebrated emotional responsiveness, therefore coexisted uneasily with demands for female restraint. Women performed constant emotional labour and were expected to be responsive to others' needs, to smooth social interactions, to absorb criticism without complaint, and to maintain household harmony. This labour was mandatory and devalued simultaneously, essential for the smooth functioning of society, yet invisible as work. As Ahmed observes, "women are raised to seek the approval of others" (Ahmed 106), and this orientation towards others' views makes them particularly vulnerable to shame. The fundamental asymmetry meant that women's sense of self-worth became dangerously dependent on external validation, making shame a particularly potent mechanism of social control over female behaviour and identity.

### **Shame as Affective Circulation in *Pride and Prejudice***

In *Pride and Prejudice*, shame functions not as a private or isolated emotion but as a circulating affect that moves between bodies, families, and social spaces. Sara Ahmed's claim that emotions "align individuals with communities" (Ahmed 8) is particularly productive here, as shame repeatedly travels along lines of kinship and social association. One of the clearest instances of this circulation occurs at the Netherfield ball, where Mrs. Bennet's behaviour generates shame that immediately transfers to her daughters. Austen notes that "Elizabeth blushed and blushed again with shame and vexation" (Austen 101), marking the body as the site where circulating affect becomes materially visible. This moment demonstrates that shame operates independently of individual responsibility. Elizabeth experiences shame not because of her own conduct but because her mother's behaviour adheres to her through familial association. As Ahmed argues, shame "burns on the surface of bodies" (Ahmed 103),

intensifying self-consciousness while exposing the subject to social judgment. Elizabeth's involuntary blush registers this affective transfer, revealing how family shame becomes embodied and publicly legible. As the novel progresses, shame does not dissipate but accumulates. Each social embarrassment, for instance, Mrs Bennet's impropriety, Mary's awkward performances, Lydia's unchecked flirtations, and finally her elopement, adds to the affective weight attached to the Bennet name. By the time Lydia's scandal comes to light, Elizabeth assumes that the accumulated shame renders any possible union with Darcy impossible. The weight of familial disgrace has become so overwhelming that Elizabeth can only recognise the depth of her feelings for Darcy at the very moment when she believes those feelings must remain unrequited: "Never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain" (Austen 278). The cruel irony of this realisation underscores how shame functions as an affective barrier that structures social possibility, regulating desire and foreclosing imagined futures. Conversely, Pemberley becomes 'sticky' with positive affect. Elizabeth's visit to the estate produces a perceptible emotional shift: its opulence, order, and restraint generate feelings of admiration and security that gradually attach themselves to Darcy. The housekeeper's favourable account further reinforces this association, illustrating how places, like names and families, accumulate affective value through iteration. Pemberley thus operates as an affective counterweight to the Bennet household, reshaping Elizabeth's emotional orientation and recalibrating her judgments.

### **Gendered Emotional Labour and the Management of Shame**

Ahmed's concept of emotional labour is crucial for understanding how Austen's female characters manage shame. Women in the novel are repeatedly required to absorb negative affect and sustain social harmony, often at considerable emotional cost. Jane Bennet exemplifies this labour as her habitual generosity of interpretation and emotional restraint allow her to neutralise potentially shameful situations, yet her composure is not effortless. When Bingley appears to abandon her, the narrator observes a "want of that cheerfulness" (Austen 175) in Jane's letters, signalling the exhaustion produced by prolonged emotional regulation. Jane's emotional style is frequently praised as natural sweetness, yet psychoanalytic and feminist readings suggest that it operates defensively, suppressing anger and disappointment to preserve social approval. As Ahmed abstracts, women's orientation toward others' regard makes them particularly vulnerable to shame. Jane's refusal to judge even when she has been wronged reveals emotional labour not as a moral virtue but as a survival strategy shaped by gendered expectations. Charlotte Lucas adopts a more pragmatic mode of emotional management. Her marriage to Mr Collins is accompanied by deliberate emotional suppression. Elizabeth observes that Charlotte occasionally blushes at her husband's remarks but generally "wisely did not hear" them (Austen 156). The blush signals shame, while the refusal to acknowledge it exposes emotional labour

as conscious, ongoing work. Charlotte's strategy secures material stability, but it requires continual vigilance and a partial erasure of self; Elizabeth's emotional labour takes a different form. Her sharp humour operates as a protective mechanism, enabling critique without overt displays of vulnerability. Elizabeth must remain intelligent without becoming improper, critical without appearing resentful, yet occasional psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, gesture towards the cost of sustaining the delicate affective balance. Male characters are largely exempt from such labour. Her father withdraws into ironic detachment, while Darcy initially expresses contempt with minimal social consequence. This gendered asymmetry reinforces patriarchal structures by assigning women the responsibility of managing affects that men are free to generate, displace, or ignore.

### **Elizabeth Bennet as Feminist Killjoy**

The concept of the feminist killjoy provides a powerful lens for understanding Elizabeth's role in the novel. The killjoy is the figure who refuses to participate in collective happiness by pointing out problems, expressing critical affects, and disrupting false consensus. Ahmed elucidates that "the feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (581). Elizabeth repeatedly occupies this position, refusing to pretend that things are acceptable when they are not. Her rejection of Mr Collins is perhaps a perfect example of a killjoy disrupting enforced happiness. Elizabeth's mother has constructed a fantasy in which Elizabeth will marry Collins and secure the family's future at Longbourn, and when Elizabeth refuses, she 'kills the joy' of the collective fantasy. Mrs Bennet's frenzy unveils how much was invested in the happiness: "I tell you what, Miss Lizzy, if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all, and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead" (Austen 113). Elizabeth's refusal to participate in the arranged happiness exposes the economic vulnerability underlying the marriage plot, the coercive nature of 'choice' for women without independent means. Similarly, her anger at Darcy's first proposal disrupts his romantic narrative, wherein he constructed a story in which he nobly overcomes his objections to offer his hand, expecting gratitude despite his insulting manner. Elizabeth's rage in her words, "You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it" (Austen 193), refuses to meet up with the happiness he assumes the proposal should create. Instead, she insists on her own legitimate anger, pointing out that he has been "arrogant" and "conceited in his treatment of her and her family (Austen 193). This expression of critical affect, which Ahmed calls outlaw emotions, challenges the gendered expectation that women should be grateful for any offer of marriage. Elizabeth's criticism of her father also functions as a killjoy affect. When she warns him about Lydia and Kitty's behaviour, "Our importance, our respectability in the world, must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark

Lydia's character" (Austen 231), she disrupts Mr Bennet's comfortable detachment. He prefers to laugh at his family's follies from the safety of his library rather than amending their disposition. Elizabeth's insistence that their behaviour matters, that it will have real consequences, makes her a killjoy who refuses to participate in her father's ironic distance. However, the novel also divulges the costs and limits of the killjoy position. For instance, Elizabeth is often isolated, accused of being too critical, too hard to please. Charlotte's words to her, "You are too sensible a girl, Lizzy, to fall in love merely because you are warned against it" (Austen 26), suggest that Elizabeth's critical stance makes her resistant even to positive attachments. When she laughs at Darcy and others, she risks becoming the figure whose "first object in life is a joke," someone who "wilfully...misunderstands" others to serve her wit (Austen 57). The killjoy position, while potentially resistant, can also become isolating and self-defeating. Moreover, Elizabeth's trajectory from killjoy to wife suggests that her critical affects are ultimately contained. Her marriage to Darcy resolves many of her material and affective anxieties. She escapes her mother's vulgarity, gains economic security, and acquires Darcy's protective pride as her own.

### **Pride, Shame, and Defensive Affects**

Darcy's character development shows how pride can function as a defence against shame and how gender shapes the ways one can use such defences. From his first appearance, Darcy's pride manifests as contemptuous distance. He dismisses Elizabeth as "tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me" (Austen 13), and responds to Mrs Bennet's chatter with "indignant contempt" (Austen 94). The pride elevates him above others, reinforcing his sense of superiority. Yet his later confession reveals its defensive function: he admits, "I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit...allowed, encouraged, almost taught to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world" (Austen 369). His pride relies on devaluing others to maintain his own sense of distinction, suggesting that the contemptuous side of his pride stems from a fragile sense of self and family honour. Sara Ahmed's analysis clarifies this dynamic. Contempt, she argues, is an affect that "elevates the self above others" (Ahmed 93), but this elevation is always a defensive response to the threat of being diminished. Darcy's contempt shields him from shame by keeping him separate from those who might expose him to embarrassment. His avoidance of social interaction, his refusal to dance except with those he already knows, and his dismissal of provincial society all serve to protect him from vulnerability. The gendered dimension of these defences becomes clear when one compares Darcy's contempt with Elizabeth's wit. Both act as shields against shame, but differently. Darcy can withdraw, express disdain, or refuse participation without serious consequence because of his gender and social position. Elizabeth, however, must be subtler, turning shame into wit that entertains even as it critiques. Her strategies must remain socially

acceptable while protecting her from humiliation. The growth of both characters involves learning to manage affect differently. Elizabeth describes Darcy as "properly humbled" by her rejection (Austen 369), showing that accepting shame rather than defending against it allows for transformation. Elizabeth, in turn, learns that pride need not always be defensive or demeaning; dignity can coexist with empathy and social awareness.

### **Marriage as Affective Resolution**

The marriage plot of *Pride and Prejudice* operates not just as a romantic resolution but as an affective transformation. Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy resolves her shame about her family by detaching her from their 'sticky' affects and attaching her to Pemberley's accumulated dignity. The improvement in her status minimises her anxieties about shame and her vulnerability to being disgraced by her family, from whom she emotionally distances herself. The affective transformation is further evinced in Elizabeth and Darcy's relation with the Gardiners. Austen writes, "With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms. Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them" (Austen 388). But Lydia and Mrs Bennet are carefully distanced: "Lydia was occasionally a visitor there...but Mr Darcy...though he always received her with the utmost civility, never spent much time in her company" (Austen 389). The mortifying family relations are excluded from regular intimacy. This resolution satisfies the marriage plot while revealing the limits of individual solutions to structural problems. Elizabeth escapes her particular vulnerability to shame through upward class mobility, but the systems that created that vulnerability remain intact. Other women without her intelligence, wit, or luck in attracting wealthy suitors remain subject to the same affective pressures. Charlotte remains married to Collins, managing his embarrassments through strategic emotional labour. Jane's happiness depends on Bingley's malleable nature, and moreover, the novel suggests that even Elizabeth's resolution is partial as she would be performing emotional labour at Pemberley, managing affects and maintaining social harmony. Her killjoy tendencies are channelled into the private sphere, where she can tease Darcy and maintain intellectual equality within marriage, but her critical affect no longer disrupts broader social arrangements. The marriage rewards her while simultaneously containing the threat her critical intelligence poses to social norms.

### **Conclusion**

The reading of Sara Ahmed's affect theory in *Pride and Prejudice* discloses how shame operates as a powerful mechanism of social control in early nineteenth-century England, particularly for women whose economic and social vulnerability made them especially susceptible to its force. By deciphering emotions as circulatory rather than individual, as political rather than merely articulating internal

states, Austen's novel stages a sophisticated critique of both sensibility culture and the gendered structures of feeling it produced. Shame circulates through the Bennet family, sticking to some bodies and spaces while others remain protected. It requires constant emotional labour from women, who absorb negative affect, generate positive ones, and maintain social functioning through their invisible work. Elizabeth's wit operates as a feminist killjoy affect that disrupts false happiness, while Jane's depression and Charlotte's strategic suppression reveal the costs of different management strategies. Darcy's pride functions as a masculine defence against shame, a privilege of contempt unavailable to women who must remain socially engaged. The novel's marriage plot provides individual resolution; Elizabeth escapes through upward mobility, but the resolution highlights rather than resolves the structural conditions that created her vulnerability in the first place. Austen advocates for balanced affect, neither Lydia's uncontrolled sensibility nor Charlotte's complete suppression, but **her** vision of balance remains constrained by the gendered power structures and affective economies of her world. Reading *Pride and Prejudice* through affect theory allows us to see emotions not as private, internal states but as social forces that create boundaries and maintain hierarchies. Shame is not just what Elizabeth feels; it is what moves through the social world, aligning some subjects with dignity and others with disgrace, enforcing norms through its circulation between bodies. By attending to these affective dynamics, a new insight is gained as to how Austen understood the emotional costs of women's subordination and the complex negotiations required to survive and flourish within constraining social structures. The novel's enduring power lies in its sophisticated representation of affect as inherently social and political, shaped by relations of power, a complexity that contemporary affect theory enables us to recognise and analyse with greater critical precision.

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