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## **FROM PRIDE AND PREJUDICE TO DEATH COMES TO PEMBERLEY. A READER ORIENTED STUDY**

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***Abstract:** The paper looks at the afterlife of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as envisaged by detective fiction writer and theorist P.D. James who imagines, in one of her novels, a sequel to the famous Regency book. This intertextual connection is analysed in terms of reader orientedness, the paper describing a survey that was conducted by the two authors among MA students in humanities at the West University of Timișoara and the conclusions that were reached after processing the data of the survey.*

***Keywords:** detective fiction, reader orientedness, sequel, survey*

### **1. Introduction**

The study proposed in this paper attempts an approach to the genre of detective fiction by taking two less trodden paths: that of detective fiction as sequel to a canonical literary text (Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*), and that of a phenomenological instance within a reader oriented survey frame. P.D. James' *Death Comes to Pemberley* is the case chosen to illustrate this approach, both when it comes to its detective-fiction-sequel dimension and to the questionnaire based survey.

From "the undisputed queen of mystery" (Amazon) to "the nation's best-loved crime write and best known romance in a magic blend" (*Evening Standard*) P.D. James has been known for the many appraising labels, maybe the most famous being that of the second Agatha Christie of the world. (Though there are many voices claiming that she is a much more skilled story-teller than Agatha Christie.) Who, then, is this author? Phyllis Dorothy James (1920-2014) was a highly educated and titled lady. She received honorary degrees from seven British universities and she was Baroness James of Holland Park, OBE, FRSA, FRSL, governor of the BBC, Chairperson of the Literary Advisory Panel on the Board of the British Council, a magistrate in Middlesex and London. However she is best known as a crime writer. Her fame was established a detective series (over ten novels) whose chief character is the police commander and poet Adam Dalgliesh.

However, P.D. James was also interested in writing non-fiction, the most remarkable for this study being her book *Talking about Detective Fiction* (2010). According to Amazon, through this book she:

*gives us an intriguing, inspiring and idiosyncratic look at the genre she has spent her life perfecting. Examining mystery from top to bottom, beginning with such classics as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, and then looking at such contemporary masters as Colin Dexter and Henning Mankell, P. D. James goes right to the heart of the genre. Along the way she traces the lives and writing styles of Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, and many more. Here is P.D. James discussing detective fiction as social history, explaining its stylistic components, revealing her own writing process, and commenting on the recent resurgence of detective fiction in modern culture.*

(<https://www.amazon.com/Talking-About-Detective-Fiction-James/dp/0307743136ing>)

An endeavour, such as the one mentioned at the beginning of this paper, makes P.D. James not just a practitioner but also a theorist of the genre of detective fiction, a fact which strongly supported our reason for choosing her and her novel *Death Comes to Pemberley* as a salient case for our study.

## 2. Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

The basic underlying concept framing the study is that of reader orientedness. As part of the umbrella theory of reception it has as underlying principle the assumption that the reader of a text is active and not passive in the act of perception and meaning making. As such, a literary text becomes real only when it is read. In our study we drew on three concepts inherent to the overarching theory mentioned above: phenomenology, horizon of expectations and literary competence. To explain, without ignoring the substance of the text itself, we regard its reception dependent on the construal of the literary work as a social phenomenon and on the historical contexts in which it was produced and read. Additionally, we consider that the understanding of a literary text is reliant on the reader's literary knowledge and analytical skills.

Phenomenology in literary studies designates "a type of criticism which tries to enter into the world of a writer's works and to arrive at an understanding of the underlying nature or essence of the writings as they appear to the critic's consciousness" (Selden 1989:118). As for the concept of "horizons of expectations", its proponent, Jauss (1982) believes that the criteria readers resort to when appreciating a literary text vary according to time and space. In other words, an interpretation of a text depends on the reader's own culture and his/her familiarity of the period in which the text was produced. Culler (1975) first coined the concept of literary competence, which he later on (1997) deemed as being mere conventions of reading. However, in our view, literary competence and reading conventions are different as they put forth dissimilar constructs. Literary competence differs in quantity and quality and draws on the reader's exposure to various literary theories as well as to the practice of analysing texts. Reading conventions, on the other hand, we believe, are more likely culturally rooted and instantiate the values, beliefs, and practices emerging from a particular culture. As such, we take the view that Torell (2010:371) proposes: that stereotypes and clichés as reading conventions can be mistakenly taken as internalised literary conventions.

In our analysis, however, we see the concept of literary competence in the same line of thought put forth by Tucan (2018:69) who argues that in order to understand a literary text a reader resorts to three types of competences:

- Linguistic – based on the knowledge of the language system in a particular discursal situation;
- inter-discursive – an experientially based recognition of the discourse of a particular text;
- cultural – based on the knowledge of the world in general and particular (which might include the reading conventions referred to above).

As follows we will present the outcomes of the two analyses adopted in the study discussed in this article.

### **2.1. *Death Comes to Pemberley as Pride and Prejudice's Sequel***

The emergence of a plethora of “quels” to be found in cinematography and (fan) fiction writing in recent years was boosted, some say by the immensely popular *Starwars* film series. Besides the better known concepts of sequels (after the original story) and prequels (before), more obscure quels such as paraquels (simultaneous), interquels (in between), circumquels (partly before and partly after) or inquels (during a gap) have been created (not to mention any other possible “quells”, not yet coined). All these tend to become quite a fashion within any genre of storytelling, though one might regard such literary endeavours less valuable and lacking originality.

“My own feeling about sequel is ambivalent” confesses P.D. James (2012:325) in an endnote to her novel, as she says she mainly enjoys concocting original characters. However, at the same time she argues that Darcy and Elizabeth “take such a hold on our imagination that the wish to know more of them is irresistible”. As a consequence in 2011, P.D. James publishes her sequel to *Pride and Prejudice* (*PAP* henceforth), almost 200 hundred years after Jane Austen published it in 1813. In fact, P.D. James’ interest in classical literature and her idea to respond to canonical literature by means of a good detective story is already visible in one of her early novels, *Cover Her Face* (1962), where she borrows the title from John Webster’s Jacobean tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi*. The explicit intertextual reference is a quote which reminds of the main themes of the play – and of the novel – violence, revenge and murder: “Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle; she died young.” (IV, 2)

*Death Comes to Pemberley* (*DCTP* henceforth) begins where *PAP* ends in terms of storyline, with Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage, six years after. They now have two sons and their marriage is as happy and harmonious as expected. Yet the same trouble-making characters of *PAP* disturb their marital bliss prior to the traditional yearly ball at Pemberley. They are obviously Wickham and his wife Lydia, the wayward sister of Elizabeth. Lydia appears uninvited and hysterical and announces her husband’s murder. A party led by Darcy look for the body but they find him alive and kicking, the dead body being that of Wickham’s fellow soldier, Dennis, whom Wickham claims to have murdered. Poorly as he thinks of Wickham, Darcy does not believe him capable of murder. Despite his testimony in this respect during the trial in London, Wickham is found guilty and sentenced to death. The sentence determines a female character, Eleanor, to kill herself. The reader later learns that her act was prompted by the belief that if Wickham died she would not be able to adopt a much wanted child fathered by Wickham. Things are cleared after a confession surfaces before Wickham’s execution. The readers thus find out that William Bidwell had accidentally killed Dennis mistaking him for Wickham whom he wanted to exact revenge upon after Bidwell’s sister got pregnant by him. It is the offspring resulting from this deed that the woman who killed herself had hoped to adopt. The child is eventually adopted by another family while Lydia and Wickham are helped financially by Darcy and Elizabeth to immigrate to America. Though the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy has been put to the test by all these events, the end of the novel sees them as happy as ever and Elizabeth tells Darcy that she is pregnant again.

The detective work, as instantiated by the plot, is extremely thin. The investigation of the murder is reduced to the minimum and it mainly consists in the discovery of the body, some observations made by the characters, particularly by Darcy, as well as the trial per se. Nonetheless,

for the sake of authenticity which PD James takes great pains to ensure, such a thing is to be expected. By no means could CSI be practiced in Victorian England.

As for the original protagonists, it is interesting to note that while Elizabeth has lost some substance, becoming a rather schematic figure, a stereotypical wife in accordance with the stereotypical expectations of the time, Darcy gains depth by being plagued by self-doubt, becoming thus a precursor of P.D. James' favourite character, detective Dalgliesh.

Perhaps the most remarkable ingredient of *DCTP* is its style. The style employed does not just superficially mimic that of the original prose by sprinkling the language with obsolete words, as it often happens in other contemporary novels set in the period. Both the narratorial voice and the characters' voices sound constantly genuine and convincing. P.D. James probably took great pains to re-create the language of the period through which she successfully manages to lead the reader into the atmosphere of Austen's world. Descriptions also play an important role in creating this atmosphere, which are seemingly more abundant than in Austen's *PAP*. In a sense, such detailed descriptions do seem necessary since the contemporary readers of *DCTB* are far less familiar with the culture and civilization of Austen's time than the original ones. The following excerpt taken from the very beginning of the novel, namely its prologue, illustrates the previous observations.

*It was generally agreed by the female residents of Meryton that Mr and Mrs Bennet of Longbourn had been fortunate in the disposal in marriage of four of their five daughters. Meryton, a small market town Hertfordshire, is not on the route of any tours of pleasure, having neither beauty of setting nor a distinguished history, while its only great house, Netherfield Park, although impressive, is not mentioned in books about the county's notable architecture.*

This fragment is part of one the two texts our reader-based survey started from. The survey is discussed in the next section of this paper.

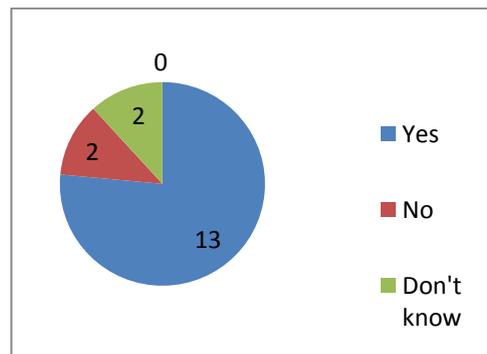
### 3. The Survey

The main aim of the study was to investigate the way in which readers having (or possibly lacking) certain literary competences experienced two samples of writing: a canonical one and a bestselling sequel. To this end we proposed a questionnaire based survey among the MA students in the two English medium programmes of the Faculty of Letters in our university. Through our survey we envisaged to render a quantitative dimension to the study, and for this reason we took Dörnyei's (2007:32) view that "the single most important feature of quantitative research is, naturally, that is centred around numbers".

The questionnaires were distributed online and had a rather low response rate (22%). The overwhelming majority of the respondents were females, a fact which accurately reflects the gender distribution of the students attending the two programmes. The number of the respondents coming from the Translation Studies programme was almost double than those from the American Studies programme. A possible reason may reside in to the fact that the two texts under scrutiny were British, therefore not in the immediate scope of an American Studies programme. To complete an even more relevant (for this study) profile of our respondents, it is useful to note that out of the seventeen respondents only two stated that they had not attended any literature courses during their BA studies. This element of the respondent profile is crucial, since the literary competence, as explained, was an underlying concept in our study.

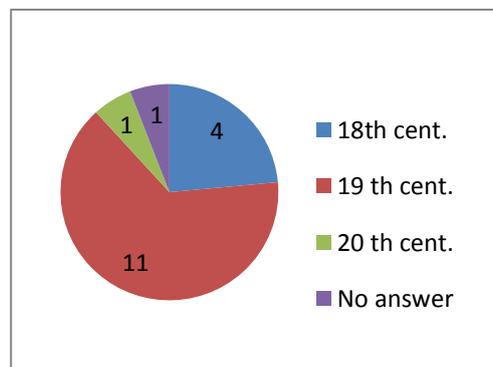
For ease of reference, the results of the survey will be presented in a number of tables, whose labels are the actual core from the questionnaire.

**Figure 1. Do you think that the two texts attached are very similar?**



Overwhelmingly the respondents considered the two texts very similar and when asked to justify their responses, their explanations given were: the same characters, same topic, same register, same novel, same language, same style. Conversely, those who answered *no* said that the writing styles were different, in terms of more details given, in tone or even in genre. It was interesting to note that both respondents who said they did not know the answer to the question were the ones who had no prior exposure to literature classes.

**Figure 2. Do you think that the language of the text is typical for the... century literature?**



Most respondents held the view that the language of the two texts was either 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. When asked to explain their answers, none of the respondents mentioned the possibility of the two texts having been written by different authors, not even the one respondent who said the language was 20<sup>th</sup> century or the one who did not answer the question. However the ones who said the language was 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century gave as reasons the following:

- sentence structure;
- obsolete vocabulary;
- rigid and dramatic language;
- no emotion;

- typical Victorian language (sic!);
- importance of the topic of marriage.

Most reasons given had a language dimension, which is indicative to what strategy an initiated reader of language resorts to when understanding a literary text. More intriguing was the reason given by the respondent who said it was 20<sup>th</sup> century: “it just felt like it”.

Here are some examples given by the respondents when asked to justify their choices:

Lexis:

Text 1 (Austen) – *domestic felicity; darling wish; chief of her time, exceedingly; only a twelvemonth; to her very material advantage*

Text 2 (James) – *chief entertainment; cold in his grave; fortunate in the; disposal in marriage; fond of loudly lamenting; the estate was entailed to his cousin.*

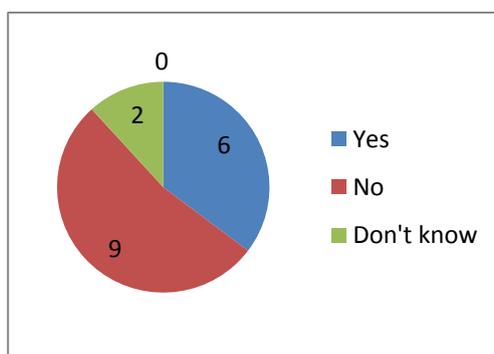
Grammar structures:

Text 1 (Austen): Inversion, repetition – *she was not so ungovernable a temper; in so unusual a form; produced so happy an effect; less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid*

Text 2 (James): Passives, neither/nor – *It was generally agreed by the female residents; having neither beauty of setting nor a distinguished history*

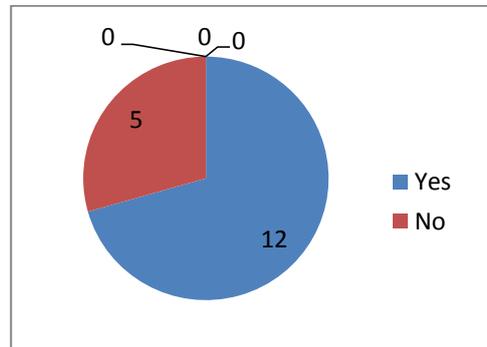
The illustrations chosen by the respondents are very similar across the two texts both in terms of lexis (mainly the level of formality) and in terms of grammar, illustrating a certain similar set of mind instantiated by our respondents.

**Figure 3. Do you think that the two texts are written by the same author?**



Very few respondents said that the two texts were written by the same author, in spite of the fact that similar language features were identified when answering the previous question. Most of the respondents said either that the two texts were written by two different authors or that they were not sure.

**Figure 4. Do you recognize any of the two texts?**



An even more interesting finding than the answers shown in the above pie chart is that the twelve respondents who answered *yes* to this question said that they recognized Jane Austen as the author of either text 1 (nine respondents) or text 2 (one respondent). One respondent even said that both texts were authored by Jane Austen. The majority of the respondents, though, recognized the genuine Jane Austen text. Similarly noteworthy, the group of five respondents who said they did not recognize any of the texts includes the two respondents who said they did not study any literature courses.

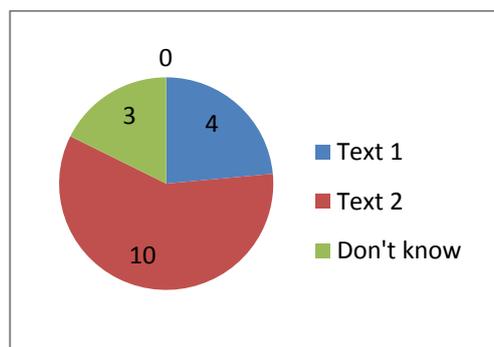
An open ended question was then asked trying to establish what prompted the recognition of the text(s). Two categories of answers were provided. They are listed below together with some illustrative quotes.

Previous reading of *PAP* – *I read it in first year of college as first book for the literature class.*

Recognition of the characters and language – *the characters and similar style.*

Once again the respondents showed that language was one of the tools they resorted to when making sense of a literary text.

**Figure 5. One text is a sequel. Which one do you think it is?**

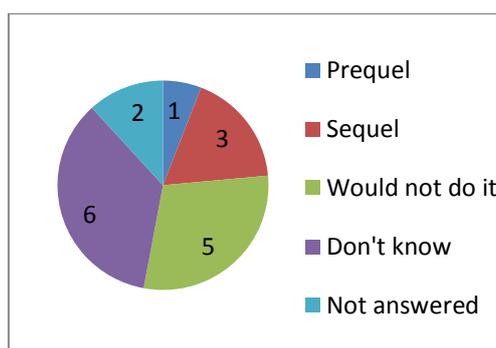


Most of the respondents acknowledged (correctly) that Text 2 is the sequel. The reasons they provided were of two types: the second text's summarising values, and the kind of language used. Two illustrative quotes were chosen to present the respondents' views in their own frame of mind.

Summarising values – *The first text appears to be from the end of Pride and Prejudice, while the second texts overviews what had happened in the meantime, being part of an opening*

The language used – *The language of the first text is more elaborate, so it might precede the first.*  
The role of language was yet again mentioned in the open-ended explanations provided.

**Figure 6. What would you write when starting from a famous novel?**



Most of the respondents, one way or another, manifested reticence when asked what they would choose to write, five of them even saying that they would not attempt such an endeavour. One of the reasons given referred to the lack of originality and/or creativity such an endeavour might show – *I'd rather write something new rather building on the work of another author, it shows lack of creativity.* The second reason hinted at was the lack of success such an endeavor might encumber – *People will compare styles and probably not even consider buying such a book.*

On the other hand, the person who said s/he would write a prequel because of the *degree of freedom in choosing the way the characters develop*, while the three persons who chose the sequel all said something similar – *it's interesting to know what happened after.*

The final question of the questionnaire was once again an open-ended one, asking the respondents to give their views on what would be the most successful sub-genre, when making an attempt at re-writing, pre-quelling or se-quelling a famous novel. Surprisingly, at least when it comes to the study put forth in this article, detective fiction turned out to be only the second runner up in our respondents' views. The runner up was the genre of romance while the winner turned out to be the genre of fantasy.

When speculating about what this finding might mean, one cannot help but think about the success, beyond belief in recent years (both fiction and movie wise) of *Twilight* and its offspring *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which is bound to have influenced the respondents' views.

All in all, the survey (though the low response rate triggered suggests a possible lack of interest in the subject of our investigation) revealed a number of thought-provoking results. Most respondents had prior exposure to literature courses and for this reason, we believe, their responses were fairly homogeneous. However, the most important findings were that most often than not the respondents resorted to language when making sense of and judging a literary text indicating that the linguistic competence is primordial as part of the literary competence discussed earlier in this paper. What is more, using a famous literary text to produce other texts

was seen as a lack of creativity and originality and yet, pop fiction genres, hot on the market, are considered most successful, even by initiated readers of literature.

#### 4. Conclusions

Contrary to our respondents' views elicited by the survey discussed before, P.D. James' detective fiction *Death Comes to Pemberley* as a sequel of Jane Austen's iconic *Pride and Prejudice* turned out to be a number one bestseller. According to criticism this success is due to the way in which she used the language to re-create the atmosphere of the period by finding a voice so similar to Austen's, by having a similar sense of humour, doubled by a whodunit story line and by the subtle re-crafting of the original characters. This success, we would argue, is also due to P.D. James' love of and expertise in writing detective fiction, best illustrated by her own words when writing about detective fiction. Being so apt and tale-telling, we decided to use it to conclude our paper.

*We do not expect popular literature to be great literature, but fiction which provides excitement, mystery and humour also ministers to essential human needs. We can honour and celebrate the genius which produced Middlemarch, War and Peace and Ulysses without devaluing Treasure Island, The Moonstone and The Inimitable Jeeves.* (P.D. James, 2009: 157)

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