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A Syntactical Approach to Mr. Collins' Letter

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A SYNTACTICAL APPROACH TO
MR. COLLINS' LETTER

SHIXING WEN

"LE STYLE, C'EST L'HOMME MEME" Buffon's remark throws an illuminating light on our study of literary styles, which, in turn, contributes to our comprehension and full appreciation of literature.

Traditionally, people estimate the style of a given literary work by their own impression of it. However, as men's experiences in life are varied from one another, the same book can impress them differently. Even the same person, if in a different mood, can draw a different impression from the same book. In a word, impression being something subjective, the estimation of a literary style based on it admits of fluctuation.

Then, how can our estimation of a literary work be more objective and our way of appraising it be more scientific? That is the problem I shall try to tackle within this paper.

A literary style is composed of many elements, such as syntactical structures, choice of words, figures of speech, imagery, and rhetorical devices. However, I shall confine myself to a syntactical analysis of Mr. Collins' letter, with the view to presenting a way of relatively objective estimation of Jane Austen's style and more accurate comprehension and appreciation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Mr. Collins' Letter

Hunsford, near Westerham, Kent,
15th October

Dear Sir,

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father always gave me much uneasiness, and since I have had the misfortune to lose him,

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I have frequently wished to heal the breach; but for some time I was kept back by my own doubts, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good terms with anyone with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance. My mind, however, is now made up on the subject, for having received ordination at Easter, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, and be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England. As a clergyman, moreover, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds I flatter myself that my present overtures of good-will are highly commendable, and that the circumstances of my being next in the entail of Loughman estate will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive-branch. I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologise for it, as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends, — but of this hereafter. If you should have no objection to receive me into your house, I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family, Monday, November 18th, by four o'clock, and shall probably trespass on your hospitality till the Saturday se'nnight following, which I can do without any inconvenience, as Lady Catherine is far from objecting to my occasional absence on a Sunday, provided that some other clergyman is engaged to do the duty of the day. — I remain, dear sir, with respectful compliments to your lady and daughters, your well-wisher and friend,

William Collins

As Mr. Collins' letter comprises only five sentences, I shall treat them separately and devote one part of my paper to each.

Abbreviations

S - Subject (—)	V - Verb (=)
O - Object (-)	Oi - indirect Object (—)
Od - direct Object (--)	Oc - Object complement (—)
A - Adverbial modifier (**)	P - Predicative (M)
(S) - real Subject (—)	(O) - real object (--)

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The opening sentence of Mr. Collins' letter can be analyzed syntactically as follows:

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late

~~~~~  
S,

honoured father always gave me much uneasiness,

----- \*\*\*\*\* =====  
A<sub>1</sub> V<sub>1</sub> O<sub>i1</sub> Od<sub>1</sub>

and since I have had the misfortune to lose him,

\*\*\*\*\* ~===== -----  
A<sub>1</sub> S<sub>2</sub> V<sub>2</sub> O<sub>2</sub>

I have frequently wished to heal the breach;

~===== \*\*\*\*\* ===== -----  
S<sub>1</sub> A<sub>1</sub> V<sub>1</sub> O<sub>1</sub>

but for some time I was kept back by my own doubts,

\*\*\*\*\* ~===== \*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*  
A<sub>1</sub> S<sub>1</sub> V<sub>1</sub> A<sub>1</sub> A<sub>1</sub>

fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory

\*\*\*\*\*  
~===== ~~~~~~ \*\*\*\*\*  
A<sub>1</sub> S<sub>2</sub> V<sub>2</sub> P<sub>2</sub> A<sub>2</sub>

for me to be on good terms with anyone

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\* ~~~~~~  
A<sub>2</sub> (S<sub>2</sub>)

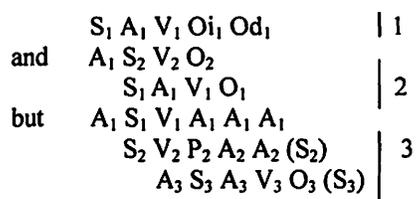
with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance.

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\* ~===== ----- ~~~~~~  
A<sub>3</sub> S<sub>3</sub> A<sub>3</sub> V<sub>3</sub> O<sub>3</sub> (S<sub>3</sub>)

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For convenience's sake, we may transcribe its syntactical structure in this way:

Diagram 1:



From this diagram, we can see that this sentence is constructed on three levels, which are indicated by the numerals following the initials.

The first level corresponds to what we generally term as the main clause. So we may say that this opening sentence is composed of three main clauses.

Let us first focus our attention on the main clauses. Here, we have three subjects, each denoting a different thing. To the first two subjects, the application of this argument of ours could raise no protest. But the case may be different as the third is concerned. Our explanation is that, according to Noam Chomsky's theory of "deep structure," the real subject of a sentence in the passive voice should be the notional subject introduced by the preposition "by". So this problem, we hope, is solved.

Now, what do these different subjects mean to us? At the present stage, we cannot infer much from them. But one thing is clear: the changes of subjects reveal the shifts of interest in Mr. Collins' mind, for the subject generally locates where the writer's most essential interest lies.

If we substantialize this abstract notion of subject with lexical meaning, the case will be more clear. Mr. Collins first recalls the "disagreement" between his father and his uncle. Then his mind goes back to himself, "I". And finally comes in his "doubts".

The relationship between these three subjects are not of the same kind. The first subject yields its place to the second in a relatively smooth and natural way. Though the "disagreement" exists in his father's generation, Mr. Collins, as his father's son and his uncle's nephew, must have some concern about it. Moreover, in his own words, that disagreement, having caused his "uneasiness" in the past, now gives rise to his wish to dissolve it. So, the transition from the first subject to the second, we think, is smooth and natural; and we can find a ready support to our argument in the "harmonious" conjunction "and".

But the case is different in the second change of subjects. Following his train of thought, we would expect Mr. Collins trying to turn his wish into action. Nevertheless, instead of making a step further, he backs away from his previous wish and casts doubts on it, as indicated by the third subject, "my own doubts".

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His abrupt turning back breaks the smooth transition of subjects. To reveal this abruptness and turning, the coordinate conjunction "but" is employed. And to give it more emphasis, Mr. Collins uses a punctuation device by placing a semi-colon immediately before "but", running the risk of being redundant.

The uneven transition of subjects here suggests the conflict of emotions in the heart of Mr. Collins, a conflict with his respectful feeling to his "honoured" father on the one side and his "good-will" towards his uncle's family on the other.

This conflict of emotions in Mr. Collins' heart can also be traced from the overall sentence structure.

Comparing the three main clauses on the first level, we will not fail to notice that they are not balanced but exceed one another in complexity. The first main clause, in spite of its lengthy subject qualifier ("subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father"), is, in fact, only a simple sentence; at most, a complicated simple sentence. The second main clause is a complex sentence itself. Its subordinate clause is an adverbial one, introduced by the subordinate conjunction "since." The third main clause has a subordinate clause, in which is embedded an attributive clause introduced by the relative pronoun "whom."

From this comparison, we can see that the syntactical structures in these main clauses proceed from the simple to the complex and finally to the involved. This increasing complexity in syntactical structure conforms to the growing intensity of the emotional conflict in Mr. Collins.

In his father's life-time, Mr. Collins could do nothing but feel some uneasiness at the disagreement of his elder generation. The death of his father grieves him much, but at the same time presents before him a possibility to wish to "heal the breach". Yet, like many other people on such a momentous occasion as this, he hesitates to plunge into action for a long time.

Doubts are raised in his mind's eye. He wonders whether his wish to restore the broken relationship with his uncle's family is "disrespectful" to his father's memory. So he stands hesitating at the end of the first sentence.

To conclude with, in the first sentence, the changes of subject and the conjunction "but," signal the conflict of emotions in Mr. Collins' heart; the increasing complexity of syntactical structure in its main clauses reveals the growing intensity of the emotional conflict in him.

## II

The word "however" in the second sentence plays the role of connecting it with the previous sentence, and what is more, connecting the past with the present. For in the first sentence, the tenses of its various clauses, main or subordinate, are invariably that of the past, with the exception of the second main clause together with its subordinate clause. But that can be justified: the present perfect tense used there refers to some event occurred in the past and not prolonged to the present. Thus, we can be safe to say that the first sentence relates something of the past as indicated by its employment of the past tense.

In effect, the first sentence provides a sort of background, from which ensues the intent and purpose for Mr. Collins to write the letter.

Now let us examine the second sentence.

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My mind, however\*, is now made up on the subject,  
 ~~~~~ = \*\*\* ===== \*\*\*\*\*  
 S₁ A₁ V₁ A₁

for having received ordination at Easter, I have been

 A₁ ~=====

so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of

 ~~~~~ \*\*\*\*\*  
 P<sub>2</sub> A<sub>2</sub>

the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*

of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
 ~~~~~  
 S₃

has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish,

 ===== - - - - -
 V₃ Oi₃ Od₃

where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself

 ***** ~===== ~~~~~ ~~~~~
 A₄ S₄ V₄ P₄ (S₄)

with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, and be ever


 ~~~~~ ~~~~~  
 (S<sub>4</sub>)

ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
 ~~~~~ ~~~~~  
 S₅

*I have excluded this word from the syntactical structure, for it is a sort of extrasyntactical word.

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“moreover,” which suggests there is a close relationship between the two. As a matter of fact, the third sentence, as far as meaning is concerned, is a natural outcome of the second.

First of all, let us cope with the syntactical structure of the sentence:

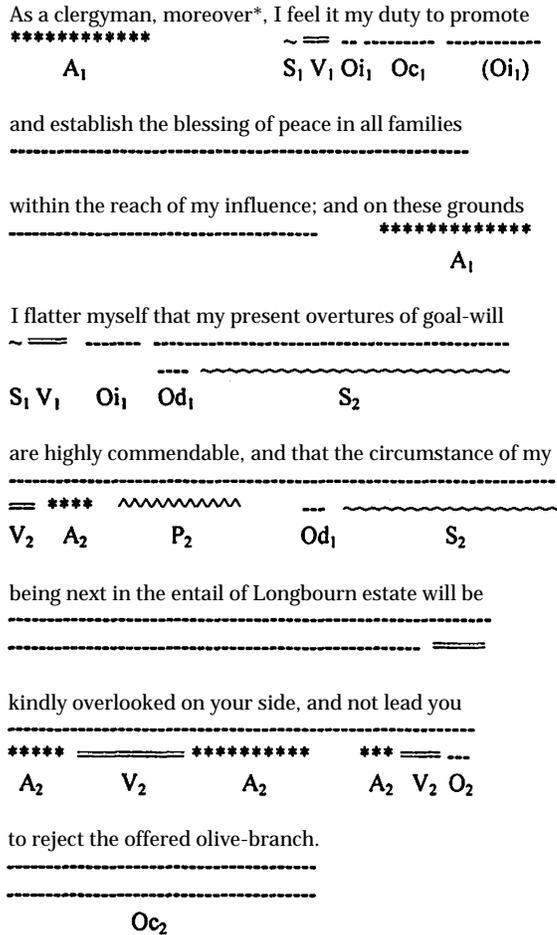
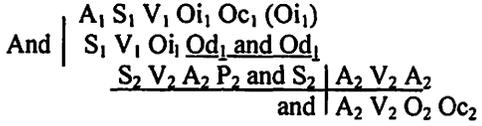


Diagram 3:



This diagram shows that the parallel structure is the characteristic feature of the syntactical structure of this sentence.

The two main clauses are combined together by the coordinate conjunction “and”.

*This, being an extrasyntactical word, is not included in the syntactical structure of this sentence.

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On the second level, there is also a parallel structure. The second subordinate clause is linked with the first by another coordinate conjunction "and".

Even within the second subordinate clause, there exists a parallel structure, that is, a compound predicate, formed by the third coordinate conjunction "and". Finally, the direct object in the second main clause is also of a compound nature.

Hence we can say that this sentence is built upon a parallel structure. In other words, the parallel structure runs through the whole sentence. This parallel structure gives us a sense of balance and security. First, the notion of "parallel" suggests two bars arranged in the same manner. If we lay our feet upon them, we will not feel lopsided but balanced. Secondly, as we are balanced, we naturally feel secure.

In Mr. Collins' case, the sense of balance and security is reflected in his confidence and self-importance. As we know, without the sense of security, a man can never be confident, not to speak of self-importance.

Mr. Collins' confidence derives from Lady Catherine's patronage as well as his social position as a rector. His confidence can be seen in his self-flattery of what he calls "my present overtures of goodwill"; in his expectation that "the circumstance of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate will be kindly overlooked"; and in his assurance that the "olive-branch" he is offering will never be rejected.

His self-importance is shown in his so-called "duty" to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of "my influence".

The sense of balance can also be seen in the parallel role Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine play, that is, as patrons to social inferiors. As to Mr. Collins himself, he has to receive patronage on the one hand and grant patronage on the other in order to keep balance. He is grateful to Lady Catherine and he expects others to be grateful to him. This is another case of balance.

Up to now, the sentences in Mr. Collins' letter are bound in a close relationship by the syntactical devices, or we may say, sentence conjunctions, such as "however" and "moreover". Yet, we cannot perceive any syntactical device between the first three sentences and the fourth sentence. In fact, the fourth is linked to the third by logic rather than by any sentence connection. This fact suggests that there is a break between the fourth and the first three sentences.

This break in the overall syntactical structure cuts the letter into two parts. In the previous part, what Mr. Collins does seems beating around the bush. From now on, he is to come down on his intended business. With this break, his tone in the letter also undergoes a change, so does the syntactical structure.

IV

The fourth sentence can be analyzed syntactically as follows:

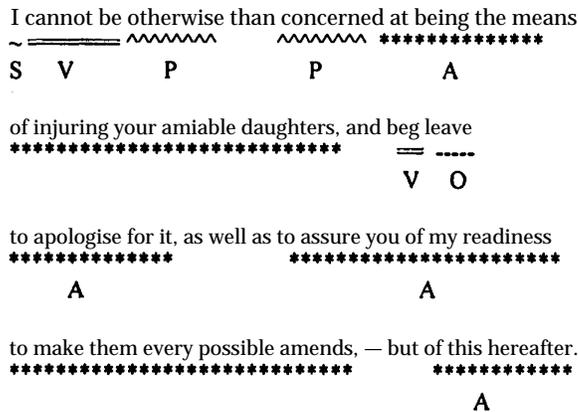
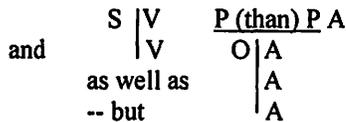


Diagram 4:



This diagram shows that the fourth sentence is a simple sentence with a compound predicate and a cluster of adverbial modifiers.

The simple sentence structure informs us that here Mr. Collins has nothing to show off or talk big of. In fact, what the sentence purports is his apology for “being the means of injuring” his amiable cousins, and his intended amends. Yet, his tone is not sincere.

The double predicatives in the first part of the sentence show that he has employed the device of circumlocution (“not be otherwise than concerned”) in voicing his apology, instead of admitting it directly.

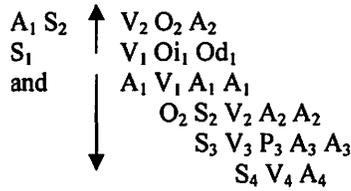
The compound predicate also indicates his readiness to dwell on anything in the nature of empty talk. But, as soon as coming to the “amends,” something substantial, he becomes business-like.

First, Mr. Collins has chosen the compound conjunction “as well as” instead of the simple “and”, and inserted it between his “apology” and his intended “amends”. As we know, the nuance of “as well as” and “and” lies in the degree of emphasis on the part following them, with “and” showing the equal importance and with “as well as” showing the lessening degree of importance.

Moreover, immediately after his supposed amends, Mr. Collins uses a dash, which means superficially a pause. But this pause is of great significance. It may suggest a turn of mind, but more likely a sort of reservation to his

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Diagram 5:



This diagram informs us that this last sentence has a rather complicated syntactical structure. It begins with a subordinate clause introduced by “if;” which reflects a momentary lack of confidence on Mr. Collins’ part: “Will they object to my intention to visit their house?”

However, his self-appraisal restores confidence in him. He has the patronage of Lady Catherine, and he has the “valuable rectory of this parish.” Viewing from his own snobbish eye, Mr. Collins could see no possibility of his being rejected by his poor relatives.

This regained confidence in him is revealed in the parallel structure of the main clause, signalled by the coordinate conjunction “and”.

He is so confident of his cordial reception that he even appoints the time for them to expect his arrival (“Monday, November 18th, by four o’clock”). What is more, as if to do away with any worries or anxieties on the part of his uncle’s family for his absence from Lady Catherine’s presence, Mr. Collins endeavours to ensure them that there is no inconvenience so far as he is concerned.

The moment Lady Catherine is mentioned, his sense of social hierarchy comes forth to assert itself in his mind, which is reflected in the hierarchical series of the subordinate clauses.

To sum up, the extremely complicated and involved syntactical structure of this last sentence is employed to signal three different emotional elements in Mr. Collins, namely, the doubts at the beginning, the regained confidence in the middle, and the revival of his sense of social order.

CONCLUSION

Our syntactical approach to the study of literature is based on two hypotheses that syntactical structure, as the form of a sentence, must help convey the meaning of the sentence, and that syntactical structure, being produced by the mind, must have an innate linkage to the writer’s characters and emotions.

The experiment of a syntactical analysis of Mr. Collins’ letter we have conducted in the paper proper has proved valid the above-mentioned hypotheses.

The emotional conflict in Mr. Collins is revealed in the first sentence by the changes of the subjects on the level of main clauses and by the coordinate conjunction “but” in particular. The increasing complicated syntactical structures of the three main clauses indicate the growing intensity of his emotional conflict, a conflict between his filial and respectful feeling to his father and his “good-will” to his uncle’s family.

The hierarchical structure of clauses in the second sentence corresponds to his sense of social hierarchy, which is exemplified in his citing the full title of his patron, Lady Catherine. The elaboration of his presentation of Her Ladyship

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shows his snobbishness in life, with all respect to his social superiors on the one hand and showing off of his high connections to his social inferiors on the other.

The parallel structures in the third sentence symbolize Lady Catherine's patronage to him and his "valuable" position as a rector, which fill him with confidence in expecting his uncle's receiving his "offered olive branch" with gratitude.

The fourth sentence is a simple sentence, which designates his intention to come down on his intended business. The compound predicate suggests his confidence in success. The double predicatives show that he is a tactful person. His way of using conjunctions resembles that of bargaining in business dealing. His supposed "amends" are nothing but a commodity to be exchanged.

The final sentence begins with an adverbial clause introduced by "if," which suggests his momentary hesitation before laying his card on the table. However, the parallel structure in the main clause indicates his regained confidence, which is derived, no doubt, from the same sources, that is, Lady Catherine's patronage to him and his position as a rector. The mere mentioning of Lady Catherine immediately calls forth his sense of social hierarchy, which is reflected in the hierarchical arrangement of the subordinate clauses in the end.

As we have already pointed out from the start that syntactical structure is only one, though a very important, often neglected component part of a style, we cannot boast of having exhausted all Mr. Collins' characteristics. What is more, in our present case, only five sentences of his have been subjected to our analysis. Naturally, there is still room to be explored.