Write a critical commentary on the following passage, relating it to the presentation of comic moments, here and elsewhere in the novel. [A Levels 2022]

In this passage replete with comic moments, Mr Collins requests a “private audience” with Elizabeth before proposing to her via a verbose monologue. Austen, by turning Collins (and to a lesser extent Mrs Bennet) into a target for ridicule, constructs comedy out of multiple layers of incongruity: between characters’ outward professions and inward feelings, between their inappropriate attitudes and socially-expected courtesy, and between their fixed understandings and the reality of the situation. In this manner, Austen presents comic moments as opportunities to highlight the follies and deficits of characters, notably their lack of sincerity, tact, and above all, discernment.

Austen first foregrounds the humorous disparity between the words and feelings of characters, revealing how maladroit pretences that characters put up can often engender comic moments. This incongruity surfaces most prominently between the aloof formality of Collins’ language and his professed love for Elizabeth. From the beginning, Collins embarked on the proposal in a “very orderly manner”, with “all the observances… part of the business”. His formal diction (“orderly”, “observances”, “business”) belongs to the official, professional sphere rather than the domain of love and romance, with the highly impersonal nature of his planned proposal emphasised by the use of intensifiers (“very”) and absolutes (“all”). This unexpected emotionlessness in a typically heartfelt proposal creates a comic effect for the reader, with the humour drawing attention to Collins’ evident lack of earnestness. Collins’ stilted formality shines through in his monologue: he begins by listing his “reasons for marrying” with methodical signposting (“firstly”, “secondly”, “thirdly”) as if he were making a logical argument rather than professing his love, creating a humorous disjunct between his manner of speech and the subject matter of romance that emphasises his lack of true affection for Elizabeth. This comic inconsistency is further highlighted when Collins dramatically discusses the purported depth of his feelings: he claims that he wishes to express “in the most animated language… the violence of [his] affection”. The hyperbolic diction (“violence”), coupled with the exaggerated use of the superlative “most”, highlights the comic irony underlying this declaration: as established earlier, Collins’ formal language has been far from “animated” and his superficial affections far from “violen[t]”. Similarly, Elizabeth almost laughs at the stark contrast between Collins’ claim to be “run away with by [his] feelings” and “all his solemn composure”: even though he asserts that his love for Elizabeth is so intense that it makes him lose his reason, this is comically incongruous with his excessively formal, restrained manner (“solemn composure”) underscored by the intensifier “all”, exposing his exaggerated

pretences of love. Austen repeatedly creates comedy from Collins' insincere affections throughout the novel: this passage is in fact bookended by comic moments that highlight his volatile, superficial feelings. When Collins claims in this passage that he fell for Elizabeth "almost as soon as" entering the house, the qualifier "almost" reminds the reader that in Chapter 15, Collins had "change[d] from Jane to Elizabeth… while Mrs Bennet was stirring the fire". Not only has Collins treated the sisters as replaceable entities as seen in the dispassionate verb "change", but his affections have also shifted with remarkable speed, humorously revealing his feelings for Elizabeth as superficial and fickle. After Elizabeth rejects his proposal, his attentions would be "transferred… to Miss Lucas": once again, the comically matter-of-fact diction ("transferred") suggests that he has smoothly and calmly redirected his affections, evincing the shallow nature of his feelings. In this manner, Austen constructs comedy from stark disparities between what characters say and what they actually feel, presenting comic moments as instances where one's insincerity is made apparent.

Additionally, comedy is created when characters' self-absorption and tactlessness fall short of social expectations of courtesy, with Austen using these comic moments to highlight and criticise these deficits of character. Once again, it is Collins that creates this comic effect, as his excessive self-centredness surfaces in his proposal even though etiquette dictates a focus on the lady. Collins peppers his speech with the reflexive personal pronoun ("I could not satisfy myself", "I flatter myself"); on one occasion, he shoves in a parenthetical comment "like myself" to emphasise that he is a "clergyman in easy circumstances". Not only does his frequent self-reference reveal his self-absorbed nature, but he also expressly draws attention to his own needs (for "satisf[action]" and "flatter[y]") or his own endowment ("easy circumstances") — an exceedingly conceited act. Hence, Austen induces the reader to laugh at Collins' inappropriate self-centredness. Collins further reveals his egotistical motivations for marrying Elizabeth through his sycophancy: he describes the prospect of inheriting the Bennet estate as a "melancholy event" and repeatedly wishes Mr Bennet longevity ("live many years longer", "may not be for several years"). Not only is it discourteous to discuss the death of one's father in a proposal, but his hyperbolic, melodramatic diction ("melancholy") and obsequious hedges also point to his clumsy attempt to reclaim moral righteousness: Austen uses this comic moment to highlight that he wants to marry Elizabeth to assuage his own guilt. This narcissistic motivation for marriage is similarly a source of comedy in Chapter 15: Collins dramatically calls marrying one of the Bennet sisters his "plan of amends—of atonement". By hyperbolically comparing his potential marriage to reparations for a grievous sin, he sanctimoniously paints himself as an upright individual, comically revealing his self-righteousness. This is reinforced when he showers himself with complimentary epithets ("he thought it an excellent one, full of eligibility and suitableness"), with his self-satisfied conceit on full display, much to the reader's amusement. Hence, this comic moment becomes an opportunity for the reader to recognise

and deride Collins' repulsive self-absorption. Even more comically, Collins commits even more egregious violations of socially-expected civility by insulting Elizabeth in a backhanded manner. He declares that Elizabeth's "wit and vivacity" will be acceptable when "tempered with silence and respect" for Lady Catherine: the associations of "temper" with excessiveness imply the subtext that Elizabeth's liveliness and intelligence are immoderate and irreverent. Hence, even though Collins ought to compliment Elizabeth in a proposal to her, he obliquely criticises her instead, creating a humorous disparity between social expectations and the unfolding proposal that spotlights Collins' tactlessness. In fact, after calling Elizabeth "amiable", Collins later "assure[s]" her that there are "many amiable young women" in his neighbourhood: by extending his compliment for her to numerous other women, Collins implies that Elizabeth is hardly special to him, insensitively and comically subverting social expectations that Collins would profess his unique adoration of her in his proposal. Thus, this comic moment becomes an opportunity to underscore Collins' lack of delicacy. In this manner, Austen creates comedy out of the incongruity between characters' inappropriate behaviour and socially-expected standards of courtesy.

Austen includes one more layer of incongruity that creates comic moments in this passage: she juxtaposes characters' mistaken understandings with reality to highlight their close-minded fixation on their own points of view. The passage contains three such amusing misinterpretations: it begins by depicting Mrs Bennet's misjudgement of Elizabeth's attitudes towards Collins' proposal. She boldly declares that Elizabeth will be "very happy" and have "no objection", with her confidence evinced by her repeated preface of "I am sure" alongside her intensifiers ("very") and absolutes ("no"). Further, she "instantly" answers before Elizabeth "had time for anything but a blush of surprise": she is so certain of Elizabeth's delight at the proposal that she speaks on her daughter's behalf without waiting for her reactions. This confidence is rendered especially comic when Mrs Bennet's predictions are revealed to be wholly incorrect: Elizabeth demonstrates her unwillingness to hear the proposal by imploring Mrs Bennet twice to "not go", with her use of the desperate preface ("I beg you") and pleading imperative ("do not go") revealing her extreme discomfort, in amusingly stark contrast to Mrs Bennet's earlier conviction. Her reluctance is further evinced by her "vexed and embarrassed looks" and her intention to "escape": her displeasure is so intense that she not only displays it through her facial expressions but also desires to physically leave the room, with the associations of "escape" with captivity underscoring the entrapment she feels. Hence, by juxtaposing Mrs Bennet's comical assumption that Elizabeth will welcome a proposal against the reality of Elizabeth's utmost discomfort at this prospect, Austen uses the resulting humour to foreground Mrs Bennet's single-minded fixation on marrying her daughters off, without recognising that Elizabeth may have other considerations of matrimonial compatibility. Mrs Bennet displays a similar, amusing proclivity for presumption in Chapter 20: the reader

receives a moment of schadenfreude as Mrs Bennet “congratulate[s] both [Collins] and herself in warm terms on the happy prospect” of his presumed engagement with Elizabeth. Since the reader is aware that Elizabeth had firmly rejected his proposal, Mrs Bennet’s blissful diction (“congratulated”, “warm”, “happy”) is imbued with dramatic irony, inducing the reader to deride Mrs Bennet’s inability to imagine a proposal being rejected amidst her eagerness to marry her daughters off. Thus, Austen presents comic moments as products of characters’ close-minded misperceptions that stand in contrast to reality.

In this same way, Austen also engenders comedy from Collins’ misreadings of others. He first grossly misconstrues Elizabeth’s aforementioned reluctance as evidence of “modesty”, “amiab[ility]” and “delicacy”, regarding her evident disinterest as its exact opposite: subtle coquetry that “dissemble[s]” her desire to accept his proposal. This comically erroneous belief reveals Collins’ rigid fixation on societal customs of courtship: he is unable to conceive of a woman’s refusal as anything but a “modest” or “delicate” attempt to conceal their true wishes. Additionally, even though Elizabeth’s displeasure was extreme as established earlier, Collins downplays it as a “little unwillingness”, with the diminutive “little” making this a significant understatement. Hence, Austen highlights his foolish misinterpretation of Elizabeth’s annoyance as a flirtatious facade rather than her genuine feelings, using this comic moment to underscore his close-mindedness. Collins proceeds to amusingly misread Elizabeth’s attitudes towards Lady Catherine: he proclaims that she “will find” her manners to be impeccable and that her rank will “inevitably excite” “silence and respect”. His confidence is evident in his use of the certain modal verb “will” and the emphatic absolute “inevitably”, yet his bold predictions will be comically proven wrong in Chapter 30: Elizabeth remarks that she “dare[s] to trifle with… [Lady Catherine’s] dignified impertinence”. Contrary to both of Collins’ prophesies, not only does Elizabeth find Lady Catherine haughty and snobbish (as evinced by the almost oxymoronic phrase “dignified impertinence”), but she also treats Lady Catherine without any of the expected esteem (“trifle”). Hence, by subverting Collins’ assured belief that Elizabeth would respect Lady Catherine, Austen humorously criticises his blinkered inability to recognise that others may not share his same sycophantic reverence for the upper class, creating comedy from a character’s obstinate adherence to his own understandings.

Finally, the passage constructs comedy from Collins’ misjudgement of Lady Catherine’s character, amusingly juxtaposing his adulation of her with her obvious conceit to criticise Collins’ lack of discernment. Collins idolises Lady Catherine: he calls her the “very noble lady whom [he has] the honour of calling patroness”, repeatedly praising her character (“noble”, “honour”) and using an intensifier (“very”) to emphasise her great respectability. His veneration of her is further revealed when he excitedly recounts her advice: not only does he include superfluous, minute details as he is carried away by his eagerness (“Saturday night”, “between

our pools at quadrille", "Mrs Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh's footstool"), he also inserts a rare exclamation ("unasked too!") into his otherwise solemn monologue that reveals his jubilation at her paying unsolicited attention to him. However, Collins' exaltation of Lady Catherine is comical as he immediately undermines his own depiction of her as admirable: in his recount, she "condescend[s]" to repeatedly instruct Collins that he "must marry", "for [her] sake; and for [his] own". Not only does his use of the haughty verb "condescend" and her use of the authoritative modal "must" highlight her domineering, imperious nature, but she also narcissistically mentions her welfare first before relegating Collins' to an afterthought, highlighting her self-importance. By presenting the incongruity between Collins' idolisation of Lady Catherine and her true, repulsive arrogance, Austen creates a comic moment that highlights how Collins' fixation on class has clouded his judgment of character. Such humour surfaces throughout the novel: in Chapter 14, Collins comments that "he had never in his life witnessed such behaviour in a person of rank—such affability and condescension". While his use of absolutes ("never") and intensifiers ("such") suggests Lady Catherine's exceptional geniality, this presentation is humorously undermined by his contradictory description of her with a set of antonyms ("affability and condescension"): Austen comically elucidates how Collins' preoccupation with "rank" renders him a poor judge of character. Hence, comic moments are engendered by characters' fixed understandings that dramatically diverge from reality.

Overall, Austen's comic moments are built on three layers of discrepancies: between what characters say and what they feel, between what they do and what they are expected to do, and between what they think and what is truly the case. Hence, comedy in *Pride and Prejudice* ultimately originates from the various flaws of characters that readers are invited to criticise: their poorly-veiled insincerity, their insensitive self-obsession, and their rigid worldviews.