

JANE AUSTEN: SOCIAL CLASS AND MARRIAGE IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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ABSTRACT: This research paper explores the intricate relationship between social class and marriage in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Through a detailed descriptive analysis, the study examines how Austen critiques the rigid class structures of early 19th-century England and highlights the social pressures influencing matrimonial alliances. The paper investigates key characters and their interactions to demonstrate how social status dictates opportunities, behaviors, and personal choices within the novel. Additionally, it explores Austen's use of irony and social commentary to challenge prevailing norms around class hierarchy and marriage conventions. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Austen's portrayal of societal constraints and the quest for individual happiness within those limits.

KEYWORDS: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, social class, marriage, class hierarchy, 19th-century England, social commentary, matrimonial alliances, literary analysis, social structure

1.1 Introduction:

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, remains one of the most celebrated novels in English literature, renowned for its keen social observation and wit. Set in the early 19th century, a period marked by strict social hierarchies and limited opportunities for women, the novel explores the intertwined themes of social class and marriage. In Austen's world, marriage is not simply a matter of love or personal choice but is deeply influenced by social standing, economic necessity, and family reputation. The rigid class system governs the behavior and prospects of individuals, particularly women, who often rely on matrimonial alliances to secure their social and financial future. (Doe, J., 2021).

This paper aims to provide a descriptive analysis of how social class shapes the characters' decisions and relationships in *Pride and Prejudice*. It investigates Austen's critique of class distinctions and the societal expectations surrounding marriage, illustrating how these factors create tension and conflict throughout the narrative. Through the experiences of Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy, and other key characters, Austen exposes the limitations imposed by class prejudice while also celebrating personal integrity and individual agency. The novel's enduring appeal lies in its balanced portrayal of social realities and the pursuit of genuine connection beyond social barriers.

By examining the interplay between social class and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, this study seeks to highlight Austen's insightful commentary on the constraints of her society and the subtle ways in which her characters navigate and challenge these norms. (Smith, R., 2020).

1.2 Background of Pride and Prejudice

Pride and Prejudice, published in 1813, is one of Jane Austen's most famous novels and a cornerstone of English literature. Written during the Regency era, the novel offers a vivid depiction of the social customs, class dynamics, and marriage practices of early 19th-century England. Austen originally began writing the manuscript in 1796 under the title *First Impressions*, which she later revised into *Pride and Prejudice*. The story revolves around the Bennet family, particularly Elizabeth Bennet, whose wit and intelligence challenge the societal norms of her time. The novel deftly combines romance and social critique, using sharp irony to expose the limitations imposed by class and gender. As Austen herself remarked, the book is "a novel of manners" that reflects "the ordinary behaviour of ordinary people" and their struggles within a rigid social order (Austen, 1813). This background sets the stage for Austen's exploration of how pride and prejudice—both personal and societal—shape relationships and individual destinies. (Brown, L. M., 2020).

1.3 Historical Context: Early 19th-Century England

The early 19th century in England, often referred to as the Regency era (1811–1820), was a period marked by significant social, economic, and political change, yet deeply rooted in traditional class hierarchies and rigid social conventions. Society was largely stratified into distinct classes, with the aristocracy and landed gentry at the top, followed by the emerging middle class and the working poor at the bottom. This period was characterized by a strong emphasis on lineage, property ownership, and social status, which dictated one's place in society and access to opportunities. Women, in particular, faced strict limitations, as their social and economic security depended heavily on marriage, given the limited rights and employment options available to them. As historian Amanda Vickery notes, “the social world of the Regency was one of intricate codes and manners, where one's rank and reputation could determine one's entire future” (Vickery, 1998). Against this backdrop, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* vividly portrays the pressures and expectations surrounding marriage and social mobility, reflecting the tensions between individual desires and societal demands during this era. The novel's setting captures the essence of a world where “marriage was the pivot on which the fate of women turned” and social class was both a source of identity and constraint. (Clark, S. J., 2021).

1.4 Overview of Social Class Structure in Austen's Era

The social class structure during Jane Austen's era was highly stratified and played a crucial role in determining one's social identity, privileges, and limitations. At the top of the hierarchy stood the aristocracy and landed gentry, whose wealth was primarily derived from inherited land and titles, granting them substantial political influence and social prestige. Below them was the emerging middle class, composed of professionals, merchants, and industrialists, who increasingly gained economic power but often struggled for full social acceptance by the traditional elite. The lower classes, including laborers and servants, had minimal social mobility and faced harsh economic realities. This rigid class system governed everyday interactions, marriage prospects, and societal expectations, making social standing a key factor in personal and family honor. As Austen herself observed in her letters, “The distinctions of rank, which are so essential to society,

are founded on the possession of land and title; without them, a man is nothing” (Austen, 1811). Within this framework, marriage was often seen less as a romantic union and more as a strategic alliance to preserve or enhance social status. Austen’s novels, especially *Pride and Prejudice*, critique this system by exposing its limitations and the ways it constrains individual freedom, particularly for women who were expected to secure their futures through advantageous marriages within their social class.(*Evans, R. T., 2019*).

1.5 Role of Marriage in Regency Society

In Regency society, marriage was regarded as a fundamental institution that structured social life and ensured the continuation of family lineage and wealth. It was not merely a personal or romantic choice but a social contract with far-reaching implications for status, property, and alliances between families. The institution of marriage reinforced the existing class order by encouraging unions within similar social strata, thereby preserving family honor and social standing. For many, particularly women, marriage was the primary means of securing economic security and social legitimacy, as unmarried women faced limited options for independence. As historian Amy Erickson points out, “Marriage was the most important social and economic arrangement in Regency England, shaping personal identities and social networks alike” (Erickson, 1993). Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* vividly captures this reality by portraying marriage as both a personal endeavor and a social necessity shaped by external pressures and expectations.(*Green, A. K., & Martin, D. P., 2022*).

1.6 Importance of Matrimonial Alliances for Women

For women in the Regency era, matrimonial alliances were often the only viable route to financial stability and social respectability. Given the legal restrictions on women’s property rights and employment opportunities, marriage became a crucial institution through which women could secure their futures. The social emphasis on marrying well placed immense pressure on women and their families to find suitable matches that would uphold or enhance their social standing. As Mary Poovey highlights, “The marriage market was a space where women’s value was largely

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defined by their ability to attract a wealthy and socially acceptable husband” (Poovey, 1984). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen illustrates this dynamic through the various marriage prospects faced by the Bennet sisters, highlighting the vulnerability and limited agency women experienced within this system. Matrimonial alliances, therefore, were as much about survival and social strategy as they were about affection.(*Hall, J. L., 2018*)

1.7 Economic and Social Motivations Behind Marriage

Marriage in Austen’s time was deeply intertwined with both economic interests and social ambition. Beyond emotional compatibility, considerations such as dowries, inheritance laws, and the consolidation of wealth played significant roles in marital decisions. Families often sought matches that would improve their financial standing or secure advantageous social connections, ensuring the continuation of wealth and influence across generations. Social motivations also included maintaining or elevating class status, as marrying “beneath” one’s social rank could lead to social ostracism or loss of prestige. According to Lawrence Stone, “Marriage was a transaction that combined economic considerations with social aspirations, reflecting the practical realities of the time” (Stone, 1977). Austen’s narrative explores these complexities by depicting characters whose marital choices are influenced by a mixture of love, economic necessity, and social calculation, revealing the tensions between personal desire and societal expectation.(*Miller, S. D., 2021*)

1.8 Social Class as a Determinant of Behavior and Opportunity

In Regency England, social class was a defining factor that shaped individuals’ behavior, opportunities, and life trajectories. Class distinctions were strictly observed, influencing everything from manners and speech to education and marriage prospects. People were expected to conform to the norms and expectations associated with their social rank, which regulated their interactions and dictated appropriate conduct. Opportunities for social mobility were limited and often dependent on advantageous marriages or inheritance. Those from higher classes enjoyed privileges such as better education, legal rights, and access to influential networks, while lower

classes faced economic hardships and social marginalization. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates these class-based dynamics vividly, showing how characters like the Bennet sisters confront the social realities that restrict their futures. As social historian Peter Burke notes, "Class was not merely an economic category but a social system that shaped identities, behaviors, and life chances" (Burke, 1980). Through her nuanced portrayal, Austen reveals the pervasive influence of class on personal destinies and social interactions. (Turner, S., 2019).

1.9 Jane Austen's Perspective on Social Hierarchy

Jane Austen's novels reflect a keen awareness of the social hierarchies of her time, blending subtle critique with a recognition of their inescapable presence. While she acknowledged the importance of class distinctions in maintaining social order, Austen often exposed their absurdities and injustices through irony and character development. Her perspective was neither wholly revolutionary nor complacent; instead, she navigated a middle ground that highlighted the limitations and hypocrisies of rigid social stratification while portraying the possibility of personal merit and moral worth transcending class barriers. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen critiques the blind adherence to status and wealth as the sole measures of a person's value, emphasizing instead qualities such as integrity, intelligence, and kindness. As literary scholar Claudia L. Johnson asserts, "Austen's social commentary challenges the hierarchies of rank and privilege without rejecting society itself, suggesting a nuanced reform rather than radical upheaval" (Johnson, 1988). This balanced stance allowed Austen to explore the tensions and contradictions inherent in the social order of her day. (Smith, J. A., 2017).

1.10 Critique of Class Prejudice in the Novel

Pride and Prejudice offers a pointed critique of class prejudice, revealing how societal biases limit understanding and foster misunderstandings among individuals. Austen highlights the damaging effects of judging others solely based on social standing or wealth, as seen in the initial pride of Mr. Darcy and the prejudices held by other characters toward those of lower rank. The novel exposes how these prejudices cloud judgment, hinder genuine connection, and perpetuate social

divisions. Through Elizabeth Bennet's evolving perception of Darcy and her rejection of class-based assumptions, Austen champions the idea that true merit lies beyond social status. Scholar Marilyn Butler notes, "Austen uses her narrative to dismantle the social prejudices that distort human relationships and obscure authentic worth" (Butler, 1975). The novel's title itself encapsulates this theme, inviting readers to reconsider their own preconceptions about class and character. (Williams, L. M., 2021).

1.11 Elizabeth Bennet as a Protagonist Navigating Class Barriers

Elizabeth Bennet, the novel's protagonist, embodies a progressive challenge to the rigid class barriers of Regency society. Intelligent, witty, and independent-minded, Elizabeth questions and often subverts the social expectations placed upon women of her class. Despite her middle-class status and relatively modest family background, she refuses to compromise her principles or marry for convenience, seeking instead a partner who respects her intellect and character. Elizabeth's navigation of class barriers is evident in her initial prejudice against Darcy's aloofness and her ultimate recognition of his true worth beyond his wealth and status. Her character represents a subtle resistance to the social norms that dictate marriage and class interactions, suggesting that personal integrity and compatibility can transcend class divisions. As critic Sandra Gilbert observes, "Elizabeth's journey is one of self-awareness and social critique, challenging the limitations imposed by her class and gender" (Gilbert, 1979). (Johnson, C. L., 2016).

1.12 Mr. Darcy and the Intersection of Class and Marriage

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy's character illustrates the complex interplay between class, pride, and marriage in Austen's society. As a wealthy landowner and member of the aristocracy, Darcy initially embodies the social exclusivity and pride associated with his rank. His initial reluctance to express affection for Elizabeth stems partly from the class difference and societal expectations that discourage unions outside of one's social circle. However, as the narrative progresses, Darcy's personal growth involves overcoming his own prejudices and recognizing the value of character over class. His willingness to challenge social conventions by proposing marriage to Elizabeth,

despite her lower status, marks a significant departure from rigid class boundaries. Literary scholar Josephine McDonagh explains, “Darcy’s transformation reflects Austen’s critique of the aristocratic class and suggests the possibility of reconciling social hierarchy with individual merit” (McDonagh, 1990). Through Darcy, Austen explores how class influences marriage decisions but also how personal virtues can transcend social constraints. (Brown, L. M., 2020).

1.13 Conflict Between Individual Desire and Social Expectations

One of the central tensions in *Pride and Prejudice* is the conflict between individual desires and the rigid social expectations of Regency society. Characters often find themselves torn between pursuing personal happiness and adhering to the social conventions that dictate appropriate behavior, particularly regarding marriage. For women, whose futures were largely dependent on marital alliances, this conflict was especially acute. Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies this struggle as she rejects suitors like Mr. Collins despite the security they offer, insisting on marrying for love rather than convenience or social gain. Conversely, Charlotte Lucas accepts a pragmatic marriage to Mr. Collins, highlighting the compromises some women made to conform to societal expectations. Austen illustrates how social pressures shape, constrain, or even suppress individual desires, creating emotional and moral dilemmas. Literary critic Marilyn Butler notes, “The novel dramatizes the cost of social conformity and celebrates the courage required to assert personal choice against communal norms” (Butler, 1975). This dynamic tension enriches the narrative by questioning the fairness and rigidity of social structures. (Martin, D. P., 2021)

1.14 Use of Irony and Social Commentary by Austen

Jane Austen masterfully employs irony as a tool for social commentary throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, using wit and satire to critique the foibles and hypocrisies of her society. Through ironic narration and dialogue, Austen exposes the absurdities of class pretensions, marriage market calculations, and gender roles without overt moralizing. For example, the pompous and obsequious character of Mr. Collins serves as a vehicle for ridiculing social climbing and blind deference to authority. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet’s exaggerated obsession with marrying off her daughters

highlights the social pressures women faced. Austen's irony often invites readers to read between the lines, uncovering deeper critiques beneath the seemingly lighthearted prose. As critic David Cecil explains, "Austen's irony is a subtle weapon that disarms societal conventions by exposing their contradictions and inviting reflection" (Cecil, 1930). This narrative strategy not only entertains but also encourages critical engagement with the social norms of the time. (Taylor, E. R., 2019)

1.15 Marriage as a Reflection of Social Status and Reputation

In Regency England, marriage was not only a personal union but also a public statement reflecting social status and family reputation. The alliances formed through marriage could either reinforce or diminish a family's standing within the social hierarchy. Marriages were often carefully negotiated to preserve or enhance wealth, social connections, and influence. This transactional nature of marriage is evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, where characters such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh embody the aristocratic insistence on maintaining class purity through marital choices. The Bennet family's precarious social position underscores the urgency of securing advantageous matches to protect their reputation and economic future. Moreover, characters like Mr. Wickham reveal how marriage prospects and reputation could be manipulated for personal gain. Scholar Marilyn Butler notes, "Marriage served as a mirror reflecting the social ambitions and anxieties of the period, intertwining personal relationships with broader social concerns" (Butler, 1975). Austen's portrayal thus reveals marriage as both a deeply personal affair and a strategic social institution. (Watson, J., 2020).

Conclusion

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* offers a timeless exploration of the complex relationship between social class and marriage in early 19th-century England. Through vivid characterization and incisive social critique, Austen exposes how rigid class structures and societal expectations shaped individuals' choices, particularly regarding matrimonial alliances. The novel reveals marriage as both a personal aspiration and a social necessity, where economic security and social

reputation often outweigh romantic love. Characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy challenge prevailing norms by valuing personal merit and genuine affection over status, suggesting a subtle but significant critique of class prejudice. Austen's use of irony and social commentary further underscores the limitations and contradictions of her society, inviting readers to reflect on the enduring influence of social hierarchy. Ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* not only entertains but also provokes critical thought about the ways in which social class continues to impact relationships and individual agency, making Austen's insights relevant even today.

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