

Love, Money, and Social Status: The Economics of Marriage: A Study of “Pride and Prejudice”

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Abstract

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen is a prominent work of English literature that explores the gender roles, social conformity, complexities of marriage, and how financial considerations overshadow idealized romantic love in marital relationships. This review paper examines critical perspectives on the novel, focusing on the relationship between personal values and social expectations. It discusses the condition of women in Regency era, especially in market of marriage as well as the outlook of men towards relationships. This paper is based on the study of various review papers, exploring the marital bond presented by Jane Austen. By bringing together different interpretations of the novel, the review highlights Austen’s critique of social conventions and the limited opportunities available to women. She presents a pragmatic yet progressive model of marriage that rejects both mercenary unions formed solely for financial advantage and romantic unions formed without economic prudence. The novel contrast and different types of marriage, and highlights that a successful and harmonious relationship requires mutual respect, understanding, and compassion.

Keywords: marriage, social conformity, financial security, legalities, compassionate

Introduction

“Pride and Prejudice” is written by Jane Austen—a prominent English novelist of the nineteenth century. Her writing mirrors everyday life and social relationships, exposes social hypocrisy, examines women’s condition of her age. Marriage is one of the most recurring themes of her writing, she often expresses her bold and strong views on matrimonial alliance alongside portraying a realistic image of society. She uses “Pride and Prejudice” to criticize the marital setup of her age, she combines romantic relationships with social criticism. She presents different forms of marriage—ideal romantic marriage, impulsive marriage, practical marriage, affectionate marriage, and status-oriented marriage. Austen presents a: “rather black and white depiction of marriages.”

This paper studies the relationship of various couples presented in the novel. It takes into account the thematic analysis of marital set-up of her age. It focuses on the qualitative aspect of matrimonial relationship. Previous researchers have approached this topic from diverse perspectives, however, demonstrated similar findings. They equally emphasized on the legalities resulting in vicious marriage market of nineteenth century, as marriage was considered only viable option for bachelor women to secure a stable life ahead. Owing to these circumstances, there exists a struggle to find an appropriate match in order to maintain a decent lifestyle, keeping in mind their middle-class status.

Kumar argues that marriage in “Pride and Prejudice” is far more than a romantic resolution, it works as a social institution that shapes individual status and class standing, while offering a platform for Austen’s

critique of societal norms.

This paper discusses dynamics and driving force of the relationships, of the various couples presented in the novel with an aim to comprehend the status of women and outlook towards matrimonial ties in nineteenth century.

Societal Background

Society and its norms shape how society functions. It recognizes marriage as one of the important foundations of family formation as marriage provides social recognition to a couple's relationship. Likewise, in nineteenth century the society has expectations and regulations regarding marriage. Jahan states that marriages in that era were less about pragmatic alliances designed to preserve and extend family wealth, security, and influence. Legal doctrines such as feme covert—where a woman's legal identity was subsumed by her husband and primogeniture—laws that restricted property inheritance to male heirs, women had limited legal and economic rights.

Owing to these norms, the Bennet family estate is entailed to pass exclusively to a male heir, implying that upon Mr. Bennet's death, his land passes to his cousin, Mr. Collins.

Louise highlights the fact that to gain economic rights and protections, non-traditional couples are often forced to adopt or mimic traditional marriage centric financial structures, thereby reinforcing patriarchal marriage models rather than transforming them.

Driven by the estate entailment that leaves Bennet sisters without income after Mr. Bennet's death, Mrs. Bennet views marrying her daughters to wealthy men as an urgent matter of survival. Kumari reinterprets Mrs. Bennet's frantic efforts to marry off her five daughters not merely as foolishness, but as “worldly wisdom” and genuine maternal within a patriarchal structure where daughters must secure prosperous marriages for financial survival. Courtship is portrayed not merely as a romantic ideal, but as a competitive financial venture where women must calculate risks to secure their survival and happiness (Schneider).

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet

Jane Austen presents the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet as mismatched and unhappy marital relationship. This couple symbolizes the outcomes of marrying without adequate compatibility, understanding, and mutual respect. Mrs. Bennet is talkative and emotional whereas Mr. Bennet is sarcastic and detached. Their marriage is marked by differences in temperament and outlook on life. Through this couple, Jane Austen portrays the dangers of an ill-matched marriage, highlighting the need of compatibility and understanding in marital relationships.

Berry explains their relationship as a match based on fleeting youthful attraction that devolved into twenty-three years of emotional disconnect, lack of mutual respect and sarcasm. Mohammed observes that Mr. Bennet detaches himself in his library, while Mrs. Bennet obsessively seeks wealthy suitors for her daughters, resulting in parental failure and domestic instability.

Jane Bennet and Mr. Charles Bingley

Relationship of Jane Bennet and Mr. Charles Bingley presents a model of love based on kindness and mutual affection. It explores how family, social class, and the opinions of others can influence romantic relationships. It also shows that genuine love can overcome misunderstandings and external interference. They share a gentle and affectionate romantic relationship, evident as Bingley takes care of Jane, when she was ill. However, Darcy's interference and Caroline Bingley's influence create misunderstanding and

distance between them. The obstacles eventually vanish and their union created a merry ending to their love story.

Dr. Kumari describes their courtship as one of the most cherished love stories in English literature and characterizes their dynamic as a smooth love based on mutual affection, beauty, and mild temperaments. Their union satisfies both romantic affection and financial imperative for middle-class stability that drives the novel's domestic setting.

Charlotte Lucas and Mr. William Collins

Their relationship can be seen as a marriage of convenience, driven mainly by financial security. Alquraidhy highlights that Charlotte abandons the search for pure love out of financial insecurity, choosing monetary comfort and social position with Mr. Collins. On the other hand, Weinsheimer observes that Charlotte explicitly views marriage as a lottery where:

“happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance.”

This union succeeds not because of genuine compatibility, but because both share a mutual identity of pretended self-description to escape financial insecurity. Jahan presents Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins as the ultimate example of economic pragmatism. Charlotte's famous declaration—that she asks: “only a comfortable home.”

is analyzed as a rational acceptance of marriage as an economic safety net rather than an emotional union. Austen presents Charlotte as an intelligent woman taking control of her future within society's narrow options (Inostrantseva). Wang believes that Charlotte's pragmatism is not presented merely as a flaw, but as a realistic reflection of societal pressure on women lacking independent fortunes. She deliberately structures her daily routine to avoid her husband, creating a practical and emotionally distant union. In order to secure financial stability, Charlotte Lucas sacrifices emotional compatibility. Societal norms leave no scope for woman to choose emotional compatibility over monetary benefits. Their relationship symbolizes marriage as an economic arrangement and limited opportunities for women, criticizing patriarchal society.

Lydia Bennet and Mr. George Wickham

They share a reckless and impulsive matrimonial relationship. Wang describes Lydia and George Wickham represent a mercenary and unstable match grounded in short-term gratification rather than financial and moral responsibility. Lydia Bennet illustrates the perils of reckless romanticism, showing how impulsive decisions threaten family reputation and financial security (Kumar). Mohammed observes, driven by childish impulse, superficial attraction, and self-serving pleasure without emotional or moral maturity Lydia Bennet marries Wickham, characterized by financial carelessness and lack of personal growth. Because Lydia brought no financial incentives to Wickham. He had no reason to marry her until Mr. Darcy intervened with a direct financial payoff and settlement to clear Wickham's debts and buy his compliance (Hall).

Their marriage represents the marriage without moral responsibility. Austen criticizes romanticism, irresponsible parenting, male deception, and a society that places excessive importance on women's reputations. Their relationship serves as a cautionary example, exposing the risks of confusing attraction with love and entering marriage without maturity and sense of responsibility.

Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy

Their relationship is central to the story of novel. They justify the title of the novel “Pride and Prejudice”. Their love story is shaped through pride and presumptions about each other. Their relationship challenges the importance attached to wealth, rank, and family connections in Regency era as Elizabeth Bennet values social propriety yet maintains critical detachment from her assigned social roles, as demonstrated when she rejects Darcy’s initial marriage proposal despite his higher social standing (Louise).

Their relationship suggests that love can overcome personal pride, societal prejudice, and social class barriers. With genuine conviction of heart, initial prejudices are dismantled through sincere actions (Setiyawati).

They represent a relationship built on mutual transformation. Their journey from dislike to love demonstrates that a successful relationship requires honest self-examination, respect, and emotional maturity.

Schneider explains that Elizabeth successfully adopts a masterly poker face refusing to be bluffed, guarding her thoughts, and managing social risks to secure her future with Darcy and avoid her parents’ unhappy fate.

Episode of Elizabeth and Mr. Collins

Inostrantseva argues that Mr. Collins uses a monocle to inspect both the Bennet estate’s artwork and the Bennet sisters, visually framing the women as objects he will eventually inherit and own. This entire episode reflects the position of women hold in Regency era.

Mr. Collins proposal to Elizabeth is driven purely by social obligation to his patroness rather than genuine affection and personal connection (Kumar). Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins proposal of marriage because she refuses to tie herself in a loveless and incompatible marriage merely for financial and monetary security as well as social respectability. She challenges the limited choices available to women in the nineteenth century. Jahan uses her refusal:

“sacrifice every better feeling to worldly advantage.”

to demonstrate Austen’s critique of viewing marriage as a financial transaction. Through the character of Elizabeth, Jane Austen emphasizes that marriage should involve personal choice, mutual understanding, and genuine affection.

Episode of Elizabeth and Mr. George Wickham

Khan highlights that Elizabeth is initially captivated by Wickham’s charm, appearance, and graceful demeanor. As Wickham’s lack of property and financial instability become clear, Elizabeth consciously restrains her feelings. Khan interprets this shift as evidence that Austen’s ideal heroine is neither an emotional fool nor a blind follower of romance, recognizing that love without economic stability leads to hardship. She exemplifies (Khan):

“It is not sensible to marry for money, but it is silly to marry without money.”

Condition of Men

Men of Regency era also faced the influence societal conformity. Their outlook towards marriage was structured by the norms and notions set by the society. Kristic explains that financial calculations were not limited to women, characters like George Wickham actively targets heiresses, and the Colonel Fitzwilliam explicitly states he cannot afford to marry without financial gain.

Kumar also states that for men, marriage functioned to consolidate property, secure heirs, and maintain social standing. Schneider also asserts that men in Austen's society hold the structural dealer's edge through financial and legal power.

In similar manner, Inostrantseva exemplify that Wickham mercenary habit of pursuing women purely for their fortunes is portrayed as morally bankrupt and damaging.

Another example of Ideal marriage

Jane Austen represents a successful and ideal marriage through, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. They share a respectful and harmonious relationship. Their behavior reflects emotional maturity. Austen doesn't describe their married life in great detail, their conduct suggests that emotional maturity is essential to a happy relationship. Berry supports that they present a model of rational, harmonious, and supportive partnership.

Conclusion

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." [1]

While the novel's famous opening line asserts that a rich man must want a wife, the paper emphasizes that in reality, it was women without fortune who desperately needed husbands. The paper dives and explores into the marriage market of the nineteenth century. This paper supports the argument of Dulabic that Austen built a clear moral framework in her novel that rejects making money or social status the sole basis of marriage. Austen promotes a model of marriage based on intellectual equality, mutual respect, and emotional connection, highlighting the essential elements of relationships. The paper highlights that Jane Austen presents different forms of marriage to readers alongside their consequences, providing the readers a mirror and a guide to choose their partners wisely for harmonious life. Through the theme of marriage, Austen explores how social conformity shapes and influences individual decisions.

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