

Beyond Social Barriers: Empathy versus Socioeconomic Factors in *Pride and Prejudice*

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ABSTRACT

This paper observes the role of empathy and equality in overcoming social barriers in *Pride and Prejudice*. More specifically, I argue that the novel shows that empathy plays a more significant role in creating a successful marriage than socioeconomic factors do. Austen's significance as a groundbreaking women author of interesting ideas and genres during a time when authors were predominantly male has left a remarkable impact on the literary world and therefore spread a message about feminism and women's rights discourse to young female readers, even in the modern day. Thus, this paper analyzes *Pride and Prejudice* alongside other feminist works of the time, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Throughout the novel, the need to marry well to live a successful life is emphasized through the characters' actions and dialogue and reflects on the desires and problems of many young women during the time period that the novel was published. I challenge the idea that Austen was only concerned with showing how socioeconomic factors determined a woman's future in the Regency Era. Rather, Austen utilizes the written word to comment on the need for empathy in marriage, which she implies is more important than socioeconomic factors.

Introduction

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."¹ Marriage is famously the central theme in Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen writes about the lives of the Bennet family—and other upper-class families in Hertfordshire, England—as the characters must overcome obstacles in order to marry. In this novel and many others of the same time period, marriage is seen as the happy ending desired by the characters. Once the historical context is considered, it is easy to see why; marriage was seen as a necessity for women to live a fulfilled life and suit the expectations of those around them. Since characters like the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, usually had no other way to provide for their own lives—considering the social constraints that prevented them from sustaining themselves—they sought a marriage partner. However, this process proved competitive and painstaking for many young women. Austen shows this by presenting the limitations on a woman's freedom that marriage may cause, such as moving away from her family and being unable to pursue her true desires. Additionally, Austen often negatively portrays characters seeking marriage, such as Miss Bingley and Lydia Bennet, as they display rude behavior whilst being powered by their intense desire for marriage and the socioeconomic benefits that are likely to arise from a wealthy match. In her guide to studying Austen's novels, Vivien Jones argues that money and marriage together equate to a happy ending for Austen's protagonists.² When discussing marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as other Jane Austen novels, many scholars, Jones included, argue that money and social class necessarily pave the way for such quality unions. Contrary to the prevailing view, this paper argues that empathy and equality—qualities

¹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Scholastic, 2000), 1. Page numbers hereafter cited in parentheses.

² Vivien Jones, "Money and Marriage: *Pride and Prejudice*," in *How to Study a Jane Austen Novel* (Red Globe Press, 2000), 35-36.

linked with the emerging rights discourse of the period—in fact play a more important role in creating a bond between the protagonist and her love interest than the much-discussed socioeconomic factors. By the end of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are able to form a union because of the built-up empathy between the pair and their lack of focus on socioeconomic factors. In this way, *Pride and Prejudice* stealthily discusses themes of women's rights, specifically ideas uncommon during the Regency Era. Thus, Austen portrays the need for adversity and sacrifice in the marriage process, highlights the pitfalls of socioeconomic-driven relationships, and ultimately shows the necessity for empathy in order to achieve a fulfilling marriage.

***Pride and Prejudice*: “A Novel”**

Considering the limitations that women faced in the early nineteenth century, Austen's ability to discuss her ideas on human rights and marriage through the written word is remarkable. When Austen first released *Pride and Prejudice*, which is widely regarded as a work of romance today, she labeled it “A Novel.” She did this to distance her works from the romance genre which, during Austen's time, was not simply a book about love; nineteenth-century romances usually portrayed love and relationships that were over-imaginative, unrealistic, and set in the drastic past. Austen considered this to be artistically inferior to other genres.³ Since her works were not set in the past and were instead set in the present day, had more realistic characters, and effectively portrayed the ideas of marriage, women, and society, she opted to call her books novels. This set up a distinction between Austen's works and the very fanciful romantic books of her day, just as she had intended. More importantly, this would convey Austen's implicit message to the readers of her novels that the empathy and equality shown in Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship is perfectly plausible and relevant to real life, thus giving hope to young women.

The Use of the Epistolary Genre

Besides the general genre of the novel, *Pride and Prejudice* is believed to have specifically started as an epistolary novel called *First Impressions*.⁴ Epistolary novels, or novels that consist only of letters between the characters, rose to popularity during the eighteenth century, with works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*.⁵ These kinds of novels allow readers to easily empathize with the characters since they are able to read the characters' thoughts and emotions in a deeper, ostensibly unfiltered, way, thus creating a strong connection. In *Inventing Human Rights*, the historian Lynn Hunt argues that, in the eighteenth century, through reading epistolary novels, readers learned to empathize with the senders and receivers of heartfelt letters in these novels, which became one of the few ways that people could identify across social and gender lines.⁶ The

³ Devoney Looser, “Jane Austen's Contributions to the Novel as a Literary Genre,” Wondrium Daily, <https://www.wondriumdaily.com/jane-austens-contribution-to-novels-as-a-literary-genre/> (last modified February 3, 2022).

⁴ Ted Scheinman, “A New Edition of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ Crosses Its T's and Dots Its I's,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/new-edition-pride-prejudice-crosses-its-ts-and-dots-its-is-180975808/>

⁵ Louise Curran, “Letters, Letter Writing and Epistolary Novels,” British Library, [https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/letters-letter-writing-and-epistolary-novels#:~:text=Epistolary%20fiction&text=It%20reached%20a%20peak%20of,Frances%20Burney's%20Evelina%20\(1778\)](https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/letters-letter-writing-and-epistolary-novels#:~:text=Epistolary%20fiction&text=It%20reached%20a%20peak%20of,Frances%20Burney's%20Evelina%20(1778)) (last modified June 21, 2018).

⁶ Lynn Hunt, “Torrents of Emotion: Reading Novels and Imagining Equality,” *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (Norton, 2008), 35-69.

effects of such novels were so large that one of Samuel Richardson's novels was proclaimed "the soul of religion, good breeding, discretion, good nature, wit, fancy, fine thought, and morality."⁷ Richardson served as a great inspiration and influence on Austen as she wrote her most famous novels.⁸ Though Austen's adult works are not fully epistolary, they still contain epistolary elements that reveal the ways in which characters are motivated by inner feelings, and we see these emotion-filled letters generate empathy in the characters that read them. As Lynn Hunt argues, "the epistolary novel showed that all selves had this interiority [...] and consequently that all selves were in some sense equal because all were alike in their possession of interiority."⁹

The Formation of Empathy Through Letters

Empathy forms between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy and slowly furthers the development of their characters and relationship throughout the novel. This blossoming of empathy is exemplified in Mr. Darcy's letter to Elizabeth, in which he describes his reluctance to allow a union between Jane Bennet, Elizabeth's older sister, and Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy's friend, due to the inappropriate behavior of some of the Bennets:

"My objections to the marriage were not merely those which I last night acknowledged to have required the utmost force of passion to put aside, in my own case [...] The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, by your three younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father." (206)

The importance of a good reputation in particular is depicted in this line because Mr. Darcy states he was opposed to the marriage between Jane and Mr. Bingley because of the Bennets' lack of wealth and their inappropriate behavior, both of which can lead to a decline in respectability for Mr. Bingley if he and Jane marry. Mr. Darcy continues, "If I have wounded your sister's feelings, it was unknowingly done; and though the motives which governed me may to you very naturally appear insufficient, I have not learnt to condemn them" (207). Mr. Darcy explains that his point of view may be confusing to Elizabeth or may be dismissed by her, but he wished to inform her regardless. Though Mr. Darcy has previously lacked the ability to empathize with those different from him, he proves that he is gradually altering himself. After reading the letter, Elizabeth exclaims, "I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself" (217). This line expresses Elizabeth's regret at her past prejudice and unjustified judgment of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham, both of whom Elizabeth formed an opinion of that she regrets after reading Mr. Darcy's letter. Austen's use of letters to create a sense of empathy between characters is similar to Hunt's argument, which states that reading novels was one of only a few ways to identify across social lines and boundaries and that readers were better able to empathize with the senders and receivers of heartfelt letters.¹⁰

⁷ Quoted in Hunt, 45.

⁸ Looser.

⁹ Hunt, 48. It is important to note that "sympathy" was the term that was used to denote empathy in Austen's day, with the word "empathy" only coming to have its current meaning in English in 1909. See Rae Greiner, "1909: The Introduction of the Word 'Empathy' in English," *Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, BRANCH, https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=rae-greiner-1909-the-introduction-of-the-word-empathy-into-english (last modified March 2022) and Wendy Jones, *Jane on the Brain: Exploring the Science of Social Intelligence with Jane Austen* (Penguin, 2017), 7.

¹⁰ Hunt, 45.

Influence of Feminist Ideas

In the famous feminist essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft argues that men and women are equal in all aspects and should be treated in that way. She explains this by stating, “[n]ot only the virtue, but the knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures, ought to endeavor to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men.”¹¹ Wollstonecraft’s bold and unconventional ideas simply could not be ignored by other women writers, leading to debates that greatly impacted Austen herself. Austen is said to have replied positively to many of Wollstonecraft’s feminist arguments in her novels, without ever mentioning her name.¹² Many of Austen’s heroines who are well-educated in reading and have the potential to become responsible wives and shrewd judges of human nature allude to Wollstonecraft’s ideas. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet’s sarcastic condemnation of female “accomplishments” shows Wollstonecraft’s influence.¹³ Therefore, it is clear that Austen expressed Wollstonecraft’s belief that the best woman is one with sense and sensibility, who wishes for a psychologically egalitarian marriage.

Pride and Prejudice and Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* both present the adversity and sacrifices required for marriage. During the nineteenth century, a married woman was often unable to pursue any other opportunities that may arise due to their married status. Wollstonecraft explains her belief that when women are allowed to pursue their interests, many will give up on love and marriage.¹⁴ This shows that though many women would be happier if they were to pursue their interests and dreams, they must sacrifice them in order to conform to social norms and marry.

Empathy as a Driving Force

If many factors can prevent young women from a happy and fulfilled marriage, one may ask how Elizabeth Bennet is able to meet a match that she knows will make both herself and her partner content. Throughout the novel, empathy emerges as the stimulus of a felicitous match. The novel appears to argue that once empathy is developed and acknowledged as more important than socioeconomic factors, an auspicious marriage is likely to emerge.

A demonstration of the end result of an empathy-driven relationship occurs near the end of the novel, when Mr. Darcy confesses to Elizabeth, “I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. [...] You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I am properly humbled” (384-385). This excerpt exhibits the ability of empathy to help different people understand one another and grow from their mutual development. Austen shows this through Mr. Darcy, an originally very proud man, to show that even the most prideful people can change with the help of others. Hence, empathy is a powerful emotion throughout *Pride and Prejudice* as a force that can overcome socioeconomic factors and create meaningful marriages.

¹¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Delphi, 2016), 632-633.

¹² Anne K. Mellor, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the Women Writers of Her Day,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156.

¹³ Mellor, 156.

¹⁴ Wollstonecraft, 689.

The Role of Equality

Equality between such different characters must also be established in order to overlook factors such as class and income. This equality comes in the form of intellectual and emotional connections. Regarding the case of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, they reach intellectual equality through debates regarding gender, marriage, and other relevant topics of Regency England. These debates cause Mr. Darcy to see Elizabeth as someone equal to him, as she proves her knowledge on topics that he previously did not expect her to know a proficient amount about. For instance, Mr. Darcy begins describing the qualities that one must possess in order to be an eligible wife. He explains, “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expression, or the world will be but half-deserved” (39). Mr. Darcy’s unrealistic expectations anger Elizabeth, who retorts, “I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*” (39). Elizabeth’s ability to debate Mr. Darcy on topics that many young women of the time period barely mentioned leads to a sense of equality between the two, which is necessary for the formation of their relationship later in the novel.

Also, Elizabeth proves herself to be someone able to oppose Mr. Darcy, a quality that is very rare for young, unmarried women of the Regency Era. An example of this occurs at a party, where Elizabeth refuses to dance with Mr. Darcy. She says, “Indeed, sir, I have not the least intention of dancing. I entreat you not to suppose that I moved this way in order to beg for a partner” (25). This bold manner helps Elizabeth be seen as more than the stereotypical meek young woman. Instead, it exhibits her ability to decide for herself what she desires. Her manner eventually leads Mr. Darcy to confide in Miss Bingley, “My mind was agreeably engaged. I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow” in reference to Elizabeth (26). Mr. Darcy’s confession that he has become drawn to Elizabeth displays clearly the effect of proving one’s equality, even towards someone who possesses a higher status.

Jane Austen on Women’s Rights Discourse

Elizabeth Bennet’s unique ideas and actions reflect Austen’s ideas about women’s rights. Thus, *Pride and Prejudice* was a way for Austen to include rights discourse in terms of marriage, equality, and power. Specifically, Austen illustrates this through the female characters’ inability to live a stable life without marriage as well as the societal expectations that they must conform to. As a part of her unique commentary, Austen displays Elizabeth as a young woman who is not afraid to venture away from what is expected in order to fulfill her own desires for her future, and who therefore succeeds on both her own terms and those of her society.

Addressing Counterarguments

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen emphasizes the relevance of socioeconomic factors. In Regency England, young women and their families sought men who could advance them in terms of social class, wealth, and power. In his article “Money in Jane Austen,” Robert Hume claims that *Pride and Prejudice* is a dark reminder that women can only succeed if they are successful in the marriage market. He argues this because of the constant reminders of what would happen to the Bennet daughters if they were not to marry before the death of their father, and due to the recurring theme in many of Austen’s novels that a woman must possess money or marry into money.¹⁵ In *Pride and Prejudice*, socioeconomic factors as a driving force toward marriage are shown when Charlotte Lucas, a close friend of Elizabeth Bennet, accepts a proposal from Mr. Collins, for whom she has no romantic interest. She states that she is “not a romantic” and can only ask for “a comfortable home”

¹⁵ Robert D. Hume, “Money in Jane Austen,” *The Review of English Studies* 264 (April 2013): 294.

(132). This clearly illustrates that many women must prioritize wealth and income over romance or true happiness. Austen presents this through Charlotte's explanation of her desperate circumstances that do not allow her to be picky when choosing a husband. She also implies that this kind of marriage is not likely to lead to a happy life, but one that can be respected and maintain both parties' reputations.

On the other hand, some women, though much rarer than the above example, prioritize love over money during the marriage process. Elizabeth's sister Lydia is a clear instance of this. Infatuated by Mr. Wickham and drawn in by the idea of marriage, she makes an impulsive decision to elope, though neither truly knows the other, thus lacking empathy between one another. She writes to Mrs. Forster saying, "There is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy without him, so think it no harm to be off" (300). Austen shows the negative effects of Lydia's naivete during her wedding when Mr. Wickham's interest in Lydia is minuscule compared to hers for him.

As money and hierarchy are both important aspects of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, many, like Robert Hume, might argue that the influence of socioeconomic factors is more important than empathy in bringing Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy together.¹⁶ Some critics state that although Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy did end up in love by the end of the novel, conveniently enough, Elizabeth happened to marry a man with a large income that would sustain a comfortable life. Also, *Pride and Prejudice's* protagonist's affection for Mr. Darcy deepens once he pays for Lydia and Mr. Wickham's marriage, thus proving his wealth and ability to support Elizabeth.¹⁷ However, examining Elizabeth's attitude toward Mr. Darcy at the beginning of the novel, it is clear that she did not care for the man, even though she knew of his income of "ten thousand a year" (8). It was only once he expressed to her his thoughts, perspectives, and reasonings that she grew fond of him. It can also be argued that though his gesture toward Lydia to ensure the respectable reputation of the Bennets did deepen Elizabeth's affection for him, her change in feeling was not due to his proof of wealth, but because of the empathy and generosity that he presented in this selfless act.

In "Materialistic Marriage Market: Intersections of Money and Matrimony in *Pride and Prejudice*," Judith-Renée Herman argues that since many women sought marriage for economic reasons, Jane Austen used Elizabeth Bennet as a unique and inspirational example for young women to show that they can be different. Herman explains that, unlike other characters, Elizabeth seeks love more than money.¹⁸ Herman's analysis adds weight to the argument that Austen wished to convey that women can be happy regardless of their focus on socioeconomic factors. Unlike Herman, though, I argue that, beyond love, empathy and equality are what Elizabeth is truly seeking.

Conclusion

Pride and Prejudice makes clear that empathy should be a driving force for marriage, as it is the force that can most effectively overcome adversity in any relationship. Though some characters, such as Charlotte Lucas, are unable to prioritize other factors besides income and social class, more fortunate young women are shown overcoming such afflictions. Elizabeth's headstrong personality helps her ignore socioeconomic factors and provides a necessary example of how Regency Era women could be truly happy and this impacted the discourse on women's rights, as she is shown successfully opposing social norms and pursuing what she desires. Austen's commentary on what is really important in the institution of marriage must be understood to provide modern readers with a unique perspective that defies social norms and expectations that are present in many other works

¹⁶ Akanksha Yadav, "Marriage and Social Realities in 'Pride and Prejudice'," Owlcation, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Marriage-and-Social-Realities-in-Pride-and-Prejudice> (last modified June 16, 2022).

¹⁷ Jones, 2.

¹⁸ Judith-Renée Herman, "Materialistic Marriage Market: Intersections of Money and Matrimony in *Pride and Prejudice*," *Persuasions* 42 (2020): 212.

from the Regency Era. By presenting a message about empathy throughout the novel, *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates what must be overcome and how one must develop to secure a content marriage.

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