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Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice: Class and Society, Marriage and Women

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Abstract: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel 1813, it is often taken to be a Victorian novel because it is very realistic is often taken to be a Victorian novel because it is very realistic in its depiction of the early nineteenth century English society. At the time, England was still a land of aristocracy, even though the Industrial Revolution caused major changes in the class structure. As Victorian novels often do, it portrays and comments on the social conventions of the period. It is generally known that the society of the nineteenth century England was nothing like today: class differences were more visible. There were three major classes upper, middle and lower – that were further divided. the upper class “can be divided into three sections: the aristocracy, the gentry, and the hierarchy or class of independent gentlemen who did not have to work. Polite manners were much more appreciated and, most importantly, the social status of women was determined according to the status of their family or their husband. Therefore, they had to marry the most appropriate man that was sometimes even imposed on them by their family. Though they could choose whom they would marry, there was very little possibility that they would marry a man they loved, unless he is also wealthy and willing to marry her. This paper focuses on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to illustrate that because of their subordinated position marriage was the only way through which women could validate their social status. Therefore, it was usually not an institution created for love but rather one based on social class. Austen successfully portrays the society of the then England and contemporary anxieties connected with marriage.

Key Words: Women, Marriage, Nineteenth Century, Class, Society.



Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel published in 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* is taken to be in the class structure as Victorian novels do but it does not display typical Romantic characteristics. As Victorian novels often do, it portrays and comments on the social conventions of the period. It is well-known that the culture of the nineteenth century England was very different from today. Class differences were more visible, there were three major classes that were further divided. In the upper class, polite manners were much more appreciated and most importantly, the social status of women was determined according to the status of their family or their husband. Consequently, they had to marry the most suitable man that was sometimes even forced on them by their family. Though they could choose whom they would marry, there was very little possibility that they would marry a man they loved, unless he who is also wealthy and willing to marry her.

This paper emphasis on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to depict the condition of women that because of their secondary position in society and marriage was the only way through which women could validate their social status. Therefore, it was usually not an institution created for love but rather one based on social class. Jane Austen effectively represents the society of the then England and existing anxieties connected with marriage.

Pride and Prejudice is very realistic in its representation of the nineteenth century English society. At that time, England was a land of aristocracy, the society was divided in three major classes upper, middle and lower. In the words of Prewitt Brown the upper class "can be divided into three sections: the aristocracy, the gentry, and the squirarchy or class of independent gentlemen who did not have to work. The majority of Austen's characters are members of the upper class. At the opening of the novel she tells us that Fitzwilliam Darcy, one of the main characters, has an income of £10,000 a year. In spite of his enormous yearly income and his origins, he is technically not a member of aristocracy due to the absence of the title that a real aristocrat was supposed to have (Prewitt Brown 74).



“To qualify as an aristocrat, one had to be of titled rank, to own an estate exceeding 10,000 acres, to have enough money in revenues to live opulently, and to own a house in London to go to during the social season. Obviously there were exceptions—some ancient titles had declining fortunes—but in order to participate fully in the social life of the aristocracy, one had to have these things. (Prewitt Brown 74) The Bennet’s, as well as most of the people who live in Meryton and its surroundings, are members of the gentry. Their income does not come near £10,000 a year but rather around £2,000 to £5,000. Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, can be regarded as a gentleman. The following passage explains why: “In Jane Austen’s novels, a gentleman can be a younger son of the gentry who has not inherited an estate and who has taken holy orders (...), or he can be the son of a man who has made a fortune in business and has been brought up as a gentleman to do nothing (Mr. Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*)” (Prewitt Brown 76). When he comes to the city, Bingley is promptly seen as a suitable would-be husband of one of the Bennet sisters because of his prosperity. The characters in the novel are strictly defined by their social status which cannot drastically change unless a character loses a great sum of money or somehow comes into its possession. This makes it more understandable that to the society of the nineteenth century England money really made the world (or class) go around. Prewitt Brown agrees with Stone and suggests that:

In the early nineteenth century, the nexus of social change was to be found more in the gentry and middle class than either the working class or aristocracy. Austen shows over and over again that the apparent stability of class position is an illusion created by the slowness of change through marriage and the peculiar stability of class character, resulting from the chameleon like adaptability of new families. (78)

Throughout history money has always meant the same thing: power. In the nineteenth century it usually opened a way to the upper class; however, “this did not mean that everyone who was rich was a member of the upper class. But without money, people sink awfully fast. Austen’s novel reflects this through Mr. Bennet’s frequent warnings to his wife and two frivolous younger daughters – Lydia and Kitty that they should reduce their expenditures, for they “were in the habit



of spending more than they ought” (Austen 10). Even smaller amounts of money meant some kind of stability at the time – they meant preserving one’s social status. In that regard, Mr. Bennet had enough money to not to be forced to work, but if his family spent more than they could yearly afford, this money would soon be gone and their social rank would be lowered. This kind of scenario troubled them so much that they hardly dared to speak of it in open terms; however, Mr. Bennet was aware of the fact that “Mrs. Bennet had no turn for economy, and his love of independence had alone prevented their exceeding their income” (Austen 177).

Pride and Prejudice is called a novel of manners because it represents the society of that time. The characters are concerned with pride, education, and courtesy all that of what we call manner. The fact that the novelist places her characters in the realistic situations helps one learn more about the actual image of the society of that time and her characters acts according to their social class. As the title indicates the main flaws of the upper class society are, pride and prejudice, but also vanity. The rich are too proud of their own wealth and legacy which causes them to be unproductive and dismissive of those who are less well off. They never value a person’s qualities, but think of him or her only as a member of his or her family and class. In other words, the prejudice of the rich against those who are not as rich often cause distress to both sides as emotions and individual virtues are overlooked. Mary’s remarks on the disparity between vanity and pride explain the lack of obsessive self- absorption: “Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us” (Austen 13). Darcy also comments on this topic by saying: “Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation” (Austen 36). Clearly, these two characteristics are two completely opposite things.

While arrogance can have negative as well as positive results, varying upon the person’s character, vanity can only have negative outcomes. After reading the novel, it can be said that half of the society is hollow, starting from Mr. Bingley’s sisters, Mrs. Bennet and her daughters. In the



course of the novel Darcy states: “I have an excessive regard for Miss Jane Bennet, she is really a very sweet girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it” (Austen 23). Austen’s analysis of such attitude is seen in the redeeming ending of the novel as Darcy realises that no woman could make him happier or be a better and more interesting partner than Elizabeth, despite her poor connections.

Wealth indeed was very important as it separated people into classes and therefore played major role at the time, especially for women who were seen as secondary and were considered according to the families they were born and married into. It often produced pride and arrogance, which caused prejudices. Today women today almost as equal as men but women in the nineteenth century did not have the same place in the society. To understand their condition better, it is necessary to point out that women, once married, did not have any properties. Everything they possessed became their husband’s proprietorship. If one takes a closer look at the condition of women, it is obvious that they were inferior to men. They were considered to be a wife and a mother, especially the women belong to upper class. Since they were not allowed to work, their only responsibility was to give birth to their children and to take care of their husband. However, women of the nineteenth century were to some point in a better condition than those before them. They had some freedom; they were educated. It was no longer the exception for women of the middle and upper classes to choose their own husbands.

If one takes *Pride and Prejudice* as a representative of the culture of that time, it is clear that those women who acted in accordance with their sense were more appreciated in the society. For example, because of her common sense Elizabeth did not let herself be fooled by some characters and she acted the way she thought was best. With such qualities as the sharpness of her mind and responsiveness, she is much valued by others. So, people like her company: “It was plain to them all that Colonel Fitzwilliam came because he had pleasure in their society, a persuasion



which of course recommended him still more; and Elizabeth was reminded by her own satisfaction in being with him, as well as by his evident admiration of her” (Austen 107).

If one tries to analyse the role of women in the novel, it can be seen that it is compatible with the ones previously described. Her female characters in the novel are playing the role of a mother and a wife. Although they did not have their own properties once they got married, they were mistresses of the household and, besides being a mother and a wife; it was their most important role.

Their representation in the novel is based on everyday leisure and social happenings that took place in their community. The important events were balls, and Austen describes two significant ones: the first in the town near Meryton, and the second in Netherfield, on Mr. Bingley’s property. Balls were very significant in making social contacts because they were huge get-togethers and many people attended them. At the first ball were made the most significant connections that would affect the course of the novel: Jane met Bingley and Darcy met Elizabeth. The second ball was more a requirement that took place in order to approve the feelings developed on their first meeting. In addition to being an opportunity for making connections, balls also provided an opportunity to meet a future husband.

The prospect of the Netherfield ball was extremely agreeable to every female of the family. Mrs. Bennet chose to consider it as given in compliment to her eldest daughter, and was particularly flattered by receiving the invitation from Mr. Bingley himself, instead of a ceremonious card. Jane pictured to herself a happy evening in the society of her two friends, and the attentions of her brother; and Elizabeth thought with pleasure of dancing a great deal with Mr. Wickham. (...) And even Mary could assure her family that she had no disinclination for it. (Austen 54)”. Another important aspect represents women in the novel is their meetings with family and friends. Elizabeth and Miss Lucas, owing to the fact that they are close friends and live nearby, often visit each other.



Kitty and Lydia visits their uncle and aunt not to meet them but with the purposes to meet the soldiers of the nearby regiment:

The two youngest of the family, Catherine and Lydia, were particularly frequent in these attentions; their minds were more vacant than their sisters', and when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening; and however bare of news the country in general might be, they always contrived to learn some from their aunt. At present, indeed, they were well supplied both with news and happiness by the recent arrival of a militia regiment in the neighbourhood; it was to remain the whole winter, and Meryton was the headquarters. (Austen18)

Elizabeth and Jane, however, were different from Lydia and Kitty. They liked spending time with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, their uncle and aunt, as well as travelling, which was a great advantage for women of upper classes considering the fact that travelling is the best way to learn something and to grow as a person, but also to meet people. Finding a husband was the greatest task of women of the upper and middle class in the nineteenth century according to Victorian fiction (Armstrong, 113). At that time, they could, to a certain extent, choose whom they would marry, which was a major progress compared to the fifteenth century for example. The important thing was for their future husband to be either of the same or of a higher rank than them: "On her choice of a love object, a man she could both marry and desire, depended not only her identity as a white, respectable English woman, but also the integrity of the family unit, on which in turn rested the well-being and longevity of the nation" (113). Woman had no personal possessions and could acquire them only in rare cases; while they were unmarried everything was their father's propriety which was to be inherited only by male heirs after his death, and as soon as they got married, the dowry they bring into marriage became their husband's. Therefore, the only way to become socially accomplished was to marry a rich man. Likewise, a rich man cannot be deemed socially accomplished if he remains a bachelor. Austen clearly depicts these concerns in her novel by introducing them with the famous first sentence: "It is a truth universally acknowledged,



that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (2). Marriage is thus established as the central concern of the upper classes.

Women were supposed to choose a man who could financially support them and not the one they wanted or loved. This was a common truth and it can safely be said that girls were taught to think that way from early on. Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to marry someone with a great fortune. After she hears that a young man who has inherited a large sum of money has come into their neighbourhood, she insists on Mr. Bennet’s visiting him and immediately sees him as a potential husband for one of her daughters. Similarly, after Elizabeth turns down Mr. Collins’ proposal, her mother sees it as the most inappropriate thing since Mr. Collins was to inherit their land after their father passes away. She laments it as if Elizabeth caused their financial downfall the second she refused him:

Aye, there she comes, (...) looking as unconcerned as may be, and caring no more for us than if we were at York, provided she can have her own way. But I tell you, Miss Lizzy—if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead. (...). (Austen 69)

Marriage is in her view a way of survival as well as a way of keeping her status. She even accuses Elizabeth in front of Mr. Collins of “not knowing her own interest” (Austen 67) because she finds Mr. Collins to be tolerable enough to make a husband for her daughter. However, Elizabeth does not agree with her – she is not at all interested in him as a man or in his inheritance. Miss Lucas, on the other hand, willingly accepts his proposal the moment he asks her to marry him. Austen explains that her acceptance happened “solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment, [and Miss Lucas] cared not how soon that establishment were gained” (74). The narrator further states that “[marriage] was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having



ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it” (74-75). Miss Lucas admits these reasons to Elizabeth later, who does not hide her surprise. Charlotte explains she only wants “a comfortable home” (Austen 76) and pictures Mr. Collins a good opportunity for her “considering [his] character, connection, and situation in life” (Austen 76). Having in mind that she is led by the thought of protective her social status it is difficult to say whether she is to be judged or not because she is not the only one who does it.

Miss Bingley similarly conforms to these social conventions. She attempts with all her feminine powers to attract Darcy in order to have him thinking of her as a potential wife. Since she belongs to the upper class, she is not even thinking of marrying someone poorer than her. According to her, Darcy is a most agreeable man, a perfect match. He is handsome, well-educated, has nice manners, and above all he is very rich. Nevertheless, not everyone has the same opinion of him. Mrs. Bennet, for example, “quite detest[s] [him]” (Austen 9) after she sees his behaviour on the first ball: “But I can assure you (...) that Lizzy does not lose much by not suiting *his* fancy; for he is a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing. So high and so conceited that there was no enduring him! He walked here, and he walked there, fancying himself so very great! Not handsome enough to dance with!” (Austen 9). However, she quickly changes her attitude towards him as soon as she finds out what he did for Lydia and that Elizabeth accepted his proposal:

Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! Mr. Darcy! (...) how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane's is nothing to it—nothing at all. I am so pleased—so happy. Such a charming man! —so handsome! so tall! —Oh, my dear Lizzy! pray apologise for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy. A house in town! Everything that is charming! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me? I shall go distracted. (Austen 220)



His money and the fact that he is willing to marry one of her daughters absolves him from any social misdemeanour he may have committed earlier. Soon after that Mrs. Bennet wants to find out about Mr. Darcy's favourite dish in order to be able to please him. She is very calculating and focused on money, as one can see from the example above. Though Elizabeth is not led solely by the idea of marrying a wealthy person regardless of his manners, she does exclaim after she sees Darcy's estate "that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!" (Austen 141). Even she, who is considered to be quite rational and sensible, admits that it would be nice to live on an estate like Pemberley. Armstrong in this view states that *Pride and Prejudice* is one of those novels that say: "Marry a man with whom you were emotionally compatible if you could, but marry a man of material means you must, (...) or else face the degradation of impoverishment or, worse, the need to work for a living" (Armstrong 97). Indeed, the biggest fear of women of the upper class was not marrying a rich person because that would cause their social and economic degradation, which was far worse than being married to a penniless man however much a woman might love him. This is only a reason more to believe that marriage was a means of social as well as financial security.

Men were also vulnerable to this notion as represented by Wickham. He tried more than once to marry a rich girl and the first one we find out about is Darcy's sister. Later on he wants to marry Miss King, to whom "he paid (...) not the smallest attention till her grandfather's death made her mistress of this fortune" (Austen 91), and at the end, when he escapes with Lydia, he is willing to marry her only after Darcy discharges his debts and pays him a certain amount of money. But Wickham is not the only one who wants to marry for money; Colonel Fitzwilliam on one occasion openly discusses with Elizabeth his reasons for marrying a wealthy woman. As Prewitt Brown sums it up, "brought up to lead an aristocratic life and honestly unwilling to give it up, he needs a monies marriage to maintain the expensive leisure to which he is accustomed. He cannot afford the luxury of falling in love with a poor woman" (69). This explains why people at the time want to marry for money; they are used to living in the lap of luxury and are not willing to discharge it. In addition, Armstrong points out "it is fair to say that any man whom women find agreeable in other respects



will in all likelihood cost them dearly in economic terms, and there can be little emotional gratification in that” (Armstrong 107). Armstrong’s conclusion about the Victorian fiction in general could be applied to this novel, too: “Victorian fiction revised an earlier narrative that insisted a woman’s quest for financial security and social respectability began and ended with her ability to attract an agreeable man and extract a promise of marriage from him” (Armstrong 113). This confirms that the purpose of marriage in the society of the nineteenth century had to do first and foremost with the woman’s social affirmation.

In the nineteenth century male-dominated England women generally did not have as many rights as they do today; they had no rights of their own and since they did not want to surrender their social status and the way of living they were used to, the only way to keep it was to marry a man of the same or a higher social status. Jane Austen tried to depict the society of that time as realistically as she could in this novel, and considering the fact that she is a woman, one may say that she understood women’s condition better than any other male novelist. So, through this novel she clearly states that marriage was first and foremost an association through which women were able to find social acknowledgement respect. This was their socially formed vision of happiness was to give birth to children and to be able to learn to love him.

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