Love Transcending Gender Norms and Social Hierarchy in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

This paper focuses mainly on the representation of love and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Love in the Georgian Era was arguably not considered as significant as it is now; there was more to marriage than love. Austen’s novel shows how many women in the 1800s were desperate to get married for financial security and social status. In her book, Austen criticizes the patriarchal society of her time where women had no option other than to devote their lives to marriage to save themselves from being poor or from being spinster. The book also exhibits the oppression and inequality faced by women during the Regency Era. Moreover, in the book, women are seen as object of desire and pressurized to appear perfect (physically). The protagonist of the story, Elizabeth Bennet is an independent and a strong-minded woman who stands against conventional social norms. She affirms her feminist stand several times in the narrative. However, she is not perfect, as she misjudges Mr. Darcy based on her first impression of him. Mr. Darcy also goes through radical changes, ones that are mostly inspired by Elizabeth. It is common for people to wrongly judge each other based on the first impression; however, some are lucky enough to get second chances. Although Elizabeth’s pride and Mr. Darcy’s prejudice create differences between them at first, true love unites them eventually. Through these characters, Austen is trying to convey her view on love, which involves not just romance, but also respect and equality. *Pride and Prejudice* is a feminist fairytale, but it is also a critique of class distinctions and the chauvinistic society of Austen’s time. The novel implies that there is no connection between the members of the upper class and virtue. The characters representing the upper class are repeatedly mocked for flaunting arrogance and supremacy.
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1. Introduction

Jane Austen is one of the most influential writers of her time, emphasizing the social and moral behavior of the characters in her novels. Her works mostly reflect her personal life and the era in which she lived where class distinctions were omnipresent and the concept of marriage and love did not go hand-in-hand. She wrote six novels, among which *Pride and Prejudice* is the most appealing and loved by the readers. It was initially named as *First impression* (1769). Upon getting rejected by Thomas Cadella, Austen had to rewrite the whole story. In 1813, the novel was finally printed and gained popularity with good reviews. *Pride and Prejudice* tells the story of a strong-minded heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, and a proud hero, Mr. Darcy who misjudge each other and fail to see their own errors. They must overcome their prejudices to find true love. Elizabeth Bennet is the second eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet; she challenges the stereotypes of society and overcomes numerous obstacles, including her pride, to be united with her love. While other women are crippled by the power of marriage, Elizabeth refuses to yield. She affirms her feminist stand, inspiring Mr. Darcy to change.

This paper examines the representation of love and marriage through the main characters of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of the story, yearns for a life that has meaning and that does not depend on securing a husband for survival. Austen wrote the book at the time when women needed marriage to validate their social status and secure their future. However, Elizabeth believes that true love should be the sole reason for two people to come together. Elizabeth is almost perfect in the story, except for her biased first impression of Mr. Darcy, which later changes when the story reaches climax. Austen creates situations where her characters go through transformations: Mr. Darcy transforms from obnoxious aristocrat to a considerate lover and Elizabeth’s hasty judgment transforms into humbleness. Although Elizabeth’s pride and Mr. Darcy’s prejudice create conflict between them at first, true love unites them eventually, defeating conventional social structures such as patriarchy, class differences, and gender norms for women. This paper focuses on women—particularly single
women-- in the Georgian Era and their economic, educational, and marital status. It also analyzes how class structure affects the courtship of the characters in the novel. The book implies that there is no association between high class people and virtue; in fact, it presents member of the upper class as imperious and only best in flaunting their arrogance. Indeed, characters like Lady Catherine and Miss Bingley are constantly ridiculed. Judging from the characters in the novel, Austen does not think highly of the nobility, perhaps partly due to her life experiences.
2. The Historical Context of the Georgian Era

2.1. Women in the Georgian Era

The Georgian Era, which began in 1714, was a period of political uncertainty and economic volatility. It was also a time when people in England began to talk about the rights of women. However, the economic and legal limitations imposed on women during this era made them vulnerable. Men successfully established rules that stopped women from owning, earning, and inheriting wealth. Regardless of social class, all women were at a disadvantage with regards to the law, marriage, and employment (Wojtczak 3). These circumstances suggest that the law and rules were made for men to have control over women. With economic restrictions, it was difficult for women to earn a living, making them depend on the idea of securing a husband. Wojtczak argued that a marriage proposal from a man was considered as a kind of security that offered wealth and status; furthermore, since men were outnumbered, “young women [were] in fierce competition with each other to secure the best men. To win, a girl had to be (or to pretend to be) exactly what men wanted: feminine, modest, chaste, meek and above all, compliant to the wishes of others” (8). Women were under pressure to appear perfect and excel-- however, not in education.

During the Georgian Era, having an education and career was strictly reserved for men. As the result of low literacy rate among women, in 1871, many could not even sign their name; instead they had to write X next to their name. The intellectual ability of women was frequently questioned and was considered inferior than men. Doctors claimed that women were incapable of thinking intellectually and exposing women to education would affect their fertility. Besides, all strong-minded women with opinion were seen as threats to men. Therefore, the serious education that women were commonly offered was practical trainings to refine their domestic roles (Wojtczak 7-8). There were no public schools for girls as there were only for boys. However, certain kinds of studies were offered to them such as drawing, dancing, piano playing, penmanship, elementary arithmetic, and sometimes French. The purpose of such acquisitions was to attract a suitable husband (Swords). Some skills were taught to
women to run better households. Nevertheless, women educated themselves by socializing and reading on their own.

2.2 Marriage in the Georgian Era

During the Georgian Era, women were considered best suited for domestic roles and for nurturing their families. After reaching the age of consent for marriage, women started looking for husbands whose legal obligation would be to provide the former a house and status in the community. Although couples got engaged early, marriages took place only after when they reached mid twenties (Perkin 29-30). Wojtczak stated that women were not seen as respectable and mature if they were not married; therefore, getting married was their sole purpose in life. Women were under social pressure to marry, especially middle-class women without an inheritance or education and with few employment possibilities (12). Nevertheless, upon marriage, husbands lawfully inherited the property of their wives. With no legal rights, women had an inferior status to that of their husbands. Exceptionally, Gaelic women had a legal status and property rights as they were immune from English common law. Husbands also had the right to forbid their wives from getting careers, moving about freely and seeing their children (Kent 6). Furthermore, divorce remained uncommon in the Regency Era for a few reasons. For one, it was a time-consuming and expensive process, therefore, most couples avoided divorce. While a husband had to prove only the infidelity of his wife to the Parliament for a divorce, a wife had to prove adultery plus aggravated offences. These circumstances made it almost impossible for women to file for divorce. Parliament did not legalize divorce until 1937 (Perkin 22-23). For this reason, the only escape from an unhappy marriage was the death of either spouse.

Some women preferred to stay unmarried rather than living under the authority of a husband. However, staying unmarried did not mean women were entitled to freedom. The concept of women not marrying was considered unnatural and was ridiculed immensely as motherhood was viewed as the sole reason for their existence. Unmarried women were referred as spinsters, which literally means ‘women who spin’. The word is derived from a custom where a woman should have spun woollen yarn before becoming eligible for marriage. Spinsters were generally considered to be poor,
unfortunate ones and an economic burden to society. Some scholars believed that married women enjoyed longer lives than the unmarried ones (Auchmuty 57-63). The law and customs implied that women were made for marriage, and spinsterhood was regarded as a degrading condition. Marriage was a respectable destiny for women and if a woman failed to find a husband, she had failed to find a resource to support her (Auchmuty 66-67).
3. Theoretical Part

3.1. What is Feminist Literary Criticism?

Feminist literary theory uses feminist ideology and principles to critique literature that advocates male domination and the subordination of women in society. According to Barry, “The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the ‘women’s movement’ of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature” (116). The major goal of feminist literary criticism is to “examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy” (Barry 128). For instance, a feminist goes over texts to examine how male and female characters are treated. Frequently, the female characters are diminished, and the male characters are emphasized. In the past, female characters have been largely one-dimensional. They have been represented as being in the shadows of their male counterparts by frequently being homemakers or love interests in the plots. For instance, the classic literary works like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Great Expectation*, and *the Canterbury Tale* promote inferior representations of women, perpetuating gender stereotypes, and objectifying and sexualizing female characters. Additionally, the theme of ‘Damsel in Distress’, where a female character is saved by a male protagonist from a perilous situation, thus proving his masculinity, is common in Gothic literature and in medieval romances. Fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Rapunzel* feature the ‘Damsel in Distress’. It is also present in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Unexpectedly, Mr. Darcy becomes the rescuer of Elizabeth and her family, saving them from disgrace and humiliation by bribing Mr. Wickham to marry Lydia after their elopement. Elizabeth, who is initially portrayed as an independent and unconventional character, has a weaker side after all. It is disappointing how a strong character like Elizabeth is transformed into a damsel in the end. For its part, feminist criticism also exposes how women are not treated fairly and equally. Hence, the critic who examines literature using feminist theory strongly believes that doing so can bring about changes and awareness in the social and political fields.
Feminist theory includes more than attacking gender bias. It also explores the female version of the world and sheds light on the importance of women’s writing. In the early nineteenth century, many women wrote under male pseudonyms. To reach a male-dominated audience and to publish their writing without being condemned, female authors adopted *nom de plumes*. Authors like the Brontë Sisters, Louisa May Alcott, Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, and Mary Ann Evans have contributed to literature, using male pseudonym. This phase is called the Feminine Phase. The second phase of the Feminist movement is the Feminist phase. The main aspect of this phase is to criticize the status of women in society and the oppression of women. This phase maintains a radical and often separatist position (Barry 118). Lastly, the third phase, the Female phase, focuses on the legitimacy of women’s outlook. It claimed that women can be authoritative and logical. Women were often considered illogical, emotional, and unintelligent in the past. Showalter explains that, “for female writers this meant turning to their own lives for subjects. It also meant that the delicacy of expression that had typified women's writing began to crumble as a new frankness regarding sexuality emerged” (Dobie 99). It was not until the feminist movement that women began reevaluating the portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the concept of the modern women.

To understand the Feminist Movement, it is important to grasp the three waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism began with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and fought for women to get the right to vote and to own property. At that time, women had no political or economic rights. Three hundred men and women gathered in Seneca Falls, New York to rally for the women’s rights. In 1920, women finally gained the right to vote in the United States. The First Wave, also known as “equal opportunities feminism” or “equity feminism”, was concerned with equal opportunities for women and promoted a lack of distinction between sex and gender (Sorensen, Krolokke 6). With a slightly different goal, the Second Wave of feminism started in the early 1960s. Born out of the Civil Rights Movement, it focused on topics such as sexuality and reproductive rights. In 1968, women gathered to protest at the Miss America Pageant, where they threw oppressive gender artifacts, namely bras, false eyelashes, high heels, and makeup in trash cans (Sorensen, Krolokke 8). Nevertheless, the Third Wave of feminism, which began in the late 1980s, supported the idea that every woman should
define femininity for herself. Moreover, Third Wave feminism expressed itself in ‘grrl’ (young at heart) rhetoric and embraced ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in transversal theory and politics. The European term for the Third Wave Feminism is “new feminism”, which is seen in local and national activism in areas including trafficking, self-mutilation, body alteration surgery, and violence. Pejorative labels such as “slut” and “bitch” were embraced by the Third Wave feminists as they were not defined by the political standout, but rather by the use of performance and subversion as rhetorical strategies (Sorensen, Krolokke 16). The Third Wave emerged to destroy misconceptions and misinterpretations of feminism in order to move it forward. Nevertheless, the feminist movement changed the way women were seen in society, resulting in the recognition of gender equality and the empowerment of women.
4. Feminism in *Pride and Prejudice*: Patriarchy

Austen shows women’s place in the society of her time throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel reflects the great inequality faced by women during the Regency Period. It examines issues relating to restrictions on women. Indeed, women have been facing inequality and oppression for a long time. After tracing the history of women, Wollstonecraft concluded that:

> She [woman] has always been either a slave or a despot, and to remark, that each of these situation equally retards the progress of reason. The grand source of female folly and vice has ever appeared to me to arise from narrowness of mind; and the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding: yet virtue can be built on no other foundation! (66)

The root cause of the subordination of women is simply based on the myth, established by men, that “woman is weak and has a lower productive capacity” (Beauvoir 86). Beyond a doubt, patriarchy is still present in most societies. The word ‘patriarchy’ comes from ‘patriarch’, meaning father. Patriarchy is a social construct that allows father figures to control women in the family as the term originally means ‘male-dominated family’. Walby defines Patriarchy as a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20). The use of patriarchy is seen repeatedly in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is mainly seen through the Bennet family.

Throughout the story, Mrs. Bennet is desperate to find wealthy husbands for her five daughters. Should she fail to do so, her daughters could end up with no financial aid to support themselves as women were not entitled to own any property or money at that period. This harsh reality compelled women to depend on their husbands. For instance, Charlotte Lucas’ happiness completely relies on her husband, Mr. Collins, as only he can provide her with financial security and a higher social status. In her book, Beauvoir claims that men “have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set against her; she was thus concretely established as the other. This condition served males’ economic interests; but it also suited their ontological and
moral ambitions” (159). Women were seen as so inferior that they were not recognized in entailment law. Therefore, by not allowing women to have any rights, men were excluding them from succession and subjecting them to tyrannical authority. As always, it is easy to oppress the weak.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, women are the object of desire, with men admiring women for their physical attributes. In chapter five, Charlotte overhears Mr. Bingley frowning upon the looks of women at the ball. It is odd to see even Mr. Bingley, who belongs to higher class society, talking about the significance of appearance. The conversation of Mr. Bingley with Mr. Robinson is so open and indiscreet that all of the women in their surroundings can hear them. Instead of getting upset, they get proud and celebrate the praise Jane receives. While men are judging women based on their looks, women cannot do the same. The role of women in the book is to attract men they are interested in. Men in the novel seem to have many choices, but the women have to fight for men. In addition, the importance of physical appearance is further explored through the description of Mary, “who having, in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments” (Austen 19). Once again, this reinforces the idea that a woman’s looks are vital in all pursuits of marriage. If she suffers the misfortune of not being beautiful, she has to compensate for it with knowledge. Further, physical beauty is also important for Mr. Darcy. When Mr. Darcy comments on Elizabeth’s eyes, he explains that women’s eyes can give a man great pleasure. He thinks women’s physicality serves the purpose of giving men pleasure as if women exist only to make men happy.

Furthermore, women put a great deal of pressure on themselves too. When Elizabeth decides to walk to Netherfield to see sick Jane, the Bingley sisters mock the fact that Elizabeth decided to walk three miles in the dirt. Here the Bingley sisters are reinforcing the concept that a woman should be attractive to the eyes at all times. In the same chapter, Mr. Hurst is amazed to see Elizabeth reading a book. He asks her “‘Do you prefer reading to cards?... that is rather singular’” (Austen 29). During that period, card games were a basic choice to kill time. Mr. Hurst’s amazement suggests that he expects women to spend their time in meaningless games and not improving their knowledge by reading a book. This point clearly shows that women were not taken seriously and were
thought to “have been formed only to please, and be subject to man” (Wollstonecraft 88). Therefore, women were seen as objects of amusements and not as people to be amused.

In chapter eight, Darcy describes a perfectly accomplished woman. He says that she is someone who “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 expressions, or the word will be but half deserved” (Austen 30). Elizabeth replies that Darcy’s expectation is unrealistic, and there are no women possessing such qualities. The problem with this expectation is that women were under extreme pressure to be perfect. Moreover, it is unfair that there is no similar list for men. The fact that society does not hold men to the same standards makes it a patriarchal one. Clearly, the voice of Jane Austen shines through, criticizing the unrealistic expectation placed on women in the Regency Period. Women were expected to be beautiful, submissive, powerless, self-sacrificing, and more; as they were naturally “raised to the transparency of consciousness; she is a naturally submissive consciousness” (Beauvoir 161). Austen uses the character of Charlotte to exhibit the stereotype of the submissive woman, as Charlotte agrees with Mr. Collin. Charlotte’s main concern is how to be a good wife and manage her domestic life. She listens carefully to Lady Catherine when the latter “inquired into Charlotte’s domestic concerns familiarly and minutely, and gave her a great deal of advice as to the management of them all; told her how everything ought to be regulated in so small a family as hers” (Austen 125). Clearly, managing a good household is important to Charlotte as she is expected, after marriage, to ensure her husband’s comfort and to manage household affairs.
5. Elizabeth’s Stance on Gender Norms for Women

The protagonist, Elizabeth, in *Pride and Prejudice* is a strong and intelligent character. She is brave enough to show independence of mind and will. Belonging to a middle-class family does not make her passive like her mother and sisters. Elizabeth is mostly admired for her honesty, witty nature, and bold personality in rejecting the traditional gender norms of society. Elizabeth’s unapologetic attitude towards men and marriage has been praised and loved by readers of all time. She is considered a rebel in English Literature. Although her family thinks she will end up an old maid for having a sharp tongue and argumentative nature, she could not care less. While Mr. Bennet praises Elizabeth for her brilliance and judgment that separates her from her silly sisters, Mrs. Bennet sees her daughter as difficult and assertive. Elizabeth’s contradicting opinion is intimidating to many people in the novel. Furthermore, Lady Catherine also does not encourage Elizabeth’s uncooperative nature as the latter shows consistent resistance against the traditional standards set by society for women. In that era, women had to be submissive towards the opposite gender and display ladylike behavior to be able to get married. According to Wojtczak, girls were raise to obey; otherwise, they had to face consequences (8). However, for Elizabeth, it is not frightening to be unmarried or to live independently. This is what makes Elizabeth the feminist of the novel. What is more, Elizabeth’s feminism can be seen through her bold actions in challenging the conventional ideologies of society. For instance, she rejects the proposal from Mr. Collins more than one time. As mentioned in the story, she believes in marrying for love and not for money or status.

In the novel, Mr. Collins is described as “not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society, the greatest part of his life having been spent under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father” (Austen 54). Elizabeth has no respect for Mr. Collins as his reasons for convincing Elizabeth to consider marriage revolve around women’s economic position and his own keen interest in inheriting Mr. Bennet’s estate. Despite knowing that Mr. Collins could provide her a house and comfortable lifestyle, Elizabeth is incapable of loving such a man. She is absolutely repelled by the stupidity and desperation of Mr. Collins. Her decisions are
based on rationality and not convenience. Despite knowing the inevitable future without a husband and feeling parental pressure, Elizabeth does not hesitate to refuse to get married for any reason other than love. Furthermore, Elizabeth gets multiple marriage proposals over the course of the novel, first from Mr. Collins and later from Mr. Darcy. She also refuses Mr. Darcy’s proposal for breaking up Jane and Mr. Bingley and for disrespecting her family. In the past, women, considering their financial situation, could not afford to rejected marriage proposals from affluent suitors. Upon rejecting an offer of marriage, women “could easily acquire a reputation of being a jilt for doing so. In fact, both parties could be damaged by a refused offer of marriage, so matters were to be handled with the utmost delicacy and consideration for the feelings of the young man. Not only was it more ladylike to do so, it might mollify his dignity” (Grace). Women “first reject the proposal, then accept it under dramatically altered circumstances” (Davis). Therefore, upon getting rejected by Elizabeth, Mr. Collins processes the situation as “a regular part of the business” (Austen 81). Rejecting two potential suitors proves that Elizabeth is not crippled by the conventional rules of society.

Elizabeth takes a feminist stand several times in the novel as it is important for her to bring greater awareness and evolution in society. Walby argues that women’s subordination is universal and the reason behind their confinement to the private sphere of family is that they are the ones who bear and rear children (175). It is sad that women were treated as inferior and considered weak; hence, society needs more confident women like Elizabeth who fight against their oppressors and win their battles. For instance, when Lady Catherine hears the rumor about Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth getting engaged, she tells Elizabeth how she would be polluting the shades of Pemberley by marrying Mr. Darcy. Without hesitation, she tells Elizabeth how she is not worthy of marrying Mr. Darcy, stating that her own daughter is perfect as both young people belong to the same noble line and honorable family (Austen 270). To which, Elizabeth replies, “In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter – so far we are equal” (Austen 270). In this moment, Elizabeth is not afraid to stand up against Lady Catherine who is constantly disrespectful towards everyone of a lower social status. With this answer, she is defending her family honor and also stating that they are equal on the grounds of having the same integrity and having respect for each other.
6. The Role of Social Class

6.1. Marriage as a Security for Women of the Lower Social Stratum

One of the main topics in *Pride and Prejudice* is marriage. This is obvious in the opening line of the novel: “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (Austen 3). In the nineteenth century, the choices for women were distinctly limited as Austen well knew. She wrote about marriage because that was women’s only career. Austen discusses the common ideals of women of the time throughout the novel. She highlights the desperation of women from the lower class to get married due to economic reasons. It is only Elizabeth who wants to marry for love. Everyone else is determined to secure their future. Watt argued that “Newspapers carried on marriage marts, with advertisement offering or demanding specified dowries and jointures, and young girls were driven into flagrantly unsuitable marriages on grounds of economic advantages” (142-3). Thus, some women of a lower social status had to settle for unhappy marriages.

Nevertheless, the practical approach to marriage is reflected by the character of Charlotte Lucas in the book. She is a twenty-seven-year old woman who has a different perspective from Elizabeth regarding marriage. Her expectations are not high from her husband, considering that her objective is to gain social status and materialistic value. Despite knowing that Mr. Collins proposed to Elizabeth before her and got rejected, Charlotte Lucas happily accepts Mr. Collins’ proposal. It does not affect her decision knowing that Elizabeth is the first choice of Mr. Collins as marrying Mr. Collins is necessary for her to secure a future that guarantees her luxury and comfort. Furthermore, Elizabeth has integrity and intelligence, but she lacks Charlotte’s realistic perspective. For Charlotte Lucas, “marriage is a market place where they must strive to make the best bargain they can in order to conserve or improve their status in life. Accordingly, it shows us that theirs is a ‘marriage of convenience’ for comfort and status; rather than love” (Haque 40). Charlotte’s marriage is not perfect, and it does not bother her as long as her financial stability is assured. As a practical woman, she is content about getting the chance to escape the inevitable future of becoming an old maid. Tanner sympathises with Charlotte Lucas saying that “in such a society, the need
for an 'establishment' is a very real one, and in putting prudence before passion
Charlotte is only doing what the economic realities of her society - as Jane Austen
makes abundantly clear- all but force her to do” (133). Further, Charlotte Lucas knows
that she is trapped in a web of social norms. Thus, rather than feeling unfortunate about
entering in a passionless marriage, she is embracing the benefits and convenience from
marrying Mr. Collins. She recognizes the reality of her situation and marrying Mr.
Collin is a smart step towards her secure future.

According to Haque, “Marriage is inevitable in Charlotte’s society and it will
determine her fate as well as the fates of the marriageable girls” (39). Therefore, it is
clear that the only purpose of women in the novel is to find affluent suitors and settle
down. They cannot be blamed for having such conservative mindsets as:

English common law left a woman very little economic freedom, for it
ruled that whatever property a woman owned before marriage or might
receive thereafter automatically became her husband’s. Thus, daughters
of wealthy fathers frequently became prey of fortune-seeking men, and
daughters of fathers of limited fortunes often had difficulty finding
husbands at all. The laws of inheritance further limited women’s
economic freedom for they often excluded settlement of property on
women. (Swords)

After the death of Mr. Bennet, Mr. Collins is the rightful inheritor to his property,
which leaves his daughters at the mercy of their husbands. Therefore, marriage is a
necessity for them to survive. With no education and no job opportunities, marriage is
the only means for them to have a secure future. Mrs. Bennet’s obsession with marrying
her daughters off to wealthy men is clear as she does not want her daughters to wind up
like her.

However, it is obvious in examining Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s marriage that love is the
only factor one should consider before marrying. A marriage can easily fall apart if the
partners fail to show respect for each other or lack compatibility. In Mr. and Mrs.
Bennet’s case, it is both. Mr. Bennet marries Mrs. Bennet for her looks. He was
“captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and
beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her” (Austen 179). He has clearly no passion for or interest in Mrs. Bennet, and he tries to warn Elizabeth to learn from his mistakes. Nevertheless, the reason for the failure of the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is their different understandings of marriage. For Mr. Bennet, marriage is based on a shallow attraction. On the other hand, Mrs. Bennet entered the marriage with Mr. Bennet for obvious economic gain, just like Charlotte Lucas. Further, in terms of class hierarchy, Mr. Bennet is above his wife. While Mr. Bennet gains a nagging partner to spend his life with, Mrs. Bennet gets a class upgrade from the marriage. It is clear that Mrs. Bennet’s motivation for marriage is as shallow as Mr. Bennet’s. Despite of this reason, they both are not the right match for each other. Their marriage represents the idiocy of rushing into marriage with foul and superficial motives.

For her part, Lydia, a subsidiary character, draws attention to the fact that a woman should never consider eloping, especially during Regency Period. Eloping could bring “legitimacy of the children from such a marriage into question […] If it was not, her reputation would be ruined and her chances of making a good marriage possibly gone forever” (Grace). For instance, if Lydia decides to leave Wickham and marry another man, her son might not be entitled to property due to her bad reputation. Moreover, after eloping, if Wickham decides to not marry Lydia, the chance of any appropriate man marrying her is slim. She will, therefore, have no means to support herself after Mr. Bennet’s death. Lydia’s position will also devalue her sister’s eligibility for marriage. The elopement of Lydia and Wickham brings disgrace and scandal to her family. If Wickham refuses to marry her, she will become a financial burden to her family.

6.2. Class Division and Its Effect

All social interaction in the book is governed by social class, especially marriage. The entire novel revolves around the issue of marriage and the restriction placed on marriage resulting from class differences. Men and women in the Regency Era were
expected to marry within their own social class. Marrying below their position risked their social standing. It is clear that Darcy is class conscious in the beginning. In chapter ten, Mr. Darcy finds himself smitten by Elizabeth. However, he also “believes that were it not for the inferiority of her connection, he should be in some danger” (Austen 40). He holds himself back from falling in love with Elizabeth as she is from a middle class family. Mr. Darcy is the true depiction of the upper class gentleman. He admits that he is raised to “think meanly of all the rest of the world” (Austen 280). His parents taught him that as he belongs to the upper class, he is allowed to think less of people of a lower social status. Austen uses the character of Mr. Darcy to criticize the higher classes behaving in a snobbish manner. Furthermore, Miss Bingley becomes jealous after realizing that Mr. Darcy has begun to show interest in Elizabeth. She feels threatened by Elizabeth’s strong personality. Therefore, she uses the class difference between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth to stop Elizabeth from ending up with Mr. Darcy. She is aware of the fact that she cannot compete with Elizabeth’s virtue and brilliance. Thus, she uses her class superiority and constantly mocks the Bennet sisters and their upbringing. It is ironic that Miss Bingley thinks herself better than the Bennet sisters when her “brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade” (Austen 12) and not from owning an estate.

*Pride and Prejudice* is set at a time when social class is not exactly the same as wealth. However, it is not entirely different from wealth either. Traditionally, social class was based on family lineage, not wealth or income. Landowners were at the top of hierarchy and obviously showed the defects of a ruling aristocracy by having pride, acquisitiveness, and contempt for the lower class. However, in comparison, they were cultured, respectful of the rules of law and public office, and ambitious to contribute to the world of commerce and industry. Like any other group of men, being high principled individuals, they were protective of their good reputation and careful of rights of others (Mingay 14-15). It is quite clear that Mr. Darcy is a member of the landed gentry - the upper class. “Landed gentry” means people whose income is derived from their landholdings, rather than work. Mr. Darcy’s income is a product of his estate at Pemberley, and not from working. What is more, Mr. Bennet is also a member of the landed gentry, like Mr. Darcy. He owns a small estate at Longbourn that earns him nearly two thousand pounds per year. Despite being a landowner, Mr. Bennet is not
considered as a part of the upper class due to his wife. On a smaller scale, social status was traditionally determined by family connections. Mrs. Bennet’s father and brother come from the middle class and by inheriting their social status, Mrs. Bennet also belongs to the middle class. Furthermore, Austen hints that Mr. Bingley is not part of the landed gentry as his fortune is originated from his trade business and not from owning an estate. His father tries to purchase an estate before he dies; however, he fails to do so. Thus, Mr. Bingley leases the estate at Netherfield. It is ironic that Mr. Darcy looks down on Elizabeth due to her mother’s middle class connection, when his close friend, Mr. Bingley has the same origin. Due to Mr. Darcy and Bingley’s sister’s remark, Mr. Bennet and his daughters are considered as the members of the middle class, which is false.

The feud between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine best describes the class differences in *Pride and Prejudice*. Lady Catherine is beyond shocked when she hears the news about Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth’s engagement. In her opinion, it is an awful match as Elizabeth comes from the lower class. After hearing about the engagement, Lady Catherine decides to pay a visit to Elizabeth. Elizabeth and her family are surprised and feel inferior as “she entered the room with an air more than usually ungracious, made no other reply to Elizabeth’s salutation, than a slight inclination of the head, and sat down without saying a word” (Austen 266). Clearly, Lady Catherine could not care less about Elizabeth and her family. She also makes impolite remarks about their house. However, after getting interrogated by Lady Catherine, Elizabeth replies to her in a calm manner, displaying more class than her. According to Ahearn, “Lady Catherine’s adherence to aristocratic norms is flagrant, and most extreme in her argument with Elizabeth. Her assumption that the assertion of noble prerogatives will win the argument is countered by Elizabeth’s self-assurance in being a “gentleman’s daughter” (33). Lady Catherine’s argument that Elizabeth is not suitable for Mr. Darcy is solely based on her insubstantial aristocratic views. She is the true depiction of the aristocratic society. Nevertheless, she absolutely disapproves of the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy and wants Mr. Darcy to settle for someone from his own class, her daughter to be precise. Mr. Darcy also belongs to an aristocratic family and possesses a large estate that earns him ten thousand pounds per year. In comparison to that, Mr. Bennet’s earning are inadequate. Taking this fact into consideration, Lady Catherine reaches out to Elizabeth
and explains her that she should not marry Mr. Darcy. Although Elizabeth belongs to the landed gentry, her mother's background is problematic for Lady Catherine. Therefore, Lady Catherine tries to bring Elizabeth into submission by bullying her. Unlike everyone else who bows to her authority, Elizabeth disagrees with her condescending nature.
7. The First Impression, Not the Last Impression

7.1. Darcy’s Prejudiced First Impression of Elizabeth

It is evident that Mr. Darcy is influenced by his first impression of Elizabeth, which almost costs him their relationship. A first impression, based on someone’s manner and speech, can tell a lot about a person’s character. Sometimes, it can also be deceptive. When Mr. Darcy first meets Elizabeth, he coldly comments on her looks and decides not to dance with her. He also looks down on her for belonging to a lower class than him. In the beginning, Mr. Darcy is admired by everyone in the ball after the word is spread of him holding a large estate and having a high status in society. However, this admiration turns quickly into resentment when he displays his repulsive attitude towards people. He is proud, which is agreeable as he shows resistance to any lady in the ball and prefers to sticks with his companions only.

Eventually, Darcy’s perception about Elizabeth changes, along with his ideas on the attributes of the ideal woman. The desired qualities no longer include physical beauty. He overcomes his preconceived mindset about superficial beauty after getting to know Elizabeth’s witty and eloquent nature. At this point, Mr. Darcy knows that they are intellectually suited for one another. Falling for someone’s personality is absolutely genuine and romantic. Mr. Darcy evolves by the end of the story, and he sincerely falls in love with Elizabeth. In their second meeting, Elizabeth, out of a desire for revenge, refuses to dance with Mr. Darcy, leaving him stunned. At this point, Mr. Darcy’s view of Elizabeth is slightly different, and he begins to notice her face and atypical intelligence. He finds himself admiring Elizabeth’s beauty, which he remarks upon to Miss Bingley. Elizabeth is the only one who stands up to him and makes him change his biased behavior. Most of his life, Mr. Darcy is surrounded by women with pretentious characteristics who are after his wealth. Elizabeth clearly stands out among them, by challenging him in every meeting. The more he knows about her, the more he realizes that he is falling for her. Despite her inferior background, he then decides to propose Elizabeth at Hunsford. Darcy’s first proposal is the most surprising part of the novel. This scene reveals how Mr. Darcy feels towards Elizabeth, and he speaks openly about it for the first time. In exchange, Elizabeth also speaks clearly about her feelings. Furthermore, while declaring his love, Mr. Darcy unintentionally insults Elizabeth’s
family, leaving her aggravated. In addition to this factor, Elizabeth rejects Mr. Darcy’s proposal for many other reasons, including Jane and Mr. Bingley break up, a perceived injustice with regards to Mr. Wickham, and his air of superiority. Mr. Darcy writes a letter to Elizabeth confessing his error and justifying his behavior towards Wickham. He apologizes for his mistake while judging her sister Jane and showing unpleasant behavior towards Mrs. Bennet. To fix the mistake of ending Jane and Mr. Bingley’s relationship, Mr. Darcy arrives at Longbourn with Mr. Bingley and clarifies the misunderstanding. Mr. Darcy’s love for Elizabeth makes him virtuous, honorable, and unprejudiced. Mr. Darcy is the first one to throw away his pride for the love of Elizabeth. Moreover, the rejection from Elizabeth brings about a positive development in Mr. Darcy as he overcomes his biased judgment based on class and superficial beauty. Austen’s characters often undergo profound inward and outward changes. Clearly, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth go through radical changes of opinion and attitude. Ultimately, they both consider each other equal, with no regard towards material gain or class aspiration.

7.2. Elizabeth’s Pride in the Pursuit of Her Happiness

The most charming, yet surprising, love story in the novel is that of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. It begins as any other conventional romantic comedy where two people take a very strong dislike to one another even though they are fated to be together. On the first encounter, Elizabeth utterly disagrees with the snobbish attitude of Mr. Darcy. She believes that Mr. Darcy deserves contempt for being arrogant at the ball. She is not proud like Mr. Darcy, but her pride is hurt when she is rejected by him for a dance. Thus, she is proud and rude when responding to Mr. Darcy after that incident. Her first impression of Mr. Darcy leads Elizabeth to develop a prejudice against him that increases after every subsequent encounter. The longer Elizabeth is blinded by her pride, the longer Mr. Darcy is proud, the longer prejudice remains prejudice, and pride remains pride. Elizabeth feeds her prejudice and believes everything she hears against Mr. Darcy. For instance, Elizabeth’s judgment about Mr. Darcy is so fixed that she blindly believes Mr. Wickham’s story. Upon finding out the truth, Elizabeth realizes that the first impressions are not always right.
After getting rejected by Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy explains himself in a letter, which changes Elizabeth’s perspective about Mr. Darcy and his actions. When she first reads the letter, she expects no good news. Gradually, after reading the letter several times, Elizabeth comes to an understanding that “she had been blind, partial, prejudice, absurd” (Austen 158); she is absolutely ashamed of herself. As she processes the letter, she begins to recall the signs indicating the impropriety of Mr. Wickham and her feelings towards Mr. Darcy start to change. She also realizes that she has been a hypocrite all this time for calling Mr. Darcy a proud man, when she is the guilty one for thinking that she could never be wrong. The attention from Mr. Wickham and rejection from Mr. Darcy at the ball clouds Elizabeth’s judgment. However, the letter helps her realize the truth, and she admits her mistake. Elizabeth also tries to work out her differences with Mr. Darcy by respecting and valuing his presence. The ability to accept her erroneous thinking reflects on her maturity, making her the heroine of this book. It is this moment in *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth, by getting to know herself, becomes capable of loving Mr. Darcy. However, she does not love him yet. She gives herself time to think and reflect on her feelings. Meanwhile, the Bennet family faces disgrace from Lydia’s elopement with Mr. Wickham. Now Elizabeth has no hope that the proud Mr. Darcy will ever want her again. However, once again, she misjudges him. Mr. Darcy tracks down Mr. Wickham and bribes him to marry Lydia for Elizabeth. He saves the Bennet family’s reputation but insists on remaining anonymous. Elizabeth is moved when she learns about Mr. Darcy’s altruistic gesture. Her feelings toward him have now completely evolved. From this point, Elizabeth is convinced that Mr. Darcy’s affection is genuine, and she appreciates his change of heart.

In chapter forty three, Elizabeth begins to develop romantic feelings for Mr. Darcy. From this point on, Mr. Darcy and his opinion matter to her. She cannot restrain herself from speaking about him whenever the opportunity is provided. Even at the time when she is resentful of Mr. Darcy, she defends him against her mother. Although she is determined to think the worst of him at first, she finds it hard to believe the stories of his mischief. For instance, when Mr. Wickham tells her his made up story, Elizabeth does not expect so ‘ill of him’ (Austen 62). Despite their difference, Elizabeth admires Mr. Darcy for his intellect. Moreover, she also discovers Mr. Darcy’s positive personality traits from the housekeeper, who reassures her about his kindness and cordiality.
Elizabeth tries to suppress her love for Mr. Darcy; she yearns for his love as she knows it is pure and has been tested on several occasions. Elizabeth is now certain that the foundation of their relationship is built upon trust, respect, and support. Both of them are honest with each other and critical if necessary. For instance, in his letter, Mr. Darcy points out that Elizabeth is prejudiced, which brings her greater self-awareness and maturity. Therefore, she encourages Mr. Darcy to propose her for the second time. Fortunately, Elizabeth gets the second chance for love and bliss with Mr. Darcy.
8. Conclusion

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, women often struggled for basic rights and freedom. *Pride and Prejudice* reflects the subjugation of women and the gender inequality that existed during Regency Era. Since women had poor educational and economic status, they relied heavily on marriage for financial security. Therefore, marriage is one of the central topics in Austen’s work. Women chose marriage for financial reasons rather than for happiness or love, as shown numerous times in *Pride and Prejudice*. The book illustrates different kinds of marriages; however, the readers are left with the impression that marriage based on true love is successful and what everyone desire. For her part, Elizabeth does not agree with the marriage business and stands up against it because she knows it is a socially constructed idea of happiness. She waits for love, rather than marrying for benefits, even if it means staying unmarried. Elizabeth is the feminist of the story who fights against the biased gender norms and conventional expectations of society. Her character evolves as the story progresses. Mr. Darcy also goes through a character transformation like Elizabeth. Both of them learn through their mistakes and show significant growth by the end of the story. It is Elizabeth’s pride and Mr. Darcy’s prejudice that initially stop them from being with each other; however, they realize their mistakes and are united eventually. Everyone makes judgments based on first impression; luckily for some, there are second chances.

Austen manages to depict the reality and difference between the middle class and upper class by exhibiting the conflicts between characters like Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy, and Lady Catherine. The class difference also affects the courtship of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. Characters like Lady Catherine and Miss Bingley try to keep Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth apart, using class superiority, but they miserably fail to do so. Towards the end of the novel, Elizabeth also finally realizes that, contrary to her first impression, Mr. Darcy is the one with whom she can share her life. Thus, Austen implies that love can break down the wall of social hierarchy. Despite some disagreement and clashing beliefs, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth are able to transcend the class barrier and find the true bliss of love.
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