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Marriage and Social Structure in *Pride and Prejudice*: A Critical Synthesis

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Abstract

Marriage in Pride and Prejudice is not only a love story ending rather it is a social system that is shaped by class and money. It is also shaped by gender expectations and moral values. In the world created by Jane Austen, marriage decides a woman's future and controls the social position and economic security of women. Marriage is connected with inheritance laws and property issues. This article uses modern critics to explain this idea. It argues that Austen shows many models of marriage. Some marriages are based on money. Some marriages are based on convenience. Others are based on respect and understanding. Through these examples, Austen criticizes the society of early nineteenth-century England and shows how women depend on marriage for survival and protection. Charlotte Lucas marries for stability. Elizabeth Bennet refuses marriage without respect. These different choices show social pressure and it shows moral growth. Companionate marriage slowly appears in the novel. It emphasizes equality and mutual respect between partners. In this way the novel changes the traditional marriage plot. It is not only a romantic ending. It became a subtle social criticism. Marriage functions as a mirror of society's values and inequalities.

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) remains one of the most influential novels in English literature because of its nuanced exploration of marriage, class hierarchy, and gender roles in early nineteenth-century English society. The novel famously begins with the ironic statement: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." This opening line immediately introduces the central thematic concern of the narrative—the relationship between marriage, wealth, and social

expectations. Critics consistently observe that marriage is the center of *Pride and Prejudice*. It holds the structure of the story together. Many events move toward marriage. Dalal (2019) argues that marriage decides "status, security, and personal growth" for almost every character. It **influences how characters are treated in society and how they see themselves**. The famous opening line shows that marriage is social expectation. It is not only private feeling. It **presents marriage as public duty not personal desire**.

Jane Austen places marriage inside a legal and economic system. Inheritance laws exclude daughters from property. Women depend on husbands for financial safety. Their future **is shaped by money and family position**. Marriage therefore becomes necessary for survival.

Bagthaliya (2023) explains that social class control marriage choices. Rich families look for equal status. Poor women look for security. Charlotte Lucas marries Mr. Collins for stability. She **chooses safety over romantic love because she has limited option**. This decision shows social pressure. Marriage becomes negotiation between emotion and survival. It **reflects the inequality of nineteenth century society**.

The narrative centers on the Bennet family and the marital prospects of the five Bennet daughters, presenting different models of marriage that reflect varying motivations such as love, financial security, social ambition, and impulsive desire. Scholars frequently identify four major marital patterns in the novel: the pragmatic marriage of Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins, the reckless union of Lydia Bennet and George Wickham, the harmonious relationship between Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley, and the transformative partnership between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy. Through these contrasting relationships, Austen explores how marriage can either reinforce or challenge the rigid social structures of her time. Since most of the marriages of the eighteenth century were decided by the parents and “women were expected to behave modest, submissive, and, most important: incapable of independent thought” (Strohmeier, 2013).

Therefore, the study of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* provides valuable insight into the broader social structure of Regency England. By presenting multiple marital models, Austen examines the tensions between economic necessity, social status, and genuine affection. This paper offers a critical synthesis of these perspectives, exploring how the novel uses marriage as a lens through which to analyze social hierarchy, gender expectations, and moral values.

Marriage and Economic Reality

Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen is often presented as a matter of social survival, societal acceptance, and status. In the rigid social structure of Regency England, marriage functions not only as a personal relationship but also as an economic and social necessity. Women are frequently treated as secondary participants in this institution, while men are viewed as the central authority and primary providers within the union. Because women had limited opportunities for financial independence, they were often expected to marry men who were wealthy or socially established. As a result, many marriages in the novel reflect the influence of wealth, class, and social expectations rather than genuine affection.

Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* is strongly connected with money. Sariwulandari (2021) explains that financial security is central to the story. Almost every marriage decision is influenced by economic conditions. The Bennet sisters cannot inherit their father's property. The law gives the estate to a male relative. This situation makes the daughters financially vulnerable and dependent. Because of this, Mrs. Bennet feels constant anxiety. She pushes her daughters to marry rich men. Her urgency reflects economic fear more than simple social ambition. Charlotte Lucas accepts this truth when she says, “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance.” She chooses stability over romance. Marriage, therefore, becomes a strategy for survival. It is a romantic dream but also a practical necessity. One scholar writes, marriage in Regency England was not only a personal union but a vital social institution that defined one's status and future. For women, marriage was often the only means of securing financial stability and respectability. In a society where women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere, the choice of a marriage partner had significant implications for their social standing. A woman's inheritance, family background, and ability to secure a wealthy or socially prominent husband could directly impact her family's fortune and reputation (Brown 98).

Marriage in the novel is not simply a romantic union; rather, it functions as a social institution

shaped by economic necessity, class structure, and gender norms. In the rigid social hierarchy of Regency England, women often depended on marriage for financial stability and social security because they lacked independent inheritance rights and economic opportunities. Modern critics emphasize that Austen portrays marriage as a complex social mechanism rather than merely a romantic ideal. For example, recent scholarship notes that the novel demonstrates how marriage operates as an economic necessity for women while simultaneously reflecting individual values and moral development.

The novel begins with the famous line, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." This sentence immediately connects wealth and marriage. Almost every marriage decision is influenced by property and income. The narrator states that the Bennet estate was "entailed, in default of heirs male, on a distant relation." This law excludes the daughters from inheritance. This situation makes them economically vulnerable.

Kica (2017) also discusses the difference between married and unmarried women. A married woman gains respect in society. An unmarried woman often faces insecurity and judgment. Lydia's scandal proves this danger. Mr. Bennet declares, "She is lost forever." Reputation and marriage are closely linked. Through these examples, Jane Austen presents marriage as both an economic necessity and a social survival. Social position depends on the husband's income and rank. A woman's identity is connected to her husband's name and status. Without marriage, her future remains uncertain. Austen shows this reality through different female characters. Some marry for love. Others marry for safety. In both cases, economic reality shapes their choice strongly.

Companionate Marriage and Equality

Many literary critics argue that Jane Austen presents the ideal marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* as a companionate relationship founded on equality, mutual respect, and emotional understanding rather than social convenience or financial gain. **Claudia L.**

Johnson explains that Austen's heroines seek marriages that allow intellectual and emotional partnership: "Austen's heroines insist on marriages that provide companionship and respect rather than mere economic security." **Mary Poovey** also emphasizes that Austen's concept of marriage involves moral and emotional equality between partners: "The ideal union in Austen's fiction is one in which affection, respect, and moral understanding replace purely economic motives." Similarly, **Devoney Looser** highlights that the marriage of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy represents a balanced relationship: "Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage ultimately models a partnership based on mutual admiration and personal growth." More recent criticism also notes that Austen's portrayal of marriage challenges rigid social hierarchy. **Kiran Dalal (2019)** states: "The union of Elizabeth and Darcy symbolizes a companionate marriage where equality, respect, and emotional maturity replace pride and prejudice."

In *Pride and Prejudice*, marriage is not portrayed only as a matter of financial security. Gradually, Jane Austen develops the plot to emphasize a relationship based on equality, where both men and women achieve a more balanced and respectful position within marriage. Through the development of the characters, especially Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, the novel shows that love and mutual understanding are the true foundations of a successful marriage. Austen suggests that a meaningful marital union requires not only social acceptance but also emotional compatibility and moral growth between the partners. Companionate marriage appears clearly in *Pride and Prejudice*. Alquraidhy (2021) argues that Jane Austen move beyond economic needs. She presents marriage based on honor and understanding rather than economical stability. The relation between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy grow slowly just to match the human souls. At first there is pride and prejudice. Darcy says, "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me." This insult creates misunderstanding. Elizabeth later rejects him strongly. She declares, "You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it."

This moment shows her dignity. It **proves that she does not marry for money or pressure.**

After reflection Darcy changes his behavior. He writes a letter and admits his faults. Elizabeth realizes, "Till this moment, I never knew myself." This sentence shows moral growth. Their marriage is based on self-knowledge and equality. It **represents mutual respect and emotional compatibility rather than simple financial advantage.**

Maeda (2023) also explains that Austen reshapes the marriage plot. The heroine is not passive. She thinks and judges. Marriage becomes result of maturity. Mengzhen Li (2023) also notes that equality in love is central. Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins by saying, "I am perfectly serious in my refusal." She insists on respect. This shift shows personal choice over social arrangement. Marriage therefore **becomes union of equal minds not economic contract only.**

Marriage and Social Reputation

Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* is strongly connected with social honor. It is seen that society judges women very quickly. **Mary Poovey** explains the connection between marriage and social reputation in Austen's fiction: "In Austen's novels, marriage functions as a means of **regulating social behavior and preserving family reputation within the class structure of English society.**" **Claudia L. Johnson** highlights the social pressure surrounding marriage: "Marriage in Austen's fiction is closely tied to **social approval and the maintenance of respectability within the community.**" **Devoney Looser** comments on the cultural importance of reputation in Austen's society: "In *Pride and Prejudice*, marriage is not merely a private union but **a public act that affects family honor and social standing.**" **Kiran Dalal (2019)** also discusses the social function of marriage: "Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* operates as **a social institution through which status, reputation, and class hierarchy are maintained.**" In the case of Lydia, when she runs away with Wickham, the family feels deep shame. Mr. Bennet reacts with fear and says, "She is lost forever, and we must forget her." It shows how reputation can disappear suddenly by just a mistake made by a woman. Lydia's action destroys the moral image of the whole

family in a moment. Her behavior makes the sister's future uncertain and socially threatened, too.

Elizabeth also comprehends the seriousness of this event. She ponders, "Our importance, our respectability in the world must be affected." This realization shows that reputation belongs not only to one person but to the entire family. Here we can observe that society watches women closely. Their conduct is treated as a symbol of family honor. Without proper marriage, Lydia would remain socially rejected and insecure.

Whereas, marriage to Wickham finally restores her respectability. The narrator states that Lydia was "secure of being married." But, this marriage is not based on virtue or love rather it exists to repair social damage. It **proves that marriage function as protection against public shame.** In this society, reputation and marriage are deeply connected. A woman social survival often depends on legal union.

Marriage and Moral Development

In *Pride and Prejudice*, it is seen that marriage is closely connected with moral growth. It is suggested that characters must change before they achieve a happy union. In course of the time Darcy learns humility, and Elizabeth recognizes her own flaws. After reading his letter, Elizabeth admits, "Till this moment, I never knew myself." This moment shows deep self-realization and self-introspection. This self-realization marks the beginning of her moral transformation. Now she begins to judge more fairly about herself. **Alan H. Goldman** explains the moral growth of the main characters: "The narrative shows the protagonists moving from **ego-centered moral perception to broader moral cognition and empathy.**" **Mark Makin (2024)** emphasizes the ethical foundation of marriage in Austen's novel: "The ideal marriage is **a friendship of virtue between moral and intellectual equals.**" **Kiran Dalal (2019)** describes marriage as a medium for character growth: "Marriage serves as **a medium for character development and a critique of social norms.**" **Salman and Abdul-Kadhim (2024)** explain the moral message behind different marriages in the novel: The novel shows that marriages based only on wealth or attraction

“do not continue forever” and lack true moral value.

Darcy also demonstrates ethical changes through good deeds. He helps Lydia's family secretly without expecting any reward from them. Elizabeth later realizes his own true character. The narrator notes that he was “generous and forgiving.” This description shows moral strength. It proves that inner virtue becomes more important than social pride.

Elizabeth finally accepts him with respect and understanding. The narrator states that Darcy was now “worthy of being loved.” Love here is not a sudden emotion when one comes in contact with someone. It grows from reflection and experience. Marriage, therefore, represents moral achievement rather than simple romantic success. Austen suggests that a lasting union requires humility, self-knowledge, and ethical responsibility. And thus, characters must improve themselves before they can form a stable and meaningful partnership.

CONCLUSION

Pride and Prejudice also shows marriage as negotiation between personality and society. Not all marriages are equal. Some are based on illusion. Some are based on patience. The novel states, “Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice.” This description explains the imbalance in Mr. and Mrs. Bennet marriage. It **suggests that lack of understanding creates long term dissatisfaction.** Their union is not violent but it **shows how emotional distance damages domestic harmony.**

The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner offers different example. Elizabeth observes that Mrs. Gardiner is “an intelligent, amiable, and elegant woman.” This partnership is calm and respectful. It **demonstrates that mutual sense and kindness creates stability.** Through them Austen presents healthy domestic model.

Social performance also influences marriage choice. When Darcy proposes the first time, he confesses his struggle with class difference. He say, “In vain I have struggled. It will not do.” His words reveal internal conflict between feeling and

pride. It **expose how social expectation control even private emotion.**

At the end, Elizabeth’s feeling changes gradually. The narrator notes that she “began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her.” This realization comes after observation and reflection. It **proves that rational judgment and emotional insight are both necessary for lasting union.**

Through these varied examples, Jane Austen portrays marriage as complex institution. It is shaped by character, education, and moral awareness. It **reflects society structure but also reveal individual responsibility inside relationship.**

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