

The Theme of Marriage in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

Love and lack of love have always been in a way or the other themes for major creations. Every great writer wrote some lines to worship or to mock love; either way it has been a long lasting theme. Jane Austen used love to mock the morals of the époque, but also to draw a line between what should or should not be done in the name of love. And while every Austen's novel ends up celebrating the happiest kind of union, based on strong feelings, mutual respect, compatibility, in her novels are also other alliances contracted as the result of other inducements, either elopement or arranged marriages.

Keywords

love, marriage, man, woman, social status

At first sight the story is very simple: a family of seven (parents and five daughters) live a quiet, simple life, in a common village; nothing fancy, nothing out of order. In the neighborhood appear some rich persons; they make acquaintance: some of them like each other, some of they don't; after many fruitful events they all like each other and the novel ends up with everybody living happily ever after. But the story is much more than that. This late 18th century novel emphasizes the condition of women and family at the end of the 18th century; we find emphasis on man in his social environment, on what is really important in life; we find a very powerful antithesis between rich and poor, stupidity and wit, falsity and integrity, all served up with a bit of irony. We come to know feelings and emotions dictated or not by wealth. We get to know the level of society with which Jane Austen was most familiar: large landowners, the armed services, the professions and the lower gentry. Within this society the companionate marriage was still seen as the ideal and conjugal happiness as a legitimate aim. Nonetheless marriages of convenience were common. At the top of the social scale the aristocratic families still arranged marriages between their children from their cradle, for money or even political reasons. Children became items for barter and in their turn made the same thing with their children. "In these tumultuous relations love matches occurred and a certainty emerged: the relations based on love, respect and esteem were more likely to pass the test of time than those contracted for material reasons. Even so, parental veto regarding the bride remained a very powerful weapon where money and land

were at stake. So, social standing and wealth are not necessarily advantages in Austen's world." [5, 186] It is like a vicious circle and all in all one comes to say: happy the wealthy ones with no parents. "Daughters in all ranks of society were in a particularly vulnerable position and the pressure on them to marry was of a different order, because their present and future economic security lay in male hands: fathers', brothers', husbands'." [4]

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters." (Ch. 1)

Although this is a truth universally acknowledged especially for that particular period of time, we should also mention the fact that a single man in possession of a good fortune *was not* in want of a wife, unless he chose to be so. We should not forget that the privilege of proposing marriage was and still *is* the man's privilege. Also, let's not forget that even asking a woman to dance was and still is *his* privilege. But even if dancing with a woman was indeed considered a step forward in the future relation of the couple, a dance did not guarantee de happy ending of that couple. Mrs. Bennet is very pleased after the first ball when Br. Bingley has danced several dances with her daughter Jane; she already sees herself as Bingley's mother-in-law, but that was not enough for the girl to receive a proposal. Mr. Darcy emphasizes at the first ball that "a lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony, in a moment." (Ch. 6) When talking about marriage, a man had to take into account several other aspects, and he had to think beyond his initial inclinations. Jane Austen leaves her novel readers in no doubt that, in fact, "single women with little money must be in want of husbands with ample fortunes, especially if they had no male relatives to support them." [4] Women, generally speaking, had to learn to value self preservation above inclination from infancy. A woman had to be very strong and firm to be able to refuse a suitable, convenient proposal, when she had no other male support or better future perspectives. Character and connections were very important too when taking into account a proposal, but the income of the groom weighed in the balance. It is worth reminding the fact that women were excluded from inheritance; therefore they had to secure themselves. "*Primogeniture* was the right, by law or custom, of the first born to inherit the entire estate. Historically, the term implied *male primogeniture*, to the exclusion of females. According to the Norman tradition, the first born son inherited the entirety of a parent's wealth,

estate, title or office, and then would be responsible for any further passing of the inheritance to the siblings. In the absence of children, inheritance passed to the collateral relatives, in order of seniority of the males of collateral lines.” [10] Beautiful or not, a woman had to secure her future, no matter the questions of the heart. And not all of them were firm enough to refuse a *convenient* marriage when the pressure was very powerful from her family.

A good marriage was supposed to imply money, connection and character on both sides. As Charlotte Lucas states “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” (Ch. 7) and no many men or women could afford to ignore money when choosing a companion; they were either very rich, very foolish or had no family to consider. All the choices were made “with an eye to monetary gain and, if possible, emotional happiness; affection was desirable, but if a good income made the heart beat a little faster, well, that was understandable.” [4] But the first type of marriage we are to talk about is not one built up on the character or the connection of one of the parties. The marriage between Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas is based on economics rather than on character, connection, love or appearance. She is not a beauty; she is not romantic, as she herself says it in her conversation with Elizabeth Bennet; she is already considered to be a burden to her family at her seven and twenty, and she needs to feel secure. She is not a woman who could afford to ignore the absolute necessity of an *adequate* income, so she sees the opportunity to be united to an easy to avoid husband when Elizabeth Bennet refuses Mr. Collins. Of course, she honestly admits the materialism of her choice: “I see what you are feeling, you must be surprised, very much surprised... But when you have had time to think it all over, I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done. I am not romantic you know. I never was, I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.” (Ch. 22) It was a common practice during Austen’s time for women to marry a husband to save herself from spinsterhood or to gain financial security, so she chooses wise for herself: “Mr. Collins was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it 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.” (Ch. 22) There is another side of the coin and Jane Austen shows that women who submit themselves to this type of marriage will have to suffer in tormenting silence as

Charlotte does: “When Mr. Collins said any thing of which his wife might reasonably be ashamed, which certainly was not unseldom, she [Elizabeth] would involuntarily turned her eye on Charlotte. Once or twice she could discern a faint blush; but in general Charlotte wisely did not hear.” (Ch. 28) On the other hand, Mr. Collins is not very much in love with his wife, nor charmed by her insipid locks either. First, he chooses Jane Bennet, who is considered a real beauty in the neighborhood because of her curled long blonde hair. Mr. Collins decides to marry Jane on the first evening of his visit to Longbourne. He is very sure of himself, that he is enough of a catch to stipulate for a beautiful partner. After being persuaded that Jane is to marry very conveniently, he casts his eyes on Elizabeth, who is an acceptable alternative. He never considers a rejection from her beyond the vague virtue of *amiability*. He gives himself 11 days in which to solve the problem of his life companion and he doesn’t want to expend too much energy on courtship. He is the inheritor of the Longbourne estate and therefore his suit is highly acceptable. He does not see marriage as a romantic affair and he states his position regarding this union very clearly when proposing to Elizabeth Bennet: “My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly – which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honor of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject... Thus much for my general intention in favor of matrimony... And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection...” (Ch. 19) We cannot dream that his vision regarding the institution of matrimony could have changed during such short period of time, between the proposal made to Elizabeth and that made to Charlotte, only days after. A limited person, he sees himself very important, just because he is lucky enough to live near a wealthy lady who uses him and treats him and all around her with contempt. Even if Elizabeth Bennet has a tendency to judge on first impressions and perhaps to be a little selective of the evidence upon which she bases her judgments she gives us a clear portrait of the man and also she expresses her harsh position regarding Charlotte’s accepting his proposition: “My dear Jane, Mr. Collins is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man; you know he is, as well as I do; and you must feel, as well as I do, that the woman who married him cannot have a proper way of thinking. You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning

of principle and integrity, nor endeavor to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger security for happiness.” (Ch. 24) “Charlotte Lucas’s brothers can breathe a sigh of relief that their sister will not be a future burden on their finances and their sisters entertain hopes of mixing in adult society sooner than they had expected.” [4]

The second couple of the novel is a controversial one: Mr. Wickham and Lydia Bennet. This is obviously an example of a bad marriage. It is based on appearances, good looks, and youthful vivacity. Once these qualities can no longer be seen by each other, the strong relationship will slowly fade away. The idea is that we cannot dream to suspect Mr. Wickham in love with Lydia. In the past he wanted to elope with Miss Darcy, fact that leads to the cold relation between him and Mr. Darcy. But when he appears in the novel, he courts Elizabeth, who is far more accomplished than Lydia; after her, he turns his charm for Miss King, with ten thousand pounds. So, his ultimate purpose is money. The problem is that even though his elopement plan is a success, and he runs away with silly Lydia, soon this success becomes his condemnation: he sees himself tied up with a woman he no longer cares (assuming he cared for her at a certain point), with no money or connection, with nothing but reproof from his in-laws. Not both his in-laws, because Mrs. Bennet’s favoritism towards him, as her first son-in-law, is obvious. Parting was not a solution and even if he wished to, divorce and separation were prohibitively expensive options. On the other hand, Lydia is the youngest Bennet sister, aged 15 when the novel begins. She is frivolous and headstrong. Her main aim in life is socializing, flirting with the officers. She spends her time with her older sister Kitty, who is proven to be badly influenced by Lydia, in contrast with the good influence that Elizabeth and Jane have on her at the end of the novel, and is supported in the family by her mother. Lydia shows no regard for the moral code of her society and is remorseless for the disgrace she causes her family. After her scandalous alliance, which could have harmed the reputations of her all other sisters, if it weren’t for Mr. Darcy who saved the situation, all she thinks of is how great she acted in finding herself a wonderful husband: “Well, mamma, and what do you think of my husband? Is not he a charming man? I am sure my sisters must all envy me. I only hope they may have half my good luck. They must all go to Brighton. That is the place to get husbands. What a pity it is, mamma, we did not all go.” (Ch. 51) She doesn’t know what a marriage is; she is charmed by the idea of being married, she wants to be married before her elder sisters for all the wrong reasons – “Ah! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman.” (Ch. 51) – but she does not take seriously the responsibilities of a

family. Regarding her mother, we could easily say that her support comes from the fact that in her youth Mrs. Bennet was exactly like Lydia. The similarities between Mrs. Bennet and Lydia are spoken aloud by the former when she boasts in being once as energetic as Lydia. And although we are told little about how Mr. and Mrs. Bennet got together, it may be inferred by their conversations that their relationship was similar to that of Lydia and Wickham. Jane Austen's description of the Bennets is very clear: "Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humor, reserve and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character... She [Mrs. Bennet] was a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper." (Ch. 1) and we hear Mr. Bennet very often mocking his wife – "I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these last twenty years at least." (Ch. 1); once again it is emphasized the fact that he indeed married a woman who found sexually attractive, not realizing that she was not an intelligent woman. The long term effect of his mistake was him isolating himself from the rest of the family, finding refuge into the library and forgetting that he has five daughters who needed a firm hand to educate them. The failure of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet (particularly the former) as parents is blamed for Lydia's lack of moral judgment. [5, 187] He understands at the end of the novel that he deepened into his mistake, but that does not help him saving his family. He is a weak father and Austen uses his mistakes to draw a warning sign that in life it is necessary to use good judgment to select a wife/partner; otherwise the two people will lose respect for one another. However, the difference between Mr. Bennet and Mr. Wickham is clear: the former is a gentleman his major mistake was marrying the wrong woman and leaving aside his duty as a father; on the other hand, Mr. Wickham is not at all a gentleman and that is easily seen from his conduct in the society: gambling was a serious problem of the time; that is why Jane is so worried when she finds out (Ch. 49) that Wickham was a gambler. "The code of conduct of the gentleman of the period meant that a gambling debt was a debt of honor. It had to be paid before you paid tradesmen, the rent or any other legitimate debt. If you did not pay your gambling debts you forfeited your right to respect from your fellow officers and gentlemen. Wickham left tradesmen debts behind him but also gambling debts. He was not a gentleman." [7] Through both these relations Austen shows that marriages contracted in a hurry, based on first impressions quickly cool and lead to unhappiness.

As in every Jane Austen's novel we have to find the happily ever after couple that overcomes all obstacles in its way to happiness. In *Pride and Prejudice*

we find two such couples, but even if the protagonists are to remain together till death do them part, we can talk about two types of love marriage. The first couple – Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet – is one formed in the first pages of the novel; Jane was meant to embody beauty of the time, which if would have been blonde hair and Grecian features so perhaps that explains it somewhat. [4] So, Mr. Bingley is very easily caught by her beauty, her quietness, her manner of speaking. All in all he is charmed and ready to propose to her from their first encounters. Jane also is impressed by him and we could talk about love at first sight: “He is just what a young man ought to be, sensible, good humored, lively...” (Ch. 4) But in their relation there is a problem: he is easily influenced. We find it in his relation with Mr. Darcy, who is indirectly responsible for both their separation and final union. Mr. Bingley needs Darcy’s approval for his romance with Jane Bennet. In his conversation to Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy tells her about the impulse given to his friend: “On the evening before my going to London I made a confession to him, which I believe I ought to have made long ago. I told him of all that had occurred to make my former interference in his affairs absurd and impertinent. His surprise was great. He had never had the slightest suspicion. I told him, moreover, that I believed myself mistaken in supposing, as I had done, that your sister was indifferent to him; and as I could easily perceive that his attachment to her was unabated, I felt no doubt of their happiness together.” (Ch. 58) A question rises: what would happen in the future, would he be again so easily influenced? The first witness of their fulfilled love is Elizabeth, the beloved sister: “This is too much! ... by far too much. I do not deserve it. Oh! Why is not every body as happy? ... I am certainly the most fortunate creature that ever existed!” states Jane when at last alone with her sister in the privacy of their room; also Bingley’s declaration is a reiteration of what love can do to people. Theirs is an example of a successful marriage and Austen, through Elizabeth, expresses her opinion of this in the novel: “... really believed all his [Bingley] expectations of felicity, to be rationally founded, because they had for basis the excellent understanding, and super-excellent disposition of Jane, and a general similarity of feeling and taste between her and himself.” (Ch. 55) On the other hand, Mr. Bennet lovingly mocks their relation saying that the flaw in their relation is that both characters are too gullible and too good-hearted to ever act strongly against external forces that may attempt to separate them: “You [Jane and Bingley] are each of you so complying, that nothing will ever be resolved on; so easy, that every servant will cheat you; and so generous, that you will always exceed your income.” (Ch. 55)

The surprise of the novel is represented by Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy: “He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world... She had a lively, playful disposition...” (Chapter 3) It is Jane who, when Darcy is condemned by everybody else as “the worst of men” pleaded for allowances and urged the possibility of mistakes. [6, 111-112] But, of course, Jane thought well about everybody, she is a defender of all human kind. Because of this presentation of the main characters of the novel the surprise is even bigger at the end of the novel when they end up marrying each other. The plot of the novel is such way built up that we see Elizabeth knowing everything, but no one is aware of what happens to her. The reader sees the unfolding plot and the other characters mostly from her viewpoint. [3, 198] She is very secretive about her feelings; very late in the novel her sister Jane finds out about her true feelings towards Mr. Darcy. Austen’s heroines lead restricted lives, but her novels are not about restriction, nor even about expression, but about the relationship between the two, about how women find ways to develop and assert their womanhood despite the restrictions placed on them. Though there are women in the novels who fail to do so – who, like Charlotte Lucas, settle for demoralizing compensations – the heroine always succeeds. [8] The Reverends Gregory, Blair, Fordyce and Gisborne’s opinion regarding women’s role in life induced the idea of weakness: “God made men stronger than women, both intellectually and physically and this superiority gave them a divine right of authority which women must not seek to challenge. Equality was neither possible nor desirable; female interests were best served by the cultivation of refined helplessness, guaranteed to stimulate the male protective urge and soften the male heart. Women were put on this earth to please men, after all, and happiness in marriage could only come through an unquestioning acceptance of male dominance.” [4] But it is hard to us to even imagine Elizabeth as a submissive wife; she has the ability to defend her own opinions, based on knowledge and not on female hysterics. Actually, Mr. Darcy loves and marries her for entirely different qualities. He does not expect her to transform herself into an exemplary wife. She is appreciated for her acute self-knowledge, for her moral and intellectual qualities. Mr. Darcy is seen in the same manner. The time spent hating each other helped them to better understand one’s character. But they have to change themselves in order to be together. From the first declaration – “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” – and the harsh refusal – “You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it... and I had not known you a month before I felt that

you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.” (Ch. 34) – until the final encounter of their hearts, Jane Austen gives her heroes a year to grow and to transform their inner opinions. Their story takes time because both of them need time to learn and change their convictions. And the story complicates once more because these knowledge processes are continually affected by one another. “It should be pointed out that the qualities of the title are not exclusively assigned to one or the other of the protagonists; both Elizabeth and Darcy display pride and prejudice.” [2, 185-187] They both have to overcome their own pride and prejudices regarding the other. In Chapter 5 Mary Bennet speaks about vanity and pride: “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.” It is a distinction that Austen makes on purpose because both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have no vanity problems, although one might be tempted think otherwise. If it were a problem of vanity their relation would have never had a happy ending. “Only at the end of the novel does Austen permit Darcy to reveal his character completely and explicitly, although by restricting us still to her heroine’s point of view in the closing chapters, she teases us about his feelings a good deal less than she does Elizabeth.” [1, 118] “You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever... dearest, loveliest Elizabeth!” (Ch. 58) The answer is simple and Austen does not give us direct speech, probably because the society of that time did not accept yet this kind of love bursts: “Elizabeth, feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure his present assurances. The happiness which this reply produced was such as he had probably never felt before; and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do. Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eye, she might have seen how well the expression of heartfelt delight, diffused over his face, became him; but, though she could not look, she could listen, and he told her of feelings, which, in proving of what importance she was to him, made his affection every moment more valuable.” (Ch. 58)

On the long term Elizabeth’s marriage to Mr. Darcy fulfills Mrs. Bennet’s expectations and introduces Kitty, who was very much influenced by Lydia, into a

more edifying company and gives her the opportunity to change herself and her way of seeing life and relations. On Darcy's side of the equation Georgiana gains a sister who injects a sense of fun into her serious life. [4]

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