



TRANSACTIONAL UNIONS AND REVOLUTIONARY LOVE: EXPLORING ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND GENDERED IDEOLOGIES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* AND *MIDDLEMARCH*

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| Article history: | | Abstract: |
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| Received: | 10 th May 2025 | <p>The Regency-era conventions that respected rank and material stability over individual liberty and contentment are sharply criticized in Jane Austen's novel (<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>). By Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of suitors such as Mr. Collins and her eventual union with Mr. Darcy, Austen advocates for a marriage founded on respect, intellectual fairness, and personal in organization. Charlotte Lucas, who prefers for financial security, and Lydia Bennet, whose sudden choice damage her family's public image, are prime examples of the unpredictable options available to women in a patriarchal world.</p> <p>Austen through her novel explores the pressure between individual desire and societal requirements, challenging hard gender standards and class foundations. It is often viewed from a protofeminist a view point. George Eliot's <i>Middlemarch</i>, which portrays how the female autonomy is still stifled by financial reliance and a lack of educational opportunities, carries these reproaches into the Victorian period. Both authors claimed that when love is founded on respect and fairness, it can become a radical act of resistance and that marriage is a miniature of greater injustices in society.</p> <p>Although Austen highlights individual agency one's autonomy within the confines of Regency society, Eliot evaluates the emotional cost of losing values. As a whole, their works offer an innovative view points on relationships founded on sincerity instead of social conventions, challenging the rules of marriage as a means of survival and a site of conflicting ideologies. Jane Austen's claim that genuine fulfillment comes from having the strength to oppose oppressive systems rather than from submitting is what gives her enduring relevance; her message is especially relevant to the present battles for justice and self-determination in.</p> |
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INTRODUCTION

Persistent themes in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) by Jane Austen include prejudice, social pressures, and the limitations these factors impose on romantic partnerships and marriage decisions. Originally titled *First Impressions*, the novel was intended to highlight the misunderstandings and premature judgments that arise from superficial observations. The eventual shift in title to *Pride and Prejudice* signals a broader and more critical engagement with the psychological and social barriers—namely pride and prejudice—that obstruct authentic human connection.

The novel's protagonists, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, personify these themes. Mr. Darcy's aristocratic pride and Elizabeth's early prejudice create major barriers to mutual understanding in their developing relationship, highlighting the ubiquitous effect of social etiquette and class hierarchy. Through these character arcs, Austen examines the intersection of personal integrity and social conformity, particularly as it pertains to courtship and marriage—an institution heavily burdened by economic, gendered, and social imperatives.

In early 19th-century England, women's economic prospects were largely tethered to marriage. Financial autonomy was rare, and social mobility for women was often contingent upon securing a "suitable" husband. Austen critiques these realities through the character of Elizabeth Bennet, who, unlike many of her contemporaries, resists the notion of marriage as a transactional arrangement. As Austen illustrates, the pressure to marry for wealth and security rather than affection was a dominant force in female experience (Austen, 2000, p. 123).

Although contemporary societies have evolved, and women today possess greater legal, educational, and economic agency, remnants of traditional gender norms and matrimonial expectations persist globally. Consequently, *Pride and*

Prejudice retains its cultural and literary relevance. Its nuanced portrayal of marriage as both personal choice and societal obligation continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike.

Austen's narrative is deeply situated within the socio-economic structures of Regency England, where marriage served as both a stabilizing institution and a means of upward mobility. The famous first line of the book reads, "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 is both satirical and a criticism on how women are used in the marriage market. The intricate relationship between individual aspiration and societal norms is exposed in the work, which Gilbert and Gubar (1979, p. 45) contend analyses the widespread worry about "suitability" in marriage contracts.

Through its rich tapestry of characters—including Elizabeth, Darcy, Mr. Collins, and Charlotte Lucas—*Pride and Prejudice* interrogates the rigid conventions that define acceptable suitors. Claudia Johnson notes that "marriage is both an economic necessity and a social imperative" in Austen's work, reinforcing how limited women's options were outside of matrimony (Honan, 1987, p. 89). The concept of the "suitable suitor" thus emerges as a central motif, binding romantic ideals to economic reality.

This critique is further informed by Austen's own biographical circumstances. Born into a family of modest means within the landed gentry, Austen experienced firsthand the precariousness of female economic dependence. Her decision to remain unmarried—despite societal pressures—signals a radical assertion of autonomy. These lived experiences directly informed Austen's literary preoccupations with class, inheritance, and the social contract of marriage (Honan, 1987, pp. 58, 78).

From *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) to *Mansfield Park* (1814) to *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1818), and *Persuasion* (1818), Austen's criticism of social systems is intricately interwoven throughout every book. Published anonymously under the pseudonym "By a Lady," these novels blend irony, realism, and social commentary. Austen's innovative use of free indirect discourse enables her to navigate the interiorities of her characters while simultaneously satirizing the social mores they must confront (Johnson, 1988, p. 92).

While often categorized as romantic fiction, Austen's novels are deeply skeptical of romantic idealism. As Jones (2004, p. 110) asserts, Austen's heroines frequently challenge the prevailing view of marriage as a vehicle for economic gain and social status, insisting instead on emotional compatibility and personal integrity. In this light, *Pride and Prejudice* offers a powerful critique of the ways in which patriarchal systems restrict female agency.

Despite her premature death in 1817—likely due to Addison's disease—Austen's literary legacy endures. As Poovey (1984, p. 150) contends, Austen's narratives provide "a nuanced critique of the expectations placed upon women," foregrounding the tension between individual will and societal constraint.

Ultimately, Austen's exploration of the "suitable suitor" serves as both a thematic and structural cornerstone in *Pride and Prejudice*, offering enduring insights into the dynamics of gender, class, and personal choice within the institution of marriage.

MARRIAGE AND GENDER EXPECTATIONS IN THE REGENCY ERA

The Regency period (1811–1820) in England was characterized by rigid social structures and limited opportunities for women, especially regarding economic independence and legal agency. Marriage during this time functioned not merely as a romantic union but as a vital mechanism for preserving and enhancing social status, securing financial stability, and safeguarding familial reputation. Women, in particular, faced significant constraints; they were legally barred from owning property in most cases, lacked access to professions, and were often excluded from inheritance. As such, marriage became not only desirable but essential for social survival (Kant, 1998, p. 210).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen deftly critiques this socio-cultural framework by exposing its flaws and contradictions through her characters' matrimonial choices. Elizabeth Bennet, for instance, refuses Mr. Collins's proposal, despite the fact that his inheritance of Longbourn could have secured her family's future. Her rejection signifies a refusal to sacrifice personal integrity and emotional fulfillment for economic gain, thus highlighting the central conflict between individual desire and societal expectation. Conversely, Charlotte Lucas's acceptance of Mr. Collins reveals the pragmatic decisions women often had to make—choosing security over love as a matter of necessity rather than preference (Kenner, 1980, p. 33).

Inheritance laws such as entailment exacerbated the precariousness of women's positions within families. By restricting inheritance to male heirs, these laws effectively excluded women from financial autonomy and institutionalized their dependence on marriage as the only viable route to security (Lewis-Williams, 2002, p. 89). Austen's narrative critiques this legal and social framework by presenting marriage as both an opportunity and a constraint, especially for women of the gentry who were vulnerable to disinheritance.

Austen's treatment of marriage reflects a broader commentary on the gender inequities embedded in the Regency social order. Through characters like Elizabeth and Charlotte, she presents contrasting responses to societal pressure: one characterized by idealism and resistance, and the other by pragmatic compliance. These juxtapositions underscore Austen's critique of a system that privileges economic stability over emotional fulfillment (Mazzeo, 1960, p. 58).

The precarious position of the Bennet sisters further illustrates the stakes of advantageous marriages. With no male heir to inherit the family estate, their financial future hinges entirely on securing suitable matches. This urgency is personified in Mrs. Bennet, whose obsessive efforts to marry off her daughters underscore not mere maternal concern but a realistic response to their socioeconomic vulnerability. While often depicted comically, Mrs. Bennet's anxieties reflect a deeper truth: marriage, for women of limited means, was less about romance and more about financial survival (Mellor, 1988, p. 142).

As literary scholar Vivien Jones observes, the Regency marriage market was driven by inheritance and financial calculation, encouraging families to arrange unions strategically to maintain or elevate social standing. This dynamic is embodied in Charlotte Lucas, whose acceptance of Mr. Collins represents a conscious compromise of romantic ideals for material security (Nagy, 1999, p. 101). Austen uses Charlotte's perspective to reveal the limited agency afforded to women and to critique a society that normalized such difficult compromises.

Social class divisions further restricted the freedom to marry for love, reinforcing the norm that individuals should marry within their rank to preserve family honor. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who vehemently opposes the idea of Mr. Darcy marrying Elizabeth Bennet, represents this rigid aristocratic mindset. Her outrage is not merely personal but emblematic of a broader societal fear of class contamination. Through such characters, Austen exposes the destructive nature of classist ideologies that prioritize lineage and wealth over compatibility and affection (Plato, 1997, p. 55).

Nevertheless, *Pride and Prejudice* subverts these norms by advocating for marriages based on emotional compatibility and mutual respect. Elizabeth's rejection of both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy—until the latter overcomes his pride—illustrates her resistance to viewing marriage as a transaction. The eventual union of Elizabeth and Darcy symbolizes a reconciliation of personal values with societal expectations, affirming Austen's belief that genuine affection should supersede social ambition (Seed, 2005, p. 76).

Claudia Johnson argues that Elizabeth Bennet embodies Austen's progressive vision of womanhood, challenging prevailing gender roles by refusing to accept a marriage lacking in respect and emotional connection. Unlike many women of her era, Elizabeth prioritizes moral and intellectual compatibility over material gain, thus redefining what constitutes a "suitable" match within Austen's narrative framework.

Austen's critique extends to male behavior as well. Mr. Darcy initially exemplifies the aloofness and pride associated with his class, as demonstrated by his dismissive behavior at the Meryton ball and his condescending first proposal to Elizabeth. However, his eventual transformation—including his discreet intervention in Lydia Bennet's scandal—reflects personal growth and an embrace of values beyond class and wealth. Darcy's arc underscores Austen's broader critique of shallow aristocratic values and affirms the importance of humility and moral integrity in a partner (Wordsworth, 1968, p. 37).

Charlotte Lucas, on the other hand, embodies the harsh realities women faced when romantic ideals were subordinate to social survival. At 27, Charlotte is considered beyond the conventional age of marriage and thus accepts Mr. Collins, whose proposal offers security rather than affection. Her pragmatic stance—summarized in her statement, "I am not romantic... I ask only a comfortable home"—illustrates the sacrifices many women had to make in a patriarchal society that offered them few alternatives (Thompson, 1984, p. 121).

Scholars have interpreted Charlotte's decision as emblematic of the systemic injustices facing women. By juxtaposing her resignation with Elizabeth's insistence on marrying for love and mutual respect, Austen critiques a culture that forces women into unwelcome compromises. Through its celebration of marriages grounded in equality and personal understanding, the novel presents a progressive reimagining of romantic relationships within a constrained social order (Wordsworth, 1968, p. 37).

TRADITIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE IN AUSTEN'S TIME

Between 1811 and 1820, during the Regency era, marriage in England was regarded as far more than a romantic union—it was a fundamental social contract through which individuals, especially women, secured financial stability, elevated or preserved social status, and upheld family reputation. For women, whose legal rights and economic opportunities were severely limited, marriage often represented the sole legitimate path to social respectability and material security. As Austen (1813, p. 123) implicitly critiques, this societal structure transformed marriage from a personal choice into a pressing necessity.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen exposes the flaws of this traditional framework, particularly by illustrating the inequities enforced through inheritance laws. The entailment of the Bennet estate to Mr. Collins renders the Bennet daughters financially vulnerable, thus making their marital prospects critical to their survival. This legal constraint exemplifies how inheritance laws systematically excluded women from economic independence.

Mrs. Bennet's obsessive efforts to marry off her daughters reflect the real urgency of their financial and social precarity (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 45). Social hierarchies further dictated that marriages should occur within one's class, as evident in Lady Catherine de Bourgh's outrage at Mr. Darcy's interest in Elizabeth Bennet. Austen, however, subverts this ideology by allowing Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship to flourish in spite of class distinctions, thereby suggesting that compatibility and mutual respect are more important than wealth or social rank (Jones, 2004, p. 110).

Marriage also bore a strong moral dimension. Women were expected to embody modesty and virtue, as their reputations were essential in securing respectable matches. Lydia Bennet's elopement with Mr. Wickham endangers not only her own standing but also that of her entire family. Mr. Darcy's intervention to mitigate this scandal, motivated by his evolving respect for Elizabeth's principles, critiques the superficial moral codes of his class (Honan, 1987, p. 78).

Austen juxtaposes Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic acceptance of Mr. Collins with Elizabeth's idealistic refusal, underscoring two contrasting responses to the same societal pressures. While Charlotte admits she only seeks "a comfortable home," Elizabeth rejects security in favor of personal compatibility and intellectual respect. As Claudia Johnson argues, Elizabeth challenges traditional norms by seeking a marriage founded on equality and emotional depth (Kirkham, 1997, p. 67). Through their eventual union, grounded in growth and mutual admiration, Austen envisions a progressive model of marriage—one that critiques the transactional nature of Regency-era unions while affirming the value of autonomy and love.

THE SOCIETAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE "SUITABLE SUITOR"

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the notion of a "suitable suitor" is largely shaped by prevailing societal values that prioritize wealth, status, and propriety over emotional or intellectual compatibility. Jane Austen uses her characters' differing perceptions of suitability to interrogate these norms. Mr. Collins, for example, fulfills all social expectations: he has a stable income, familial connections, and deference to hierarchy. Yet, his proposal to Elizabeth—lacking in genuine affection or understanding—highlights the disparity between social conventions and personal fulfillment. His offer, described as satisfying the "highest reasonable expectations," reflects society's emphasis on form over substance.

Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Collins, despite the economic security his proposal offers, marks a radical departure from convention. Literary scholar Mary Poovey argues that Elizabeth's actions challenge the assumption that marriage should be dictated by social obligation rather than personal happiness (Kirkham, 1997, p. 67). In doing so, she asserts a form of self-worth that defies patriarchal norms, risking her family's security in the process.

Elizabeth's defiance reveals Austen's broader critique of a system that reduces women to economic dependents. Her insistence on mutual respect and emotional companionship—qualities deemed secondary in her social milieu—positions her as a protofeminist figure. Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr. Collins, though pragmatic, highlights the limited alternatives available to women. As Poovey (1984, p. 150) notes, Austen exposes the paradox of a society that rewards compliance and punishes female autonomy.

Moreover, Elizabeth's boldness transcends personal rebellion—it represents a broader resistance to the idea that a woman's worth is determined by her marital prospects. Her disdain for Mr. Collins's pomposity and Lady Catherine's class-based condescension critiques the expectation that women remain passive and deferential. In this light, *Pride and Prejudice* functions not only as a romantic novel but as a subtle feminist commentary on women's right to self-determination.

Marriage, especially for families of modest means like the Bennets, was a critical tool for maintaining social and financial security. As Edward Kirkham notes, Austen repeatedly emphasizes that "women's livelihoods were frequently tethered to the marital choices available to them."

Elizabeth and Darcy's evolving relationship captures the tension between romantic ideals and societal expectations. Elizabeth's initial rejection of Darcy stems from his class pride, while Darcy must overcome his own prejudices about Elizabeth's social standing. As their characters develop, Austen presents a reimagined vision of marriage—one based on personal growth, equality, and emotional resonance rather than social convenience. Poovey argues that Darcy's transformation under Elizabeth's influence signals Austen's support for marriages based on mutual respect rather than hierarchy.

To emphasize how economic realities often compelled women to sacrifice their principles, Austen compares this with Charlotte's pragmatic marriage to Mr. Collins. Rejecting the transactional character of Regency-era courting, Elizabeth famously rebukes—"You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it" (Kenner, 1980, p. 33). Using their intelligence and conscience, the women in Austen's novels fight patriarchal norms and pave the way for independence and self-determination, as Gilbert and Gubar contend in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

ROMANTIC LOVE VS. SOCIAL EXPECTATION IN AUSTEN'S NARRATIVE VISION

Austen explores in *Pride and Prejudice* the conflict between passionate love and the strict societal norms that dictated marriage during her day. Despite the fact that many of her characters see marriage as a path to social and financial advancement, Austen stresses the importance of partnerships based on love and understanding.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship embodies this conflict. While Darcy must overcome his class preconceptions, Elizabeth violates social convention by turning off attractive proposals that are emotionally incompatible. In contrast, Charlotte Lucas acknowledges her restricted alternatives and agrees to a secure but loveless union. The "sacrifices women were made to offer in a society that granted them limited options" are reflected in Charlotte's choice, as Marilyn Butler notes.

Condescending and class-conscious, Darcy's first suggestion highlights how social stratification affects interpersonal connections. These norms are broken by Elizabeth's adamant refusal. According to Claudia Johnson, Elizabeth's answer calls into question the notion that marriage choices need to put status ahead of personal taste. The idea of a new marriage model by Jane Austen is represented in the final modification of Darcy, which is marked by humility and a new proposal based on equality.

An additional example of how societal standards impact romantic relationships is the romantic connections between Jane Bennet and Mr. Bingley. Due to Darcy and the Bennets' lower social standing, Bingley momentarily abandons Jane despite his feelings for her. His hesitancy highlights the potential for social reputation to sabotage emotional bonds. In the end, neither Jane and Bingley nor Elizabeth and Darcy find love fulfillment until they defy the expectations of their surroundings.

Austen's message is clear: while social realities cannot be ignored, they should not dictate the emotional lives of individuals. *Pride and Prejudice* champions marriages that transcend class and wealth, advocating for partnerships rooted in understanding and shared values. Elizabeth's moral independence and Darcy's willingness to change illustrate the potential for transformative love within a rigid society. As Lewis-Williams (2002, p. 89) concludes, Austen presents a compelling case for the primacy of personal integrity and emotional authenticity in the face of social conformity.

The Economic and Social Pressures of Suitability in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch*

The entailment of the Bennet estate to Mr. Collins exemplifies the legal mechanisms that left women financially dependent on marriage, as daughters were excluded from inheritance. Mrs. Bennet's obsessive matchmaking, often dismissed as comic, reflects the real economic peril her daughters face should they fail to secure financially advantageous marriages. Charlotte Lucas's decision to marry Mr. Collins, though emotionally unfulfilling, is depicted as a rational survival strategy within a society that affords women little autonomy (Nagy, 1999, p. 101).

The novel's array of female characters underscores the complexity of this predicament. Jane's relationship with Mr. Bingley, though built on mutual affection, is jeopardized by class-conscious interference—namely Caroline Bingley's disdain for the Bennet family's "low connections." In contrast, Lydia's elopement with Wickham represents a reckless disregard for social convention, resulting in a scandal that is only mitigated through Darcy's financial intervention. These divergent paths highlight the double standard of the era: while Wickham's misconduct barely tarnishes his reputation, Lydia risks complete social ruin (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 45).

Mr. Darcy's character arc—from aristocratic arrogance to moral humility—further complicates the notion of suitability. His initial proposal, laden with classist assumptions, reflects a system in which marriage is more contractual than emotional. Only after recognizing Elizabeth's moral strength does Darcy earn his place as a worthy partner (Mazzeo, 1960, p. 58). Austen reinforces this critique through Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who voices the harshest defense of class-based exclusivity. Elizabeth's refusal to yield to Lady Catherine's demands represents a subversive assertion of individual choice over inherited expectations.

George Eliot, in *Middlemarch*, engages in a parallel critique of marriage as an institution bound by economic and social constraints. Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Mr. Casaubon reflects a form of intellectual idealism undermined by gendered expectations. Her desire for meaningful partnership is thwarted by Casaubon's egotism and intellectual isolation. Much like Charlotte Lucas, Dorothea initially sacrifices personal happiness for perceived duty. However, Eliot's scope extends beyond economic pressures to explore how rigid gender roles limit women's intellectual fulfillment (Plato, 1997, p. 55).

Rosamond Vincy's relationship with Dr. Lydgate serves as a cautionary tale of misaligned expectations and materialist aspirations. The deterioration of their marriage under financial strain echoes the emptiness of Lydia and Wickham's union in Austen's work. In both novels, women's economic dependence curtails their freedom, reinforcing the authors' shared critique of a society that commodifies romantic relationships (Kenner, 1980, p. 33).

Love as a Revolutionary Ideal in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch*

The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet stands as a cautionary emblem of unions formed on superficial attraction, devoid of emotional depth or intellectual respect. Their dysfunctional relationship, marked by Mr. Bennet's passive cynicism and Mrs. Bennet's frantic social ambition, reflects the long-term consequences of mismatched unions (Kant, 1998, p. 210). Charlotte Lucas, with her pragmatic and emotionless acceptance of Mr. Collins, personifies the bleak options available to women without fortune. Her declaration—"I am not romantic, you know"—is not a critique of her character but of the patriarchal society that renders romantic fulfillment a luxury. Similarly, Lydia Bennet's hasty marriage to Wickham highlights the perils of unchecked emotion, especially when untempered by wisdom or social guidance. These contrasting examples elevate Elizabeth Bennet's stance as revolutionary: she refuses Mr. Collins's security and Darcy's initial condescension, asserting a right to emotional and intellectual compatibility over economic gain (Poovey, 1984, p. 150).

Elizabeth and Darcy's evolving relationship is revolutionary in its emphasis on personal growth and equality. Their conversations—animated, argumentative, and introspective—are a medium for mutual development. Darcy's acknowledgment of Elizabeth's critique and his transformation reflect a shift from privilege to humility: "I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun." Elizabeth, in turn, confronts her own prejudices, re-evaluating both herself and Darcy in the wake of his letter. This moment of self-reflection is a turning point not only in the plot but in Austen's ethical framework, emphasizing introspection as essential to love (Kirkham, 1997, p. 67).

Darcy's redemption through action—his discreet assistance in Lydia's marriage and his revised, humble proposal—redefines "suitability" as a merit earned, not inherited. Their eventual union balances passion and pragmatism, forging a new vision of marriage as partnership rather than arrangement (Jones, 2004, p. 110).

Similarly, in *Middlemarch*, Eliot proposes love as a redemptive and transformative ideal. Dorothea Brooke's final union with Will Ladislaw mirrors Elizabeth's with Darcy in both defiance and development. Ladislaw lacks wealth or status, yet his moral integrity and shared intellectual values offer Dorothea the kind of partnership she initially sought in Casaubon. Her decision to marry Ladislaw is a deliberate act of resistance against societal expectations, aligning with Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Collins and her eventual acceptance of Darcy based on merit rather than status (Mazzeo, 1960, p. 58). Both Austen and Eliot use dysfunctional marriages—Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Casaubon and Dorothea, Rosamond and Lydgate—to demonstrate the failures of unions built on convenience, vanity, or social ambition. In contrast, they champion marriages rooted in mutual respect, intellectual parity, and moral growth. These ideals, though progressive for their time, reflect a shared vision: that love, when anchored in equality and emotional honesty, is a revolutionary force capable of dismantling oppressive social norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Regency England, women's financial security was largely contingent upon marriage, a reality shaped by entailment laws that denied them the right to inherit property. This socio-legal paradigm is profoundly criticized in *Pride and Prejudice*, which portrays marriage as a patriarchal survival strategy rather than just a personal choice. For a long time,

academics have examined how Jane Austen challenges these conventions, concentrating on the relationship between gender, class, and economic power.

According to Claudia Johnson (1988), marriage in Austen's books is a type of "economic transaction," with Charlotte Lucas's practical acceptance of Mr. Collins serving as the clearest example. Johnson contends that these partnerships are a reflection of the restricted agency available to women in a culture where material gain frequently takes precedence over individual fulfillment. In a similar vein, Vivien Jones (2004) places Austen's story in the framework of the "marriage market," in which social and familial pressures regularly compelled women to put security ahead of love. The Bennet sisters' financial precarity, particularly as a result of the Longbourn estate's entailment, serves as a metaphor for the structural exclusion of women.

By examining Austen's engagement with eighteenth-century feminist ideas, Margaret Kirkham (2000) expands on Park Honan's (1987) connections between Austen's personal experiences and the themes of her novels, highlighting the author's acute awareness of the societal constraints placed on women. Kirkham emphasizes how Austen subtly critiques contemporary gender roles and social hierarchies through characters like Elizabeth Bennet, who insists on marrying for compatibility and respect rather than convenience.

The Madwoman in the Attic by Gilbert and Gubar (1979) offers a more comprehensive framework for analyzing Austen's writing. They contend that female writers of the nineteenth century, such as Austen and George Eliot, had to choose between adopting the passive persona of the "angel" or rebelling as the "madwoman." Elizabeth's firm rejection of transactional marriage and her quest for a connection based on mutual recognition resonate with these psychological distinctions, which are created by patriarchal ideals.

This study broadens the conversation by presenting marriage as a location of ideological opposition as well as a survival strategy, whereas earlier research has mostly concentrated on the economic and social effects of marriage in Austen's day. It becomes clear that Elizabeth Bennet was a protofeminist since she refused to fit in, whether it was by opposing Lady Catherine de Bourgh or by rejecting Mr. Collins.

Her disobedience reflects Austen's wider criticism of a society that treats women like bargaining chips in a patriarchal economy and breaks with the normal feminine passivity. By combining the viewpoints of Gilbert & Gubar, Johnson, and Kirkham, this analysis presents *Pride and Prejudice* as a work that not only illustrates the restrictions placed on women but also quietly promotes a rethinking of marriage as a partnership based on equality, respect, and individual agency.

CONCLUSION

By focusing on Elizabeth Bennet, a woman who rejects to be marry for pragmatic reasons, Austen offers an substitute marital ideal founded on intellectual fairness, respect for other people and personal ethics. In the novel, individual agency is portrayed as a legitimate counterforce to patriarchal norms. Elizabeth's refusals of Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy's first proposal further challenge the prevailing views about gender of the day.

The conflicting choices made by characters such as Lydia Bennet and Charlotte Lucas highlight the vulnerable status of women in society. While Lydia's impetuous elopement threatens to bring shame to her whole family, Charlotte's measured acceptance of Mr. Collins, despite her emotional lack, guarantees her financial security. These similar stories highlight the painful repercussions of breaking from social norms and highlight the restricted alternatives open to women. Austen's vision of a marriage founded on respect, love, and shared ideals rather than position is embodied by Elizabeth and Darcy's final union, which is only possible when both characters experience personal growth.

Middlemarch by George Eliot expands on Austen's criticism by showing how women's liberty is still restricted by economic and intellectual constraints in the Victorian age. Inspired by idealism and bound by gender norms, Dorothea Brooke's catastrophic marriage to Mr. Casaubon is reminiscent of Charlotte Lucas's concession. However, as Elizabeth and Darcy's connection shows, Dorothea's final relationship with Will Ladislav shows that alliances based on intellectual and emotional equality are the path to genuine fulfillment.

Eliot's work thus expands the feminist undercurrent of Austen's critique, illustrating how marriage operates as both a personal decision and a site of social and ideological struggle.

When *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch* are read together, they show how marriage is a microcosm of larger social injustices. Love is transformed into a radical ideal in both books, an act of defiance against the inflexibility of class institutions and the commercialization of women. The argument emphasizes how Austen and Eliot support redefining marriage as a transformational partnership founded on liberty, mutual progress, and emotional truth rather than as a societal obligation or economic need. Elizabeth Bennet's decisions are appropriately framed as protofeminist via the lenses of academics like Claudia Johnson and Gilbert & Gubar, transforming her path into both a personal victory and a larger challenge to the deeply ingrained conventions of her day.

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