



Marriage money and society in the novels of Jane Austen

V. Manimozhi ¹

Abstract

Austen was concerned with social issues and wrote her social critique into her novels can be seen in both her personal correspondence and her fiction. Judith Newton in her article "Pride and Prejudice: Power, Fantasy, and Subversion in Jane Austen," points out that Austen's letters provide numerous examples of the inequality of power and privilege between men and women in eighteenth and nineteenth century England. One of the reasons Austen's world charms us is because it appears to follow stricter rules than our own, setting limits on behavior. There are precise forms of introduction and address, conventions for 'coming out' into society (meaning a young girl's official entry into society and therefore her marriage ability), for paying and returning social visits, even for mixing with different social ranks. An investigation into the social critique present in *Pride and Prejudice* could easily fall into the realms of Marxist criticism, concerning itself with issues of social class and struggle. David D. Hume's "Money in Jane Austen," for example, focuses on the distinctions of wealth and social class and the "grimly realistic depiction of the dismal position".

Keywords

Marriage money, Society.

¹ Department of English, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research, Selaiyur, Chennai-600073, Tamil Nadu, India.

Article History: Received 01 October 2020; Accepted 10 December 2020

©2020 MJM.

Contents

1	Introduction	2365
2	Economy changes	2366
3	Cultural changes	2366
4	Marriage for Money	2367
5	Conclusion	2368
	References	2368

1. Introduction

Charlotte Lucas is, perhaps, the best example in *Pride and Prejudice* of a philosophy of romance as a business as well as one of the best examples of Austen's social criticism. Austen's, strong female leads pull the audience directly into the action. The reader finds herself in the story, for "who can resist believing that she, too, possessed the 'fine eyes' of Elizabeth? Or the common sense of Elinor?"

However, by giving her heroines desirable traits, such as beauty, intelligence, and wit, Austen combines the push for social change with other pleasing qualities. In order to understand, Austen's critiques of social norms, it is necessary to look at her 18th century world as a function of historical

perspective and cultural situation.

Austen's opinions on this inequality; it is no coincidence that the majority of Austen's fictions begin with *Pride and Prejudice*, the loss of the Dashwoods' family home in *Sense and Sensibility*. Claudia Johnson in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* points out that, by outlining these inequalities in fiction, and "by opting...to retain the same preoccupations as her more conspicuously political contemporaries, without, however alluding as they did to the topical considerations which had originally animated them, Austen was able not to depoliticize her work—for the political implication of her work is implicit in the subject matter itself—but rather to depoliticize it"

When discussing Jane's affection for Mr. Bingley, Charlotte is full of practical advice for securing a man's interest (though how a woman so insightful about how to gain a man's affection is still unmarried at this point is an intriguing dilemma): "in nine cases out of ten, a woman had better shew more affection than she feels," she begins (Austen PP15, emphasis original).

Set in a society where marrying for wealth and social status is more common than marrying for love and suitability, Elizabeth makes the strong choice to wait for love even knowing it may never come. Elizabeth is too quick to judge Darcy

Or, Elizabeth's first impressions are wrong.

Getting married is the goal of the females in this book. Mr. Collins' best quality, and his greatest appeal to any woman of sense, is how easily he is manipulated by powerful women.

Although Lydia is both young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, which does get her into trouble, her real fault, which causes her family much grief, is selfishness.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates many kinds of marriages, but the reader is left with the impression that marriages of love and suitability are the kinds of marriages to be wished for.

2. Economy changes

In particular, the thesis is perceived as representing the dominant middle classes of English society at this time, and pre-eminent in this culture was the ideal of 'the individual'. This ideal had been evolving in political and religious ways in the seventeenth century and economic ways in the eighteenth century.

Austen's books were published in a time when England was shifting its economic focus from an agrarian and landed wealth base to a more industrial cash economy. Austen inherited a century of economic shifts in British culture that would solid the domestic sphere as the "woman's sphere," an ideologically sturdy concept that made domains of the public and private seem natural. The ideology of the women's sphere mandated that women had control over domestic responsibilities, such as moral and spiritual guidance of children, while men had control over public and political matters.

Many women enjoyed at least some level of equality. However, as men began to leave the home to pursue other avenues of income, "unpaid domestic work lost visibility," and masculine work that was "public, divorced from the home, and salaried" gained more and more value. This new ideology surfaced as Austen was writing relevant issues that emerged during this period, such as economic inequalities between men and women are often addressed her novels.

Economic changes also meant women had to find a new position in comparison to the changing social order. Austen uses the situations of the characters to comment on cultural shifts that are occurring at her moment in history, shifts that leave women more vulnerable at the same time that the ideology of the domestic sphere insists they are "safe" at home under the care of a loving father or husband. Through her plotlines, Austen begs to differ, and paternal failure to provide is a common theme throughout her canon. On the critical level, this failure of the domestic sphere is upsetting because it indicates a large spread and invasive failure of functionality.

Several characters have to cope with the problems of employment that arise from the shift to a more industrial economy. John Dashwood, who inherits the Dashwood family home, a family Austen ironically notes has "been long settled in Sussex," is ready to turn landed wealth to spendable cash in *Sense and Sensibility*.

The most disastrous financial calamity of Austen's lifetime was the economic crash that followed the Battle of Waterloo and The Bleak Age depression that resulted. Set just prior to Waterloo, appears to be speculating on the cause of the crash and on who will be bankrupt and who will survive and even prosper in spite of the financial debacle.

Between 1790 and 1814, wholesale prices doubled (Ash-ton 90), while wages for agricultural laborers fell from around 15 shillings a week to 6 shillings, slightly more than one third of their former pay (Murray 85). The 1815 Housekeeper's Receipt Book referred to the economy as "the present critical period, and domestic life are so generally felt" (245). Shopkeepers wanted to sell, and the public wished to buy, but the goods in the shops were too expensive and consumers too impoverished, so shopkeepers and their customers expanded further into the world of creative finance, such as bartering and credit on account (Olsen 247). England's rural communities were being forced to become economically self-reliant.

This is not just a problem within a novel, but rather a truth of society that needs correcting. In fact, the failure of the domestic sphere even goes so far as to imply that a male-dominated structure may not be the only answer.

3. Cultural changes

Austen's novels are part of the beauty of reading. Without the challenges presented in Austen's contradictory texts, the reading would quickly become boring. Cultural progression is rarely straightforward, and the tension of Austen's novels reflects this.

The ideology of the women's sphere mandated that women had control over domestic responsibilities, such as moral and spiritual guidance of children, while men had control over public and political matters (Newton, 890). This new ideology surfaced as Austen was writing, and therefore relevant issues that emerged during this period, such as economic inequalities between men and women, are often addressed in her novels. Several characters have to cope with the problems of employment that arise from the shift to a more industrial economy.

For example, John Dashwood, who inherits the Dashwood family home, a family Austen ironically notes has "been long settled in Sussex," is ready to turn landed wealth to spendable cash in *Sense and Sensibility* (3). The women of the Dashwood family find themselves at the mercy of men because they cannot participate in economic transactions, which fall outside of the domestic sphere. Austen shows us through Elizabeth Bennet how limited the role of women was in Victorian society, with their primary goal in life being to find a suitable marriage partner. "

The reader realizes that imperfections in Austen's world may be a negative shadow of her own realities. Cultural changes, such as the shift from an agrarian to a cash economy, are often reinforced by literature. Economic changes also meant women had to find a new position in comparison to the changing social order. The only female vocation addressed by



Austen in her novels is that of governess, a fate that haunts the Dashwood women and that is directly addressed through characters.

“Pride and Prejudice” has risen to prominence and remained one of the most popular and treasured examples of human culture and writing. Its form and presentation tends to change with the times, but it remains an essential part of the literary cultures of nearly all societies around the world.

Elizabeth defends Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* by making allowances for his economic situation: “handsome young men must have something to live on, as well as the plain”.

The first chapter in *Sense and sensibility* acquaints the audience with the full financial situation of the Dashwood family. The truth of the matter is that the Dashwood women have no fortune to rely on, and their brother, who “was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed,” will not be providing for them. The ideology of the women’s sphere is based on safety in the home for the female, but for the Dashwood women this has obviously proven false.

Austen does away with formalities and discloses the truths immediately: the Dashwoods need somewhere to live, but society has made it impossible to secure housing without a male representative. However, an educated audience sees the irony here: the natural order is nothing short of outrageous. Why should having a father with little inheritance make the Dashwood women into social problems?

Pleasure readers will also recognize the failings of John Dashwood because he negates the natural order that should occur in the romantic fairy-tale world. The sheer number of personalities created within a span of six novels allows Austen to show characters on both sides of the argument. While this means Austen can remove herself from direct argument, it also provides a platform for complex argumentation.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, however, this formula takes on another facet through the character of Mrs. Jennings. As a wealthy widow, Mrs. Jennings holds the unique position of being both female and independent. A character that is ultimately making the wrong choices can have redeeming moments in which the audience understands life is not only black and white.

Although they are truly happy, they are not “quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a-year would supply them with the comforts of life”.

Eventually a change of heart in Mrs. Ferrars allows them to marry under more agreeable economic circumstances, but the message is not to be forgotten.

Ironically, the widening gap between social norms and idyllic marriages serves to close the gap that some say exists between critical and pleasure readers. Whether admiration for Elizabeth springs from a critical or pleasurable approach, readers come to the same conclusion about the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*. She is woman at her finest, and all others should be lucky to rise to her level.

World-famous authors, such as Austen and Shakespeare, are an important part of the cultural memory of literature in general. They belong to a group of authors whose texts, have an important place in cultural memory: two different, but certainly interdependent, aspects.

Austen illustrates that women can marry for passionate love while also having the many other securities of a home and wealth. By the end of her novel, it is clear that Darcy and Elizabeth not only have a clear mind in their discretion on whom to marry, but they also find a loving partner. While there are seemingly successfully marriages through the characters of Lydia and Charlotte, these characters do not experience the same amount of passion and understanding.

Another way to find adventure and keep an active mind is to read. Austen promoted reading, which is evident in the quotes used from her novels regarding reading.

The quotes pertaining to reading also tie it to education and self-improvement: “A fondness for reading, properly directed, must be an education in itself”.

Reading enables Austen’s heroines to interpret their worlds with greater accuracy and assurance. While the pleasure reader may not have the same extensive background, her more optimistic or idealized notions about the nature of marriage will be offended by the differences between the ideal and the real conditions of life in *Sense and Sensibility*.

4. Marriage for Money

Marriage is an important part of the functioning of the high society in which Austen’s characters live. It determines who will inherit family fortunes and properties, and is of particular importance to women, whose futures depend almost entirely on the prospects of the men they marry. Nonetheless, while people in the novel often marry for reasons other than love (Willoughby, for example, marries Miss Grey just for money), Elinor and Marianne ultimately do marry for love.

For Marianne, though, this means redefining her notion of love and allowing herself to develop affections for Colonel Brandon, even though she did not love him at first sight. The novel also shows the importance of love through a consideration of family. The bonds between Elinor, Marianne, Margaret, and their mother stand strong through all the difficulties they endure and at the end of the novel they maintain a happily close relationship. Thus, while marriage may often be more a matter of economics than of love, the examples of Marianne and Elinor show that it doesn’t necessarily have to be this way. And, insofar as marriage brings families together and creates new family units, it can create strong and lasting bonds of familial love.

Pride and Prejudice, Austen consents to conservative myths, but only in order to possess them, so that the institutions they vindicate can bring the fulfillment of happiness.”

The woman brings to the marriage becomes part of the husband’s family fortune: He gains full **ownership** over the entire dowry including the part settled on the wife. Consequently, although Fanny has adequate means settled on her,



she is not independently wealthy. Still, she is quite comfortable in meeting her personal needs and has a large capital to pass on to her son. This is the same way that John received his initial fortune: from the dowry amount settled on his mother by the terms of her marriage contract.

The plot of *Sense and Sensibility* revolves around marriage begins with Elinor and Marianne as unmarried but eligible young women and only concludes when both of them settle into marriages. Engagements, possible matches, and marriages are the main concern of most the novel's characters and the subject of much of their conversation.

However, marriage isn't all about love in the world of *Sense and Sensibility*. In fact, it's often more about wealth, uniting families, and gaining social standing. Moreover, it's often families and parents who attempt to decide engagements as much as any individual husband or wife. Mrs. Ferrars, for example, cares only about her sons marrying wealthy, upper-class women. She does not care whether Edward loves Lucy and cuts all ties with him when she learns of their engagement. For her, the decision of whom her sons will marry is as much hers as theirs, because their marriages are more about their whole family than about their own individual desires.

Austen's novel suggest that marrying for money is a mistake"), but you can phrase it in terms of what Austen was saying about her culture and time. One of the themes in this book is the way different women react to men and see their relationships with them. Austen was satirizing her society as much as anything else.

Marriage may have been a popular idea in society as well as in her own writings, but it was not a topic that Jane Austen had personal knowledge of because she remained single throughout her entire life. Despite her disconnect from an actual marriage, she was very observant of others around her, and offered wise advice on marriage to her loved ones, specifically in letters to her niece Fanny. There were a few periods in Austen's life when she came close to marrying, but she never made that trip down the aisle. In spite of the many consequences, Austen still chose to value love and affection over ideas of comfort, convenience, and ultimately, financial security.

Austen utilizes the marriage plot in her novels to exhibit the traditional roles of husband and wife. She gave her confidence to the audience to face the real life problems of economy and marriage. She also inherited the form, where a heroine's ultimate goal was to marry the ideal man and live happily ever after, from previous romance novelists. She purposely used the marriage plot in her novels because she knew what was at stake. Austen uses irony may have been established with the intent of protecting women, the actualities of the system are often more harmful than helpful. Her novels attract the audiences because it points out undeniable truths. Eighteenth century social structure emphasized romantic relationships, or one's ability to marry, over all others. The power of such relationships resides in sex or gender relations rather than in any sort of value system. By writing about sibling-like

marriages, however, Austen emphasizes ethical and spiritual beliefs.

5. Conclusion

Elizabeth and Darcy both benefit from their relationship – Elizabeth clearly gains materially, but what is most important is that both she and Darcy gain moral understanding. This sets the most modern romance novels and their film counterparts in which men are routinely presented as the good to be consumed either through their physical attractiveness or emotional perfection.

She argues, the marriage market allows for women to gamble on their husbands: "Rather than the objects exchanged; women in the marriage market are gambling in an economy of chance, contemplating how big a risk to take, how to control the outcome of their wagers, hoping for a big win and far too aware of the losses possible" (Richard 157).

References

- [1] Frey, Jennifer, Jane Austen: a Love Story, *The Washington Post*, (2004)
- [2] Lloyd, Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (1973) 321-38.
- [3] Literary Imagination, New Haven Yale, (1979), The Netherlands, *Brill Rodopi and Hoeti Publishing*, (2016)
- [4] Jane Austen, A Life, New York: Random House, Inc.
- [5] W. Austen Leigh, R. A. Austen Leigh, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, New Delhi, Affiliated East-West Press Pvt Ltd, (2009)
- [6] Gorham, Deborah, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, *Oxon: Routledge*, (1982).
- [7] Jane Austen, *The World of Her Novels*, London: *Frances Lincoln Limited*

ISSN(P):2319 – 3786

Malaya Journal of Matematik

ISSN(O):2321 – 5666

