The Attitude Towards Marriage and Money in Pride and Prejudice

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen, the most prominent nineteenth century English female novelist, describes vividly the value of marriage and money of female at that time in her six novels. Especially her magnum opus *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) demonstrates it with the most powerful and exhilarating extension, which lays a strong foundation of being the widely recommended works ever since it has been published. This paper concentrates on the four different types of marriage, specifically revealing the differentiation between them. What’s more, it also explores the social causes of different phenomenon in depth in order to seek for a wider social vision out of Austen’s small-scale and low-angel writing.

Introduction

As one of the most famous English novelist, Jane Austen (1775-1817) was born and raised in a small village of Hampshire called Steventon. She was the seventh of eight children of Mr. and Mrs. Austen. She was home-schooled and stayed with her family for a lifetime. Austen was so famous that “the recent phenomenon of ‘Austenmania’—manifesting itself in the wake of the various costume dramas of the mid-1990s and sustained through Anglo-American criticism—has been extensively addressed by various conferences and publications”. (Anthony and Southam, 2007, p.1)

Pride and Prejudice, probably the most popular of Austen’s finished novels, was also, in a sense, the first to be composed. The original version, *First Impressions*, was completed by 1797, but was rejected for publication—no copy of the original has survived. The work was rewritten around 1812 and published in 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*. The final form must have been a thorough rewriting of the original effort, for it is representative of the mature Austen. Moreover, the story clearly takes place in the early nineteenth century rather than in the late eighteenth century.

Marriage is an important theme throughout Austen’s novels because the institution played an important role in the lives of her primary subject: middle and upper class women. The marital institution in England during the late eighteenth century favored a

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companionate marriage over marriage arranged by parents to advance the wealth and status of their family. According to Lawrence Stone, this resulted from changing ideas about the importance of emotional satisfaction in marriage. Rather than teaching a view of the Bible that emphasized men as God’s representatives as the head of the family, English preachers began teaching a view of gender equality in marriage during the seventeenth century, which contributed to the changing emphasis on marriage and family relationships during Austen’s lifetime. However, some of the changes in the marriage relationship created some problems for the family, which Austen emphasizes throughout her novels. Stone clearly describes the problems in the upper class families that resulted when wives had a large number of servants to manage the care of the household and even their children.

For the character selection of Austen’s works, it is critical to underline the material factor that income and inhibits matter. “A ‘good’ marriage in the society Jane Austen depicts, is always one which enhances status, and status is primarily a matter of wealth.” (Christopher, 2005, p.121) In Austen’s England, marriage was truly a lifetime commitment. It was extremely difficult even for a very wealthy and highly placed aristocratic man to obtain a divorce, and for the rest of the British population, it was impossible. If a couple did separate (with or without a divorce), the husband had full rights to the children and any money that the wife earned or inherited) belonged automatically, by law, to the husband. (Teachman, 2008, p.144) Therefore, acquiring “skills” of marriage became exceedingly important.

This paper concentrates on Austen’s and her novel figures’ attitudes towards marriage and money in Pride and Prejudice, which can mainly be divided into four parts. The first part is the background of Austen and her Pride and Prejudice, in this part, obviously will analyze the personal biographical information and her novel. The second part is concerning the literature review of the study of Austen, from which we can see her great success and contribution to the current literature and culture state. The third part is the major part of this paper that explores the four different types of marriage in Pride and Prejudice, which specifically are Collins and Charlotte’s marriage, Lydia and Wickham’s marriage, Jane and Mr. Bingley’s marriage as well as Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage. By the analysis of the four types of marriage concerning different views towards money, we can gain a better understanding of what Austen tried to convey. The last part is to continuously explore the view of love and marriage in depth, which based on money and benefit, as well as true love.

The background of Austin and her Pride and Prejudice

The author’s background is always critical because it profoundly affects his/her attitude towards what he/she tries to convey. This is also suitable for putting it in Austen’s case. However, according to the current study of Austen, it is universally acknowledged that her biographical information is insufficient.

We know that Jane Austen was born in Hampshire, a small village of Kingston that is located in the north of England. She was thought as a beautiful, talented and witty middle class woman. There were nine members of her family, her parents, five brothers and an elder sister. We also know that the only literary figure in her circle was Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges (1762-1837), who was also the brother of Jane Austen’s most intimate friend Mrs. Anna Lefroy’s brother.
Jan Fergus pointed out that “biographical information on Austen is famously scarce”, and “we must rely for information about her life on her brother Henry’s short ‘Biographical Notice’ published in 1818” (Janet Todd, 2005, p.3). Kathryn Sutherland also emphasised this by saying that “… in Jane Austen’s case the evidence is also scarce. She was surrounded by family, at every waking and almost sleeping moment, yet apparently they saw so little. Family makes, inherits, and transmits what we know as her life; it is only familial”. (Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite, 2008, p.15)

The bankruptcy of her brother, Henry, sudden and premature bereavements, the dangers undergone by her sailor brothers in the long wars, were other stresses on herself and her family. She knew, in fact, as much about the sad and anxious happenings of life as most people with a reasonably secure background do. Most importantly, such events are self-evident that her mental horizons must have been broader than usual, instead of more constrained. (Christopher Gillie, 2005, p.24)

Many readers consider Austen a writer of romances for she wrote novels about young people who get married. However, an attentive reader cannot help concluding that “her attitude to marriage is thoroughly ironic”. (Marie N. Sorbo, 2014, p.231) Marriage becomes a kind of trade. In the marriage market, the breach between different couple due to their resulting different social standing. “Match” is the key word, and the key idea is trading female beauty for male money. Therefore, the seemed to be romantic plots turned out to be ironic. Austen comes close to giving us a disillusioned dismissal of romantic love, as if the narrator is teasing us that she knows we have come to the book for romance, but romance does not exist, only speculation. (Sorbo, 2014, p.237) A part of the reason why she took the aspect of speculation towards marriage is closely related to her 42 years long single life, which is a tremendous tragedy but lead to her vigorous motivation of writing the six renowned novels about love and marriage.

The only authentic portrait of Jane Austen, a crude and unfinished pencil sketch by her sister Cassandra, was thought far too ugly by her surviving relatives in 1870, and a softer, more elegant version was commissioned. It is this prettified portrait, and other versions of it, that has dominated also twentieth- and twenty-first-century publications about her, in spite of having been made by an artist who never met her, half a century after her death.

Just due to the lack of autobiographical information, we notice that the artist has not only finished an unfinished portrait, but has dressed her up in more elegant clothes, more silk and more frills, and changed her body language and the expression of her face, so that she has lost the skeptical, teasing look, the crossed arms and perhaps impatiently drumming fingers, and instead poses calmly and expressionlessly, with an almost childlike innocence.

Above all, it is imperative to emphasize Austen’s autobiographical information in order to get close enough to see her attitude towards marriage and money. And there is no doubt that her own background does affect her attitude towards marriage and money.

In the novel Pride and Prejudice, although Mr. Bennet owns sufficient property which offers him enough income, the fact that he has no son leads to Mrs. Bennet’s anxiety about not having abundant money to keep their comfortable life. “The interrelated issues of financial security and marriage are, therefore, at the heart of the novel.” (Teachman, 2008, p.2)
The Four Marriages and the Revealed Concept of Love and Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

This part is the main text of this paper, which analyzes the four types of marriages and the concept of love and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*. What we can conclude from the text is that: the most important figure in the novel is Elizabeth; the secondary figures are Mr. & Mrs. Bennet, Darcy, Lydia, Jane and Collins; the insignificant figures are Lady Catherine, Wickham and Bingley. As we have mentioned before, there are four types of marriage in the text: Collins and Charlotte’s marriage, Lydia and Wickham’s marriage, Jane and Mr. Bingley’s marriage, as well as Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the first part is the marriage of Charlotte and Collins, their marriage is lucky and natural. Although Charlotte’s marriage of convenience to Mr. Collins is criticized by Elizabeth, her situation and marriage is much more realistic than is Elizabeth’s for nineteenth-century Britain. Elizabeth’s story is a work of romantic fiction, but Charlotte’s is a mirror of reality. Even though Elizabeth cannot understand Charlotte’s reasons for marrying Mr. Collins, she does respect Charlotte’s sound management of her household and her ability to see as little of Mr. Collins as possible. Whereas Elizabeth’s relationship with Darcy was what Austen’s female readers may dream of, Charlotte’s marriage to Mr. Collins was the actual life they would most likely have to face.

Charlotte believes that compatibility of personality is a matter of chance, but she recognizes that she desires a marriage of material advantage more than risking a marriage seeking companionship, as Elizabeth desires. However, Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel, passes on the opportunity to make the safe match her friend accepts, and by holding out receives the opportunity to marry a man who is both wealthier and more personally attractive than Mr. Collins. However, we readers and maybe the author are satisfied with Collins and Charlotte’s marriage for it is real and natural.

The second type of marriage is Lydia and Wickham’s marriage. In short, their marriage is emotional and immature because their love is based on sex and vanity. Lydia is the Bennet daughter who most takes after her mother. Lydia’s misbehavior stems from a lack of parental supervision on the parts of both her mother and father. Her marriage to Wickham represents a relationship that is based on physical gratification. Lydia does not think, she simply acts upon her impulses, and that impulsiveness, combined with negligent parents, leads to her near ruin.

A charming and well-spoken young man, Wickham uses his charisma to insinuate himself into the lives of others. His behavior throughout the novel shows him to be a gambler who has no scruples about running up his debts and then running away. His mercenary nature regarding women is first noted by Mrs. Gardiner, who comments on his sudden interest in Miss King. Like Elizabeth, he possesses an ability to read people; however, he uses this knowledge to his advantage. When he finds that Elizabeth dislikes Darcy, for example, he capitalizes on her dislike to gain her sympathies.

The oldest and most beautiful of the Bennet daughters, Jane has a good heart and a gentle nature. As Elizabeth’s confidant, Jane helps to keep her sister’s tendency to be judgmental in check by offering positive interpretations of negative situations. Jane’s desire to see only the best in people becomes rather extreme at times, as in her disbelief that Wickham could be a liar, but she is not so entrenched in her world view that her opinion cannot be changed. Take, for example, her relationship with Caroline Bingley. When Jane finally recognizes Miss Bingley’s insincerity, she stops making excuses for
her and does not pursue the friendship. However, when she and Miss Bingley become sisters-in-law, Jane’s good nature causes her to receive Miss Bingley’s friendly overtures with more responsiveness than Miss Bingley deserves.

As the main theme of the novel, the fourth marriage is concerning Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage. As what has been pointed out that Pride and Prejudice abounds with examples of unhappy marriages, but Elizabeth finds a reason sufficient to induce her to matrimony. Although Elizabeth Bennet does not have a very positive view of marriage at the beginning of the novel, she recognizes that she needs to marry because she is not independently wealthy. Elizabeth is shocked when she hears that Charlotte Lucas has decided to marry Mr. Collins, even though she barely knows him, but her friend chooses to make the best out of an unfortunate situation.

Mr. Bennet is very disappointed in his choice of spouse, which is a factor in his cynical perspective on the world; however, Charlotte enters her marriage with the realization that Mr. Collins will not make her happy with his personality, but she can choose to be happy with the comfortable house of which she becomes mistress and the stable position she achieves through her marriage. It is possible to see that Austen is advocating in Pride and Prejudice that happiness in any circumstance, married or single, is a matter of choice. Charlotte Lucas, on the other hand, asserts, “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” (25). It appears from her conversation with Elizabeth that Charlotte believes that compatibility of personality is a matter of chance, but she recognizes that she desires a marriage of material advantage more than risking a marriage seeking companionship, as Elizabeth desires. However, Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel, passes on the opportunity to make the safe match her friend accepts, and by holding out receives the opportunity to marry a man who is both wealthier and more personally attractive than Mr. Collins.

While it appears that Austen does not endorse the socially sanctioned reasons for marrying that both Mrs. Elton and Charlotte Lucas accept, she provides her heroine, Elizabeth, with a much more socially advantageous marriage than her friend. However, not everyone is pleased with Mr. Darcy’s choice of spouse. Lady Catherine makes it very clear that she is unhappy with the choice and believes that Elizabeth is beneath Mr. Darcy socially. Elizabeth appears to be very happy in her relationships with her natal family.

Although Elizabeth Bennet is very close to her father and sister Jane, tolerates even the annoying members of her family with good humor. She is particularly critical of her parents’ loveless marriage and is very cautious of entering into a marriage herself. She understands that society does not provide her with the opportunity to support herself through a profession even if she had the training for one. Importantly, she also does not have a fortune to allow her to live independently of a man. Thus, she ultimately concedes to societal pressure to marry and is rewarded for her caution with a very good match. Elizabeth’s nature can be seen in the narrator’s comment:

If gratitude and esteem are good for foundations of affection, Elizabeth’s change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill-success might perhaps authorize her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment. (Todd, 2005, p.74)
Conclusion

All in all, this paper concentrates on the analysis of the four types of marriages in Pride and Prejudice from the perspective of money. We can see that Austen reconfirms the family through the hints that children are to follow as a result of the heroines’ marriages. Mary Burgan believes that the fact Austen does not follow her heroines into marriage and show them as mother demonstrates her hesitance to continue the family as a societal norm. She contends that the crucial explanation must be that Jane Austen did not see the family as a solution to moral and social problems.

To elaborate: is Pride and Prejudice a romance about a pretty girl capturing a rich and handsome husband against all odds? Or is it an ironic novel about the miseries of the marriage market and the fallacies of the human mind? One of the most endurally popular novels in the whole of English literature, it has been read for both these reasons. And film-makers as well as critics have responded very differently to the romantic and ironic alternative (or perhaps supplementary) readings.

One reason for the confusion lies in plot: Austen unmistakably exploits the romance plot of courtship. All her novels are about young people falling in love and marrying in the end. The titles of some of her juvenile stories—“Frederic and Elfrida”, “Jack and Alice”, “Edgar and Emma”, “Henry and Eliza”—reveal that she turned to this dominant genre of her time. But once we start reading one of her texts, we see that in this authorship, the inherited plot is treated with irony.

By analyzing what is above may help us understand the advantages and disadvantages in a marriage, and it will benefit us of learning the importance of true love.

REFERENCES