

The importance of marriage in pride and prejudice

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



Set in late 18th Century England, *Pride and Prejudice* depicts the search of women for the 'inevitable' husband and of a male dominant society, within which no woman can be considered truly successful without the assistance of a man of 'good fortune'. Austen addresses the common ideals of society throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, such as the monetary values of marriage and the need of a woman to find security for herself and her future children. The opening line of the novel reads 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. Austen not only uses this line to introduce a key theme of the novel, but also hints at the underlining themes of the novel and at the irony and satire due to follow.

This is also a use of proleptic irony, Elizabeth is considered as a woman who seeks true love, rather than a marriage based on the fortune of the male; however, upon seeing Pemberley Austen presents Elizabeth as considering money for the first time, the sheer size of the house impresses her and thus she cannot disregard its appeal. During both the 18th and 19th centuries marriage was regarded both a social and biological destiny for woman across all the classes.

Austen portrays this belief through Charlotte Lucas whom after gaining some composure considers " Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for a well-educated young woman of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want" (Austen, J. 1853: 22). This amplifies the importance of the rejection of marriage by Elizabeth to Mr Collins, whom by the opinions of society at the <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-marriage-in-pride-and-prejudice/>

time, the natural reaction for a woman in her situation would have been to accept.

For she cannot afford to be overly choosy when it comes to marriage - earlier on in the novel Austen describes Mr Bennett cautiously going through the accounts of the estate, in which we are indirectly informed that the accounts are not looking positive. This marriage rejection is also relevant to the life of Austen, who we have learnt rejected a marriage proposal after overnight mentation. Marriage during the 18th and 19th centuries would be a wholefamilyaffair, and thus the effects of a marriage proposal or rejection would be felt throughout the generations.

Families would look to ally themselves with other families of similar rank, hence marriage between cousins was common practice. This would ensure that both wealth and property would remain within the same family for generations via entailment, thus explaining the disappointment of Mrs Bennett upon finding out of the rejection of marriage between Elizabeth and Mr Collins. Moving to their husbands' establishment would often be the only possible freedom available to girls, though not to be confused in any way with independence, which girls at the time would be lacking.

This was another reason that leading families would ally with one another, or often marry within - a family would never wish for their daughter(s) to be associated with a family of lower social value, and thus a smaller estate, or require any future financial support from them - this dependence would grow increasingly expensive and as Austen presents the Bennetts as a family with

some financial troubles there is no question as to why she identifies the need for the daughters to be married off.

With marriage being the ultimate goal for any young girl within *Pride and Prejudice*, events leading up to any such event are considered significant. For example, any balls or dances and the partnerships which develop within these; any 'chance' encounters, such as meetings within town.

Marriage would be a key theme of conversation within social circles of girls beyond puberty, the legal age for marriage was 16 (or the age of 'coming out'), it was much desired by the age of 18 and would threaten to be beyond availability for girls of 20 or older. Girls would worry about being considered an 'old maid' beyond the age of 20 which explains the desire that Austen presents Charlotte to have in 'catching' Mr Collins and the warning that Mr Collins gives Elizabeth, who upon rejection of Mr Collins' proposal is already 21.

Though the legal age of marriage in England was 16, due to the Marriage Act of 1853, it is assumed that Lydia and Wickham elope to Gretna Green in order to complete their marriage, rather than be living in sin and thus have society look down on them as an unlawfully acquainted couple - in Scotland was not necessary to live in each others' company for a minimum of 3 weeks prior to marriage like it was in England, thus allowing for an instant marriage.

Much like the partnership between Darcy and Elizabeth we are made to wait for them to be partners in dance, it is a recurring theme throughout the novel that the longer the time period before the first dance between a couple

the longer the time period will also be before they are romantically interested in one another. " To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love" (Austen, J. 1853: 6), thus the reluctance of Darcy to participate in dancing earlier on in the novel marks his limited social availability.

However he becomes more available to Elizabeth later on in the novel as Austen presents him as someone whom is interested in being acquainted with Elizabeth and thus he asks her to dance, though even the act of doing this is portrayed as being difficult for him to achieve. The partnership between Elizabeth and Darcy is a stark contrast to that of Jane and Bingley, which Austen develops from the introduction of the two parties - they dance at the first meeting of one another and are thus romantically involved with one another from this point.

Mr Bennett is presented by Austen as a man who is interested in the happiness of his daughters, though namely Lizzy, he is rarely phased by the actions of Lydia, Jane or Mrs Bennett however upon learning of Mr Collins' proposal states " Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins... And I will never see you again if you do. " (Austen, J. 1853: 64) Austen uses this conversation as a means of demonstrating the understanding and respect that exists between both Lizzy and her father, with Mrs Bennett already having come to the conclusion that Mr Bennett would insist on Lizzy marrying Mr Collins, however in this scene Austen also manages to portray a subtle humour - we read earlier on in the novel of Mrs Bennett's 'nerves' and this is just another example of Mr Bennett knowing

how to vex her, with the reader remembering earlier on in the book when Mr Bennett states " You mistake me, my dear. 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. " (Austen, J. 1853: 4). With Lizzy being truly her father's daughter she knows that she will have the support of the parent who means the most to her, or at least the parent whom she is more interested in pleasing. Mr Bennett plays a pivotal role in the marriage of Lizzy, he has the final say on whether or not she marries Darcy, throughout the novel Austen doesn't portray any form of interaction between Mr Bennett and any of his other daughters or their respective partners regarding the issue of marriage.

Though this may be due to Elizabeth's importance to the novel, we assume that this is also due to the value of her partnership with Darcy and how this is used to show her romantic development throughout the novel. Austen presents Elizabeth as a character who goes through the typically romantic process of falling in love with someone - both Elizabeth and Darcy must overcome a variety of obstacles in order for their love to blossom, their story starts with bad first impressions of one another, with Lizzy assuming Darcy to be a pompous, arrogant man and Darcy being blinded by Lizzy's social inferiority.

Austen wrote this novel based in an era within which girls being forced in to marriages for financial reasons was coming to an end and though monetary reasons were still considered a valid reason for marriage, or at least one for

which marriage would be considered acceptable by one's family, people were also marrying due to love for one another.

Lizzy represents the new era within which love is the main reason for marriage or courtship, we recognise this as Lizzy is aware of Darcy's fortune from an early stage of the novel, however she dismisses him due to his arrogant behaviour - if Lizzy was only interested in his wealth, or if this were the reason of her interest in Darcy then Austen would have ensured that she, like her other sisters, flaunted herself in front of a male of such high social value.

Austen represents marriage for the 'wrong' reasons with the marriage between Mr and Mrs Bennett. With Mr Bennett having previously married Mrs Bennett for her youth and good looks, with Mrs Bennett declaring " I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. ", he now finds his only happiness through private study or mocking his wife, referring to her 'nerves' as his 'old friends', with his witty humour being too complex for her to understand and thus not being able to tell when he is using sarcasm.

This sarcasm is a trait which Lizzy shares, for example in Chapter 28 when describing Miss De Bourgh, Lizzy states " She looks sickly and cross. Yes, she will do for him very well. She will make him a very proper wife. " This use of juxtaposition is rife in Austen's work and is often used for comic effect.

Austen uses the juxtaposed relationship between Lizzy and Darcy to present us with an example of marrying for love, rather than superficial reasons which are evident throughout the novel.

Examples such as Mr Collins and Charlotte Lucas, or Lydia and Wickham are doomed to fail, or at least to result in the severe unhappiness of the parties involved due to the basis of the relationships being built on financial security or social status. Lizzy and Darcy represent a marriage which ignores the superficial values and focuses on true love, Austen shows us as the reader that this is the only way to have a truly successful and happy marriage to one another and she manages to gain our agreement by portraying the other possible choices throughout the novel.