

# Love and marriage in pride and prejudice

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



“ It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1). From the first, very famous sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen introduces to her readers a satirical view of, not love, but marriage, concepts that in 19th century England were not necessarily very closely related. The novel does not begin with a man in love being in want of a wife, but rather with the statement that men, by a certain stage in life, become ready to marry and then seek out a wife. This rather unromantic view of marriage is heavily parodied by Austen, and she gives us with a very parable-like story of matrimony, presenting the reader with more than several marriages and courtships, and showing her readers that the only way to marry is for love. Austen presents the reader with four marriages, each based around different motivations including lust, economic stability, beauty and most importantly, love. Unlike the other marriages in the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s is based around Mr. Bennet’s desire for Mrs. Bennet’s beauty. In addition, the marriage is shown in its later years, when it is obvious that their union was both unsuccessful and unfulfilling. While their marriage may have seemed like a good idea when they were young and naive, it is obvious that once Mrs. Bennet’s beauty faded and each person’s true character was revealed, their marriage became a failure. Elizabeth relates that “ her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection” (Austen 180). As Austen describes in the first chapter, their personalities are clearly not well matched: “ Mr. Bennet was so odd a

mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop” (Austen 3). They do not get along, as they are constantly insulting or ignoring one another, and their lack of stability and ill-matching has had a very negative impact on their children. In one typical conversation, Mrs. Bennet bemoans, “ you take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves” (Austen 2) and Mr. Bennet retorts sarcastically, “ 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 twenty years at least” (Austen 2). The combination of Mr. Bennet’s indifference and Mrs. Bennet’s frivolousness has resulted in their three youngest daughters growing up without any real intelligence or seriousness, spending all their time chasing after the military officers. Therefore, with their imprudence, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have not only done harm to each other, but they have also done a great disservice their daughters and their upbringing. Charlotte and Mr. Collin’s union is presented as the most common sort of marriage in this period, and one that Elizabeth goes against, risking a future as an old maid in her choosiness, but intimately ending up with the best union. Charlotte and Mr. Collins’s reasons for marrying are purely pragmatic and dispassionate. While Mr. Collin’s proposal to Charlotte is never presented, his proposal to Elizabeth is enough to show his lack of understanding of the meaning of marriage. As he says to her, “ 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. . . that it is the particular advice and very recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness” (Austen 81). Charlotte’s pragmatic view of marriage is obvious after she accepts Mr. Collin’s proposal, as she reflects that he “ was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband” (Austen 95). Her practical view, if one can really call it that, is obvious considering the society she lives in, as she recognizes that “ at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it” (Austen 95). She does not have the luxury of choosiness as she runs the risk of “ dying an old maid” (Austen 95). While to us, the idea of marriage without love seems a worse fate than simply spending one’s days alone, to most women in the 19th century, there was no worse fate than living as a poor single woman. Yet another example of an ill-matched union is that of Lydia and Wickham, which can be wholly attributed to Lydia’s frivolousness. Lydia foolishly elopes with Wickham, running the risk of ruining both her and her family’s reputation. Of course Lydia had thought that they were leaving to marry, but “ neither her virtue nor her understanding would preserve her from falling an easy prey” (Austen 212), and she is too imprudent to realize that Wickham has no intention of marrying her. In order to protect the reputation and dignity of the Bennet family, Mr. Darcy very generously bribes Wickham to marry Lydia. One can guess what kind of a marriage results from such terms and Elizabeth observes that “ Wickham’s affection for Lydia, was just what [she] had expected to find; not equal to Lydia’s for him” (Austen 241). Lydia clearly

never even thinks about the fact that she would be spending the rest of her life with this man, as is typical of her flighty nature. As she foolishly brags to her embarrassed and pained family upon her return after her marriage, “when I went away, I am sure I had no more idea of being married till I came back again! Though I thought it would be very good fun if I was.” (Austen 240). Though the reader does not observe their marriage after this initial “honeymoon” phase, if one can call it that, the foreshadowing of their future misery is clear. The marriage between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy proves to be a great counterpart to these other unions in every way. Their relationship grows and develops over the course of the novel, their personalities are well matched, they improve each other’s character, and they have a great deal of love and respect for each other. Their relationship began with great animosity upon their first meeting when Mr. Darcy refused to dance with Elizabeth saying to Bingley, “she is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me” (Austen 7). And from then until nearly the end of the novel, Elizabeth firmly believes that Mr. Darcy is “the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world” (Austen 7). While Darcy’s feelings towards Elizabeth change quickly after the second dance, during which he requests Elizabeth’s hand and she refuses, it takes much longer for Elizabeth to warm up to him. Their growth as a couple, and also as individuals, is evident when comparing the interaction during Darcy’s first proposal and his second. In Darcy’s first proposal, his most disdainful traits, his pride and overt class consciousness are apparent. In his proposal Darcy makes it completely obvious that he did not want to marry her, and tried to stop himself from falling in love with her because of her low status, and the narrator remarks that “his sense of her

inferiority- of its being a degradation- of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with warmth” (Austen 145). He also shows how prideful he is as he shows no true fear or apprehension that his proposal might be rejected as he sees his proposal to Elizabeth as something she could not possibly dream of receiving, and would never imagine refusing. Elizabeth notices during his declaration that “ he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He spoke of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security” (Austen 145). While Elizabeth’s rejection and dislike of Mr. Darcy is not really any surprise after the way he has acted towards her on several occasions, such as this one, it is also clear that Elizabeth relates to him with a great deal of prejudice, and even remarks herself that before he helped break up Jane and Bingley, which she decided upon with only second hand information, “ my opinion of you was already decided” (Austen 145). Her unfavorable opinion of him was developed mainly by his relationship with Wickham, from the story that he told her, which is later learned to be wholly false. When one observes Darcy’s second proposal, it is obvious that their feelings towards each other have changed greatly, and that they have both improved greatly as people because of their interactions with each other. Darcy has shown himself to be much less class conscious, as he is able to interact with the Gardiners at Pemberly with great warmth and kindness, even though they are of a much lower class, and is less prideful in his entreaties to Elizabeth. Also, Elizabeth, after reading Darcy’s letter and observing Darcy more closely and with less prejudice, is able to see that, though he has his faults, Darcy is indeed a good man and she was too quick to judge him, often relying on second hand

information in her judgments. His proposal itself is greatly changed in that he expresses his love and admiration for her, without discussing their class difference and his great superiority. When Elizabeth tells him that her feelings have changed Darcy responds like a man completely in love: “ 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 warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do” (Austen 280). And Mr. Darcy sums up the change that both characters have undergone when he says that “ though your accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises, my behavior to you at the time, had merited the severest reproof. I was unpardonable” (Austen 281). It is obvious that Darcy’s pride and Elizabeth’s prejudice are now gone and they will only have great happiness in their future together. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen shows the reader a great alternative to marriages based on economic security, lust and the pursuit of beauty in the marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy, and of course also between Jane and Bingley. Though harder fought for, these marriages are sure to fair much better than the others as they are founded on mutual love and respect. And of course, Austen further illustrates her view by having the women who marry for love to be marrying far more handsome and wealthy men than any of the other women. Austen finishes her novel with the promise that it is indeed possible to find love and marriage, no matter how difficult or improbable it may seem.