

How does jane austen present love and marriage in "pride and prejudice"? essay sa...

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How Does Jane Austen Present Love and Marriage in “Pride and Prejudice”? Essay Sample

‘Pride and Prejudice’ is a romantic comedy in which Jane Austen implicitly criticises the views on love and marriage conveyed by most people in Regency society. Austen particularly criticises the way in which both men and women in Regency society could very rarely marry purely for love; as they both needed to marry for status and financial stability. Austen contrasts a variety of different marriages to show the effects of having to marry for reasons other than love. The most successful marriage, between Elizabeth and Darcy, is shown to be based on true love and understanding; characteristics that Austen values highly and thinks absolutely necessary for a happy successful marriage. Love created by mutual attraction is shown to be the basis of Mr Bingley and Jane’s marriage, which, due to both of their simple, caring natures is also a good match. Other couples however are shown to be highly unsuited for each other.

Mr Collins and Charlotte Lucas’s marriage is shown to be the epitome of a bad, unsuccessful marriage as it is based mostly on Charlotte’s need for a respectable, social status and financial stability, which she cannot achieve through any other means but marriage. Another example of an unsuccessful marriage is that between Mr and Mrs Bennet. Mr Bennet married Mrs Bennet for her youthful good looks and Austen shows how he soon realised that that was a very bad decision as their personalities are very unsuited.

The infamous opening line of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ informs the reader that love and marriage are very important, key themes of the novel.

“ It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

The beginning of this sentence makes the reader think that some very insightful, wise fact is about to be revealed but the second half of the sentence results in an anticlimax and brings the reader to realise that in fact the information being translated to them is nothing very intellectual and in many ways fallacious, only a presumption. Most of the first part of the novel is based around Mr Collins who, from his arrival, brings the topic of marriage into the minds of all of the characters. Austen uses the sub-plot relationship between Mr Collins and Charlotte to implicitly criticise the way in which women in Regency society are completely dependant on men for social status and financial stability. The obsequious character of Mr Collins is used by Austen to provide most of the humour in the novel. Austen constantly speaks very critically of him and mocks his narcissistic character. The first line in chapter twenty is very ironic and shows how ridiculous he is:

“ Mr Collins was not left long to the silent contemplation of his successful love”

Though sincerely refused by Elizabeth numerous times, he still considers his proposal to be successful, thinking her denial is merely encouragement. When he finally realises she is not going to marry him he leaves Longbourn and within three days is engaged to marry Miss Lucas, showing his alleged love for Elizabeth is very superficial as his affection have passed from Jane to Elizabeth to Charlotte with in a matter of days. Charlotte is described as

being “ intelligent, sensible” but in no way a romantic and has no love for Mr Collins.

Austen explains that she:

“ Accepted him solely from the pure disinterested desire of an establishment”

Showing that marriage in Regency Society is more like a financial settlement in which a couple can obtain a stable, respectful arrangement rather than an act to show the love and commitment a couple feel for each other. As the novel is written through Elizabeth’s eyes the reader gets a very judgemental, critical analysis of Charlotte and Mr Collins’ marriage although, from the comments of others and information given about Charlotte, the reader realises that in fact there are many reasons why her marriage to Mr Collins is good for her. As Jane explains, in a discussion with Elizabeth, Charlotte is;

“ One of a large family [and] ...as to fame and fortune, it is a most eligible match”

Charlotte is twenty-seven, quite old not to be married in Regency times, and is not particularly pretty, therefore there is no guarantee that anyone else will ever propose to her again. A discussion with Elizabeth at the beginning of the novel reveals Charlotte’s rather cynical views on love and marriage; she does not believe in love like Elizabeth, and thinks:

“ Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance”

Charlotte thinks it better that a couple know as little as possible about each other before they are married so that it will take some time before a married couple start to see the faults in their partner. This shows Charlotte does not believe that marriage has to be based on a couples' love for each other. This is one of the reasons she accepts Mr Collins as;

“ Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune”

This again shows the inequality of men and women in Regency society; marriage is the only real option available to Charlotte, and there is no other way for her to make a good living for herself, except perhaps for becoming a governess, which is not a very desirable way of life. Charlotte knows marriage is her only option and is therefore very aware of how she should act to “ secure” herself a husband. She effectively sets a trap to procure Mr Collins' affections for herself after his refusal from Elizabeth. Austen shows that it is not only women who have to marry for mercenary needs; Col.

Fitzwillian and Wickham are also examples of people having to marry for financial reasons rather than love, both at one point would have liked to marry Elizabeth but due to financial implications both she and they realise that this would never be possible. After their wedding Mr Collins and Charlotte leave for Hunsford almost immediately, but before they leave Charlotte implores Elizabeth to come and visit her as soon as possible. Austen is showing how Charlotte is already realising that her choice is very

imprudent; Charlotte knows Mr Collins is very foolish and therefore that having to live with him will be very tedious without the company of any of her friends. When Elizabeth goes to visit Charlotte Austen writes very satirically about Mr Collins. On Elizabeth's arrival, Mr Collins shows off his home to her with his usual exaggeration and pomposity, but instead of feeling upset about what she has supposedly lost out on, as Mr Collins would like her to, Elizabeth just feels even sorer for Charlotte.

Austen shows that Mr Collins ironically thinks that he and Charlotte are perfectly matched:

" My dear Charlotte and I...we seem to have been designed for each other."

Austen then contrasts this to the reality of the Collins' relationship in Hunsford, where Charlotte informs Elizabeth of how she purposefully avoids spending time with Mr Collins:

" To work in his garden...she encouraged it as much as possible"

Charlotte realises more and more that she has to be totally self-dependent and avoid contact with Mr Collins if she is to be content. Elizabeth leaves the reader with a critical but understanding view of the Collins' marriage:

" She had chosen it with her eyes open...her parish and her poultry...had not yet lost their charms"

Elizabeth's visit has only confirmed her belief that marriage without affection, for social status alone, is undesirable. The alliteration used shows

the reader how negligible the pleasurable aspects of Charlotte's marriage really are.

Mr Collins and Charlotte's marriage relates well to the Bennet's marriage as it seems likely that in time the Collins' marriage will end up like the Bennet's. Austen uses the Bennet's marriage to portray how a relationship based mainly on youthful good looks without any real understanding of the other's personality is doomed to failure. The reader is immediately introduced to the Bennet's relationship in the very first chapter. Austen presents both Mr and Mrs Bennet critically. Mrs Bennet is shown to be very foolish and mercenary, with her sole aim in life being to marry off her daughters well, with no concern as to how these marriages come about. Mr Bennet constantly mocks Mrs Bennet, who is too self-absorbed to realise:

“ ‘ Mr Bingley might like you the best of the party.’

‘ My dear you flatter me.’”

Austen shows how Mrs Bennet does not at all comprehend that Mr Bennet is making a fool of her; she mistakes his blatant mocking as flattery, showing the true extent of her imprudence. Mrs Bennet is also shown to be easily perturbed:

“ But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr Bingley ...

Mr Bennet ... you take delight in vexing me.”

Mrs Bennet is highly disconcerted that Mr Bennet will not go visit Mr Bingley as she sees this as a perfect opportunity to get one of her daughters happily married off, to a “ man of large fortune”, which Austen shows to be very important element of marriage in Mrs Bennet’s opinion. Which due to Austen’s portrayal of Mrs Bennet’s character, has the underlying message that it is in fact only a foolish person who considers money to be more important than love in marriage. Austen shows the Bennets’ marriage to be unsuccessful when Mrs Bennet goes to Mr Bennet demanding that he “ make Lizzy marry Mr Collins”, Mrs Bennet obviously expects Mr Bennet’s support in the matter and is highly offended when he summons Elizabeth and tells her:

“ From this day...your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr Collins, and I will never see you again if you do”

Their difference of opinion on the subject proves that they have an unsuccessful marriage as to have such opposing opinions on such an influential subject shows their personalities are extremely incompatible. Austen shows how the Bennets’ unhappy marriage causes Mr Bennet to distance himself from his family, like Charlotte does by spending most of her day in her back room; Mr Bennet withdraws into his study, both retreat away so as to have to spend as little time as possible with their partner. However Austen shows how this consequently affects the rest of Mr Bennet’s family in a negative way:

“ It has been my own doing...let me once in my life feel how much

I am to blame.”

Mr Bennet has allowed his daughters to act imprudently and do as they please and when Lydia runs away with Wickham he realises that he should have been more involved and stricter in his daughters upbringing so as to have prevented such a disaster from occurring and therefore realises that he has no one but himself to blame for what has happened.

Austen shows Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage to be the most successful marriage in 'Pride and Prejudice' as it is shown to be based on true love and a real understanding of each other though both characters have to overcome their pride and prejudice before they realise their love. Mr Darcy is first introduced to the reader at the first Meryton ball, where he is first considered to be of great interest due to his handsomeness and annual income of ten thousand pounds, but, because of the way he acts, he is soon thought to be 'proud' and 'disagreeable'. Elizabeth takes a particular dislike to him when she overhears him saying she is:

"Tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me"

Austen initially portrays Darcy as being very proud and aloof and shows Elizabeth to become immediately prejudiced against Darcy and what she thinks is Darcy's intolerable pride. Austen shows how Darcy's opinion of Elizabeth quickly changes as he gets to know her better during her stay at Netherfields. He has already become attracted to her "fine eyes" and light, playful manners:

"Darcy had never been as bewitched by any woman as he was by her"

He is intrigued by her confidence and wit. However Elizabeth does not realise this and her opinion of him is soon worsened by the arrival of Wickham and what he tells her about Darcy. During her visit to Kent to see Charlotte, Elizabeth meets Darcy again; Austen uses Elizabeth's visits away from Longbourn to allow Elizabeth to discover things about Darcy she would not have been able to find out at home. Charlotte begins to realise Darcy is in love with Elizabeth during her stay:

“ My dear Eliza, he must be in love with you”

Charlotte, though very unromantic herself, is very insightful into the ways of love and clearly sees how much Darcy loves and admires Elizabeth. However Elizabeth does not think this true and therefore is very surprised by Darcy's proposal. Austen shows that Elizabeth has a romantic view on love, she would never marry anyone unless she truly loves them, she doesn't love Darcy at all. She turns him down mainly because of what he has done to Jane, by taking Bingley away, but also because he insults her by speaking of her inferior connections and how this would be degrading to him while he is proposing. Darcy is taken aback by her denial and therefore becomes angry. They argue with each other and Elizabeth accuses him of being unjust to both Jane and Wickham.

She tells Darcy:

“ You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept.”

Darcy again is astonished by this and upset by its harshness. Soon after Darcy sends a letter to Elizabeth explaining why he took Bingley away and confiding in Elizabeth the truth about Wickham. Austen uses this poignant letter to reveal to the reader Darcy's true character, he is in fact a very loving thoughtful man, who cares a lot for his friends. Austen shows how, after reading the letter, Elizabeth realises that she has been very prejudiced against Darcy, she does not in fact know him as well as she thought, her opinion of him is mainly based on what others have told her about him and what she has perceived him to be. On Elizabeth's visit to Pemberly she is told many good things about Darcy by his housekeeper, making her consider more and more whether she has been mistaken about Darcy. While at Pemberly Austen shows how, by getting to know each other properly, Elizabeth and Darcy start coming to a much better understanding of each other. Elizabeth soon realises that Darcy is still in love with her and finds herself much more attracted to him:

“ She was grateful to him; she felt a real interest in his welfare...”

Austen shows how Elizabeth's feelings for Darcy have almost completely reversed and how Elizabeth now would like Darcy to propose again. The news of Lydia's apparent elopement destroys Elizabeth's hopes of a renewed proposal as in Regency times such actions would have brought disgrace not only on the woman but on her whole family as well. When Lydia returns and blurts out that Darcy was at her wedding Elizabeth is astounded and writes to Mrs Gardiner asking for an explanation. When Mrs Gardiner tell her what Darcy has done Elizabeth is amazed and when Lady Catherine visits her and

asks if she is engaged to Darcy Elizabeth realises that he still loves her. Lady Catherine has come to try and prevent the marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy she says Elizabeth would:

“ Pollute the shades of Pemberly”

Showing her class prejudice towards Elizabeth who is below Darcy's Status in society and therefore Lady Catherine considers her unacceptable as a match for Darcy. However this does not deter Elizabeth from accepting Darcy's proposal. Austen shows through the way in which she writes about Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship what her own values and beliefs about love and marriage are. Class and social status should not affect who a person marries and the basis of a good, proper relationship should be based on love.

Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage is clearly shown to be the most successful in the novel as they have both had to come to a real understanding of the other person. The reader feels sorry for Charlotte as they realise that her marriage is not a good marriage but has been her only option. Austen clearly shows how mercenary needs dictated whom someone could marry in Regency times. Austen's message can still be considered true today as, though class and status are not as important as they were in Regency times, mercenary needs still can and do affect many peoples choice in marriage. However there are many more options available to women today, and they are not completely dependent on men for the social status. Austen shows that for a marriage to be successful it should be based on love, understanding and respect for each other.