

Jane Austen's social world: David Spring's assumptions



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David Spring, in his undoubtedly well-researched essay, "Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World: Literary Critics and Historians", expresses his dissatisfaction with the applicability of the term "bourgeois" to Austen's Social World pointing out its 'hybrid' nature (392). He furthermore proposes a classification of this hybrid world of the rural elite of Austen's novels, into the 'Aristocracy', the 'Gentry' and what he calls a newly arising class, the 'pseudo-gentry' (394-5).

While there can be little debate over the fact that Jane Austen's Social World was far more diversified than what the term "bourgeois" connotes, Spring's neat classification of this society too raises a number of questions. This paper attempts to posit that, though Spring's classification might be historically well informed, an application of the same on the Socio-economic picture presented in *Pride and Prejudice* merely serves to bring forward its shortcomings as a universal situation of the times.

It further argues that the assumption that a family's position in the social hierarchy is a function of the family's source of income and titles is fundamentally flawed, since it undermines the importance of the actual income of a family in determining the hierarchy. The first problem arises from the difficulty of fixing a specific class for the Bennet family in the Social Classification proposed by David Spring. Spring seems to assume without much examination and simply on the evidence of Mr.

Bennet's income that the Bennets belong to the so-called 'Gentry': "A modest gentry income was something like one thousand to two thousand pounds a year. It was Mr. Bennet's income in *Pride and Prejudice*..." (394).

Furthermore, he characterizes the gentry as people of “ more settled habits”, “ limited capacity” and with “ less ostentatious patterns of consumption” (394), in fact those very characteristics that differentiates them from the Aristocracy on the one hand and the ‘ bourgeois’ on the other.

If we accept such a classification and characterization, then it appears somewhat anomalous that this ‘ Gentry’ family, along with other families of similar standing from the neighbourhood, in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* appears to be the ones most obsessed with the idea of scaling the social ladder and grabbing every chance of improving their fortune through marriage or otherwise. In the novel, we find Mrs Bennet in competition with the other families from the neighbourhood to get her daughters introduced to Mr Bingley, considered universally to be an eligible bachelor for his considerable annual income.

Even, Mr. Bennet, despite his ironical and detached attitude to life, plays his part in facilitating the introduction of the daughters to Darcy and Bingley, undoubtedly with the hope of getting them married in the upper echelons of the society. Austen’s witty but nonetheless scathing opening line sums up the general attitude of these so-called ‘ Gentry’ families: “ It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”(1)

Thus when David Spring characterizes the ‘ pseudo-gentry’ as a class that “ devoted their lives to acquiring...for themselves and especially their children...the large house in its own grounds, servants, carriages and horses, appropriate husbands and wives, and last but not the least, an appropriate

income”(396), one wonders whether it would not be more appropriate to describe the Bennet and the Lucas families as sharing the essential characteristics of ‘ pseudo-gentry’, in spite of being landed (and even titled in the case of Sir William Lucas) gentry by Spring’s definition.

In fact, Spring’s definition of the term ‘ pseudo -gentry’ in the essay is rather vague. It includes the Anglican clergy, the professionals like barristers and solicitors, the fighting services, as well as those long retired from business. In the context of *Pride and Prejudice*, this would include, under one huge social canopy, Collins, Wickham as well as Bingley.

Now, as far as the question of income is concerned, this is a rather expansive group, beginning with Wickham, with no considerable personal income and encompassing Bingley with his inherited property of one hundred thousand pounds. In this context, it is interesting to note the basic characteristics of the pseudo-gentry as described by Spring: “...they had a sharp eye for the social escalators, were skilled in getting on them and...staying on them. They were adept at acquiring...“ positional goods” - those scarce services, jobs and goods that announce social success.”(396)

If we go by this definition, then surely the Bingleys fall in this social group. Jane Austen herself describes them, especially the sisters, as “ proud and conceited”, who came from “ a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother’s fortune and their own had been acquired by trade. ” Collins too, as demonstrated by his obsessive need to ingratiate himself with Lady Catherine de Bourgh belongs to this social group.

Questions can be raised about Wickham's status in this group, but then Wickham is a rogue and a general exception; and it can be contended that the other members of the Services do belong to this class. But if Mr. Collins belongs to this class simply due to his pathetic obsequiousness to Lady Catherine, designed for social aggrandizement, then so does Sir William Lucas, who "had...risen to the honour of the knighthood by an address to the King, during his mayoralty"(18). Austen's summing up of Lucas's character is telling.

After receiving knighthood, Sir Lucas "had removed with this family to a house about a mile from Meryton, denominated from that period Lucas Lodge, where he could think with pleasure of his own importance, and unshackled by business, occupy himself solely in being civil to all the world."(19) And if the Bingley sisters are perceived to be the member of this social group because they are intent upon social and economical improvement through marriage with Darcy, then so are the Bennets, particularly Mrs. Bennet.

This leaves us with Mr. Darcy, with his ten thousand pounds a year and Lady Catherine both of whom can be safely considered within the highest economic bracket in the land. Although Mr. Darcy is not titled, he has relations in the court and is rich enough to be more influential than many belonging to the aristocracy. Apart from these two members of the upper class, the rest of the characters in the novel, as shown from the above discussion, can surely be considered within one social bracket, characterised by their identical social instincts - the very social instincts that Spring pronounces to be the ruling traits of the so-called "pseudo-gentry".
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David Spring in classifying the Bennets as the “ gentry” and the Bingleys as the “ pseudo-gentry” seems to imply that the Bennets are the social superiors between the two families. However, even a cursory glance into the socio-economic drama played out in Austen's novel will prove this wrong. Spring defines the “ pseudo-gentry” as people who “ devoted their lives to acquiring the trappings of the gentry status”(396). This statement is only true when Mr. Darcy is perceived to be the representative of the social group termed ‘ gentry’ and not the Bennets.

For in the novel it is the Bennets who strive to acquire the status and economic independence of the Bingleys and not the other way round. The comic episode involving Mrs. Bennet's arrival at Netherfield Park to enquire after the health of her eldest daughter is enough evidence to this effect. In fact this is the perception - that the Bennets are only interested in the Jane-Bingley marriage because of the money and status involved in such a match - is what leads Darcy to warn his friend against any such step.

The Bingleys on the other hand vie for the status of Darcy who is presented throughout the novel, along with Lady Catherine, as being the member of a different social class altogether. Thus it can be safely contended from the above analysis that David Spring's analysis of Jane Austen's ‘ Social World’ in the essay “ Interpreters of Jane Austen's Social World” proceeds from some mistaken assumptions about the social fabric of the time. Spring in order to make a neat classification has concentrated on source of income and title as his guiding principles.

Thus "Aristocracy" consists of titled gentry and includes Sir William Lucas and Lady Catherine in one social bracket; 'gentry' consists of landed families and thus would include Darcy and the Bennets in one social bracket; and 'pseudo-gentry' consists of non-landed families and thus should include the Bingleys, Collins and Wickham under one social bracket. Moreover, the 'pseudo-gentry' is placed beneath the gentry as far as social status is concerned. In other words, the Bennets, according to such a classification, are social superiors of the Bingleys.

In the actual novel however, the social aspirations and equations appear very different. As far as *Pride and Prejudice* is concerned, Darcy and Lady Catherine forms one social bracket followed by the Bingleys, Collins, Bennets and the Lucas according to their actual income. Thus it can be concluded that the social hierarchy and the allied social aspirations are a function of the actual income and not of the source of income, as David Spring seems to assume in the essay.