



**Marriage As A Social Contract: Patriarchy, Economic Dependency, And  
Female Identity In Jane Austen's Novels**

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**Abstract**

The importance of this research paper is to explore how Jane Austen creates the idea of marriage as not only romantic connection, but instead a socially confirmed contract created by male power, economic need, and class division within society. By carefully reviewing the texts of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*, I believe Austen wrote about and also commented on the social structures of Regency England. Within this context, Austen's heroines act as quiet resistance to oppressive gender systems. By using feminism and Marxism, along with genetic structuralism, and new research (i.e. from 2021 to 2023), I will show that Austen illustrates the relational existences of men and women and how this serves as an important political commentary on coercive systems of power, ownership, and sex. Finally, I will establish that Austen's feminist literature remains socially relevant to current conversations about gender equality, female agency, and larger issues of social justice.

**Keywords:** Jane Austen, marriage, patriarchy, economic dependency, female identity, feminist Marxist theory, social contract, Regency England, gender equality

**1. Introduction**

Jane Austen holds a special place in the history of English Literature, having taken the domestic novel and turned it into an avenue for sharp social and political commentary. The novels she wrote in the early 19th century are set against the backdrop of a very rigidly defined social structure, where a woman's legal identity, financial position, and social status were largely dependent upon which man she married—the very antithesis of the ideal Christian woman. The portrayal of marriage as something that diminished women to the status of property, part of a highly prescribed marketplace for marriage, is a prominent theme in Austen's works, thus demonstrating that her stories are much more than just romantic tales of love and marriage; they also serve as solidly grounded political treatises that challenge the social systems that limited the roles played by women through their gender and class, as well as offer a multifaceted viewpoint about the connection between individual freedom and conformity. This article will study how Austen uses the institution of marriage to establish a social contract in her novels; how her female protagonists negotiate their identities and independence both within and sometimes against the societal constructs that limit them.

Marriage was the primary method by which women achieved economic stability during Jane Austen's lifetime. Accordingly, Austen's understanding of love and independence is very much affected by the fact that women's feelings of worth were negatively impacted by cultural expectations, resulting in significant distortions of power within both gender and class. Through an examination of key characters, types of narration, and cultural contexts found in



Jane Austen's most important novels, this paper reveals the true nature of women and men's relationship in Jane Austen's writings.

## **2. The Legal and Economic Framework: Women as Property**

To fully grasp Austen's critique, one must first consider the legal and economic reality of women in early 1800s England. Under the legal theory of coverture, when a woman married, her legal rights were transferred over to her husband — women had increasingly little means for financially supporting themselves and, more importantly, lacked both the right to vote and access to education.

Moreover, women typically could not directly inherit property and, therefore, were dependent on either their male relatives or husbands for economic support. The legal structure in place limited women's autonomy and demonstrated their subordinate position in society. One of the many examples Austen uses to show this is in the estate of Longbourn being entailed to Mr. Collins. Because of this, the Bennet sisters will have to live in financial insecurity. This example shows the direct economic impact of women not being able to own property — creating insecurity and dramatically demonstrating the larger societal issue of women's property rights.

During the 18th century, women had very limited ways to achieve financial independence. Women relied heavily on marrying to survive and be considered respectable. A woman's worth was often measured according to her chances of getting married, and thus her future was tied to her ability to align herself with a wealthy male. Austen successfully captures this reality with a realistic, yet brutally honest portrayal of the circumstances her female characters find themselves in as they try to secure their futures. Austen underscores how marriage functioned as both a survival strategy and a suffocating social expectation, reducing women's value to their marital prospects and reproductive roles, while the novel criticizes social hierarchy and gender inequalities.

## **3. Marriage as Social Contract: Compliance and Resistance**

In her novels, Austen depicts a diversity of responses by female characters regarding marriage—from embracing the institution to strongly resisting it. In doing so, she critiques society as a whole and reflects the varying perspectives that women possessed about marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Lucas represents the pragmatic acceptance of marriage. When she agrees to marry Mr. Collins, she exemplifies the compromises that women make under pressure from society to marry and provide security for themselves, and demonstrates how they are forced to compromise their own desires in order to meet those demands. Charlotte's choice to marry Mr. Collins is portrayed sympathetically by Austen, but does not romanticise Charlotte's circumstances — it is a rational decision in an irrational society.

Elizabeth Bennet is different from Charlotte Lucas in that she rejects the idea of a marriage contract. Instead of following convention by marrying for security rather than for love, Elizabeth chooses to use every means at her disposal to maintain her independence. Mr. Collins' surprise at Elizabeth's no-response to his proposal is a sign of how much men in Austen's day thought they had control over the marriage contract, and that women were seen as having no say in how a marriage was to be conducted and that their purpose in participating



in a marriage was mainly financial gain. Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of marriage with Mr. Collins despite the financial security it would provide to is a rejection of the idea that women are expected to be passive recipients of marriage proposals. Similarly, Emma Woodhouse's initial attempts to manage the love lives of others are transformed from her desire for power over her friends' relationships into a strong appreciation for humility, self-awareness and mutual respect in one's own relationship by the end of the novel.

#### **4. Feminist Marxist Reading: Class, Property, and Power**

In using feminist Marxist theory to analyze Jane Austen's literature, we can gain further insight into how class (and gender) affects a woman's relationship with a man. By applying the theoretical lens of feminist Marxism to the influences of class, property and inheritance upon women's lives during the Regency period, we conclude that ownership and inheritance influence the amount of agency and autonomy women experience in Austen's texts.

Austen's novels examine how a woman's socioeconomic status affects her chances to find a husband and also illustrate the limits of a woman's autonomy based on equal socioeconomic class, as well as the financial circumstances that limit her opportunities for marriage. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, meets Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, but during their initial meeting, Elizabeth is of a lesser class than Mr. Darcy, thereby causing her to have to navigate through barriers of prejudice due to their respective statuses, which interfere with her ability to form a romantic relationship with him.

As Elizabeth progresses toward the attainment of independence and self-knowledge, she is confronted on many occasions with the inequity of property laws and the class system that contribute to the oppression of women. In contrast, Lady Catherine de Bourgh serves as Austen's vehicle for expressing her views about class-based privilege, as she conveys to Elizabeth that marriage is determined by social class rather than merit.

In *Emma*, the relationship between Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley serves to provide examples of the balanced distribution of power in which both characters are influenced by society's normative behaviors; however, Mr. Knightley, despite having more social status than Emma, respects her autonomy and intelligence and epitomizes a break from the traditional gender relationships of Austen's earlier writings.

#### **5. Female Identity, Education, and the Patriarchal Gaze**

Austen critiques the construction of female identity within patriarchal systems as central to her work. She uses the education of women during the Regency period as an example of this critique since their education was intended to help them find husbands rather than to develop independent thinking, something that is often an ironic point in her work.

Austen presented a wide range of female characters with varying psychological traits surviving different psychosocial obstacles and paving the way for their socio-economic autonomy, challenging the prevailing prejudiced attitudes, roles, and expectations by navigating the feminine themes of love, social mobility, independence, and education in a world full of restrictions and limitations for women.

According to Kirkham, *Pride and Prejudice* depicts the problems of a society in which a woman's destiny depends on the husband she marries and in which women's only real source



of financial security is typically through marriage. Poovey argues that Elizabeth Bennet, through her choice of marriage for mutual respect with Mr. Darcy, has achieved a degree of independence. Still, Elizabeth Bennet must live in a patriarchal society that regards women primarily as wives and mothers.

Austen's primary objections to the existing social norms and conventions are focused on the limitations placed on women. She wrote about this extensively because she recognized that many women who participate in the marriage market may find that obtaining an autonomous life through marriage could offer them valuable intellectual, practical, and social rewards associated with self-fulfillment.

### **6. Austen's Implicit Feminist Narrative**

Although Jane Austen existed before there were any organized feminist movements, her writing style is clearly supportive of feminism. In her writing, Jane Austen tried to change people's attitudes about marriage, women's right to receive inheritance, and women's education. All of her novels point out that women are the basis of feminism for Jane Austen's writings. For example, all of Jane Austen's heroines are intelligent, strong, and independent.

An examination of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* establishes her progressive belief in equality for women and the importance of these ideas in contemporary discussions surrounding feminism and women's rights. It suggests that Austen presents a vision of egalitarian relationships built upon love, intellectual compatibility, and mutual respect.

Irony and free indirect discourse are central to the works of Austen, allowing Austen to express her views while also employing these tools to understand what is erased by polite society, including the coercion, compromise, and suffering that accompany (yet remain hidden by society) the social construct of marriage.

*Pride and Prejudice* preserves the struggle for sexual justice by providing insight into the struggle for women to have their autonomy and freedom regarding love and their personal lives in the 19th Century. This knowledge is consistently present throughout the work and not too far removed from Austen's goal of demonstrating that 'love matches' with individual men who are distinct from each other are foundations for self-identity.

### **7. Contemporary Relevance**

The exploration of patriarchal societal contracts by Austen is of value in more ways than simply historically. Furthermore, results provided by Spencer in 2022 show that the way class interacts with gender in her work continue to be relevant in today's discussions about women's rights. Austen illustrates how marriage can be considered to serve as both a means of survival while simultaneously also representing the overwhelming pressure of societal expectations within that structure.

Through her exploration of these themes, Austen critiques the normative values associated with her society, and provides a timeless assessment of the intricacies that pertain to both gender and the corresponding structure of society, leading to an enduring status for "*Pride and Prejudice*" within English literature. Additionally, the power dynamics of men with legal and/or economic authority and women needing to negotiate within these systems are also still



observable today throughout the world, making Austen's works essential reading for feminist literary scholarship across generations.

### **8. Conclusion**

This research paper has examined how Jane Austen's novels provide a complex and thorough critique of the institution of marriage as it was manifested in Regency England. By offering an extensive cast of female characters caught up in circumstances such as economic dependence, patriarchal values, and class barriers, Austen illustrates how these elements affect male-female relationships (i.e., men versus women). All of her heroines —Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, Emma Woodhouse, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot— are demonstrated to be active agents who transact and oppose their circumstances and have created new definitions for themselves within that context.

Austen's work has been an essential part of the development of feminist literary theory, providing an immense body of feminist literary criticism from experimenting with how she critiques traditional patriarchal gender roles as well as the portrayal of women as active participants within their relationships.

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