

Rigid Social Structure of the Nineteenth-Century England in Jane Austen's Novel *Pride And Prejudice*

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Abstract

This study examines the rigid social structures of nineteenth-century England as depicted in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The research investigates how inflexible social hierarchies, characterized by distinct class stratifications—upper, middle, and lower classes—constrained individual agency, particularly among women. The analysis focuses on four pivotal dimensions: marriage as a social transaction, social hierarchy and etiquette, land and wealth ownership, and the manifestations of prejudice and discrimination. Despite extensive scholarship on Austen's social critique, limited attention has been paid to the interaction between class stratification and individual agency within the specific context of nineteenth-century English property relations. Employing a Marxist literary framework, this research elucidates how material conditions fundamentally shaped character motivations, interpersonal dynamics, and socioeconomic opportunities. Through a qualitative analysis of dialogue, narration, and descriptive elements within the novel, the findings demonstrate how stringent social norms limited individual autonomy and engendered pervasive conflict between personal desires and societal imperatives. This study contributes to existing scholarship by revealing how Austen's narrative simultaneously critiques systemic inequality while exposing the psychological constraints imposed on middle-class women within a patriarchal property system. Ultimately, this study highlights Austen's sophisticated critique of the systemic injustices inherent in the nineteenth-century British class system, while underscoring the enduring relevance of these themes within contemporary social contexts.

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1. Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (2004) serves as a profound social critique of the rigid class stratification and patriarchal norms of 19th-century England, an era marked by systemic injustices and the transformative impact of the Industrial Revolution. Austen explores how these inflexible structures, categorized into upper, middle, and lower classes, stifle individual autonomy and perpetuate socioeconomic inequality, particularly for women who navigate a society where marriage is the primary gateway to economic prosperity (Ispriyani 2008; Putri, Bahri, and Suswati, 2017). Through the interactions between characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, the novel illustrates the pervasive influence of wealth and land ownership on personal relationships, while highlighting how class-driven prejudice and stereotypes prevent marginalized individuals from achieving fulfillment (Saeed and Mocabil 2024; Fitriana 2014). Consequently, the novel functions as a main backdrop that shapes the positions of women, reflecting a reality where the pressure to conform to class expectations creates an enduring conflict between personal desires and rigid social realities (Rahman, Khairunnisa, and Amir 2023; Krisita and Dewi 2020).

The research problem addressed in this study is the insufficient examination of how rigid social structures in 19th-century England systematically constrained individual agency, particularly among middle-class women, within the specific context of property relations and marriage as an economic instrument. While previous Marxist analyses of *Pride and Prejudice* have successfully identified class stratification and economic determinism, they have often treated characters as mere products of material conditions without adequately exploring the psychological tension between individual desire and systemic constraint. This study differs from earlier Marxist approaches by focusing not only on how economic structures shape character behavior but also on how characters actively negotiate, resist, or internalize these constraints—thereby revealing the dynamic interplay between social structure and individual agency.

Accordingly, this research pursues three objectives: (1) to identify the manifestations of rigid social structures in *Pride and Prejudice* across four dimensions—marriage as a social transaction, social hierarchy and etiquette, land and wealth ownership, and prejudice and discrimination; (2) to analyze how these structures constrain individual agency, particularly for female characters; and (3) to examine how Austen's narrative simultaneously critiques systemic inequality while exposing the psychological and social costs of class stratification.

By utilizing Karl Marx's theory, the research analyzes character motivations through the lens of material conditions rather than personal ideals, viewing characters like Mrs. Bennet as reflections of social pressure and the commodification of women within the marriage market. Although not explicitly theorized by Austen, these capitalist dynamics and class struggles are inherent in the narrative, allowing the novel to be understood as a critique of the economic structures that govern personal connections (Putri et al. 2024). To achieve its objectives, this research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing interpretive and descriptive data to provide a nuanced picture of 19th-century British society (Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger, 2020). Through this multidimensional analysis, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the struggle against systemic restrictions and the social inequalities of the era.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sociology of Literature

Sociology of Literature examines the reciprocal interaction between literary works and their social context. In this study, *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a critical lens to analyze the rigid social stratification of 19th-century England, an era defined by strict hierarchies and economic constraints. According to Eagleton (2005), literature does not merely reflect societal norms but also interrogates and challenges them. This is evident in Austen's portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, whose relationship manifests the tension between individual agency and societal expectations. Furthermore, this approach investigates how an author's social position shapes the narrative. Austen, navigating the complexities of her own environment, utilizes what Bourdieu (1984) identifies as social capital, where character interactions are dictated by their respective social status. Through this perspective, the novel transcends its romantic plot by subtly advocating for individual merit over inherited class distinctions.

Beyond textual interpretation, the sociology of literature explores the interplay of economic and political forces that shape cultural norms. Austen's depiction of class dynamics and social mobility illustrates how characters serve as microcosms of the prevailing social structure. This aligns with Goldmann's (1977) view that literary works are products of social structures that crystallize the collective consciousness of a society. Consequently, a sociological analysis reveals that *Pride and Prejudice* is not merely a romance, but a profound social critique that both represents and questions the social reality of early 19th-century

Britain. By employing this framework, the research reveals how the novel functions as a dynamic force that reflects and simultaneously shapes societal values and perceptions.

2.1.1 Rigid Social Structures

According to Marx (1848), rigid social structures manifest as social stratification that is resistant to change due to the dominance of the ruling class over the working class, a dichotomy that inherently creates systemic inequality and ongoing conflict through unequal access to resources and power. In the context of this research, Marx's theory elucidates the 19th-century English social structure, strictly differentiated by class, wealth, and status where a bourgeoisie-controlled framework dictates characters' lives and choices, particularly regarding marriage, education, and social interactions. In *Pride and Prejudice*, this rigidity is exemplified through the clear divisions between the aristocracy, gentry, and middle class, wherein social mobility is constrained and marriage functions as a primary mechanism to maintain or improve social status. As Eagleton (1976) argues, the upper classes maintain their hegemony through control over both the economy and culture, a phenomenon reflected in the societal pressure on women like Elizabeth Bennet to prioritize economic stability over personal affection. Consequently, the novel serves as a representation of British social reality that embodies Marx's theory of class-based structures, portraying the injustices and class struggles that are central to Marxist thought while demonstrating how these stratified positions perpetually shape individual lives.

2.1.2 Marriage as a Social Transaction

Karl Marx's theory of marriage as a social transaction elucidates the interplay between economics, social class, and the institution of marriage, perceiving it not merely as an emotional bond but as a reflection of prevailing socio-economic structures designed to consolidate wealth and status within a capitalist society. Within the framework of historical materialism, marriage functions as a strategic mechanism deeply embedded in class interests, as asserted by Marx and Engels (1848) in *The Communist Manifesto*, where bourgeois families serve to perpetuate social stratification. In the context of 19th-century Britain, this is manifested in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* through the commodification of women, whose value was often measured by their dowry or social connections rather than personal affinity. Characters such as Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth Bennet exemplify this Marxian viewpoint; while Charlotte's pragmatic marriage to Mr. Collins reflects the inevitable entrapment of individuals within material conditions for survival, Elizabeth's resistance against transactional unions serves as a profound critique of the restrictive social system. Furthermore, the ruling class's effort to maintain hegemony is illustrated through Lady Catherine de Bourgh's attempt to consolidate aristocratic heritage through arranged alliances. Ultimately, as emphasized in Marx's *Das Kapital* (1844), economic conditions fundamentally shape social relations, positioning marriage in Austen's novel (2004) as an integral part of a larger economic system that both reflects and interrogates the rigid class hierarchy of the era.

Recent scholarship has deepened this analysis. Yakumbu and Ahmadi (2025), employing a Marxist-feminist perspective, argue that Charlotte Lucas's marriage should not be read as passive obedience but as "constrained agency"—a strategic response to structural constraints where marriage becomes "the only safe path to survival" within an oppressive capitalist-patriarchal order. This interpretation shifts the analytical focus from individual choice to systemic coercion, aligning with Fraser's three-dimensional theory of economic, cultural, and political justice. Similarly, Khan, Khan, and Salman (2023) demonstrate through a feminist Marxist reading that "mobility in class, property, and inheritance" directly determined women's "level of agency and autonomy," revealing that Elizabeth Bennet's

journey toward independence was "shaped almost all the time by the struggle against the injustice of property standards".

2.1.3 Social Hierarchy and Etiquette

Within the framework of historical materialism, Marx (1867) argues that social structure is fundamentally determined by production relations, a theory reflected in *Pride and Prejudice* through a rigid hierarchy contingent upon land ownership. In this stratified system, figures like Mr. Darcy occupy the pinnacle, while the Bennet family remains subordinate due to their dependence on inheritance. According to Marx and Engels (1846), dominant ideologies, including ethics and etiquette are products of the ruling class designed to obscure systemic inequality and hinder middle-class mobility. This is strategically exemplified by Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who employs etiquette to assert hegemony, while Elizabeth Bennet's resistance illustrates the inherent class conflict within established structures. As Eagleton (1976) suggests, etiquette serves to legitimize upper-class domination by instilling "false consciousness," where social hierarchies are perceived as natural rather than socially constructed. Ultimately, analyzing the novel through the "base and superstructure" framework reveals that while Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy represents individual success, it does not subvert the overarching social system, proving that 19th-century hierarchy was sustained by both economic power and cultural norms perpetuated by the ruling class.

Building on this, Uddin & Sumaiya (2025) demonstrates how Austen critiques the "ideological supremacy" of the British upper class, revealing that etiquette operates through Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony—an "exigent instrument of dominance imposed by the ruling class to naturalize an exploitative relationship with the working class". The study argues that middle-class characters' "blind adherence to prevailing ideologies" in pursuit of respectability reflects the internalization of oppression, a phenomenon where the marginalized consent to their own subordination by accepting elite cultural norms as universal standards of worth.

2.1.4 Land Ownership and Wealth

In the Marxist theoretical framework, land ownership and wealth constitute the fundamental base for social stratification, where the bourgeoisie and aristocracy maintain dominance through the control of the means of production. In 19th-century England, as reflected in *Pride and Prejudice*, land functions not only as a source of capital but also as a potent symbol of inherited status and political power (Marx 1867). This is exemplified by characters such as Mr. Darcy, whose ownership of the Pemberley estate grants him a superior social position, contrasting sharply with the Bennet family's precarious economic standing. Furthermore, the exploitative nature of this class system leads to alienation, as individuals are forced to navigate social relationships and marriage primarily for economic survival (Marx 1844). Elizabeth Bennet's struggle against the norms imposed by the landowning elite, such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh, highlights the systemic inequalities that stifle individual freedom and social mobility. Ultimately, the novel serves as a critique of these rigid structures, where the union between Elizabeth and Darcy suggests a complex shift in class dynamics while simultaneously reinforcing the reality that identity and social agency remain deeply contingent upon economic status and property ownership.

Matutes (2025), in an economic analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, emphasizes that "incentives rooted in the law and social norms" rather than romantic inclinations primarily drive character behavior, revealing how legal structures of entail and primogeniture functioned as mechanisms of class reproduction. This perspective enriches the Marxist reading by specifying the legal apparatus through which economic exploitation was systematically enforced.

2.1.5 Prejudice and Discrimination

Through a Marxist lens, prejudice and discrimination in *Pride and Prejudice* are analyzed as direct byproducts of the rigid social stratification in 19th-century England, where class antagonism arises from the structural divide between the landed aristocracy and the burgeoning middle class. Marx (1867) posits that the ruling class employs ideology, a system of beliefs designed to maintain the status quo, to justify the exclusion and marginalization of lower social strata, as seen in the initial condescension of Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine de Bourgh toward the Bennet family. This systemic inequality breeds discrimination, where individual worth is dictated by wealth and lineage rather than merit, effectively limiting social mobility. Furthermore, the concept of alienation is manifested in Elizabeth Bennet, who experiences a sense of estrangement from the restrictive social and economic norms imposed upon her. In this context, marriage functions as a hegemonic tool to consolidate capital within a closed circle, reinforcing a social order that prioritizes economic preservation over human connection. Ultimately, Austen's narrative serves as a profound critique of a society where structural inequalities perpetuate prejudice, revealing that such biases are not merely personal failings but are deeply embedded in the exploitative economic framework of the era.

Recent scholarship has also examined the social conditions of women in this period. Bohang, Magfirah, and Nugroho (2025), employing genetic structuralism, confirm that in 18th-century England, "women get inequality gender in the society" where "education, politic, and occupation are not allowed to them," forcing them into marriage as the only viable path to economic security. This structural analysis aligns with the present study's emphasis on how systemic constraints, rather than individual failings, produced the marriage patterns Austen critiques.

2.2 Review of Previous Studies

The study of rigid social structures in 19th-century England frequently identifies Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as a seminal work reflecting the era's socio-economic hierarchies. Previous research by Putri et al. (2017) and Sarah (2022) both utilized a qualitative descriptive method underpinned by Marxist concepts to examine how wealth, power, and status manifest as "pride and prejudice" within British society. While these studies successfully mapped the forms of social class and their impacts on character interactions using frameworks from Fraenkel, Wallen, or Moleong, the present study establishes its originality by adopting a more holistic approach through the qualitative methodology of Busetto. Unlike earlier works that predominantly focus on the thematic outcomes of love and marriage, this research extends the analysis to the interplay between rigid social norms and individual agency, specifically exploring how structural limitations impact emotional expression, career trajectories, and personal aspirations. By integrating Marx's theories on a deeper level, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and systemic constraints on individual freedom, thereby offering fresh insights into the enduring relevance of Austen's social critique within both historical and contemporary contexts.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis design, a methodological approach specifically suited for examining how literary texts represent and critique social phenomena. Unlike basic qualitative descriptive methods, textual analysis focuses on close reading of linguistic and narrative elements—dialogue, description, character action, and narrative positioning—to uncover how meaning is constructed within a text (Busetto, Wick, &

Gumbinger, 2020). The research design is also historical-interpretive, situating the novel within its specific socio-historical context of 19th-century England while interpreting textual evidence through a theoretical framework.

The choice of a Marxist literary framework as the primary analytical lens is justified on three grounds. First, Marxism directly addresses the core phenomenon under investigation: rigid social structures characterized by class stratification, economic determinism, and the commodification of human relationships. Marx's concepts of base and superstructure, class struggle, and alienation provide a coherent vocabulary for analyzing how material conditions shape character motivations. Second, Marxist literary criticism has a well-established tradition of analyzing 19th-century British literature concerned with class, marriage, and property. Third, the Marxist framework enables the researchers to move beyond thematic description to structural analysis, explaining how property relations systematically constrain individual agency, particularly for women.

The primary data source is Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (2004 edition, Oxford University Press). This novel was selected for three reasons: it features multiple characters from different class positions enabling comparative analysis, its explicit focus on marriage and social mobility provides rich textual evidence, and its canonical status allows engagement with existing scholarship. Secondary data are gathered from a comprehensive literature review of historical studies, literary criticism, and social history to provide broader context.

Data were selected through a systematic four-stage procedure. First, the researchers read the entire novel once to achieve holistic familiarity with the plot, characters, and major themes, recording initial observations about class-related conflicts and marriage negotiations. Second, the researchers re-read the novel, specifically identifying passages relevant to the Marxist framework, including discussions of wealth or property, marriage proposals with explicit economic considerations, interactions between different social classes, expressions of class-based prejudice, and moments of social exclusion based on status. Third, identified passages were categorized into four thematic dimensions: marriage as a social transaction, social hierarchy and etiquette, land ownership and wealth, and prejudice and discrimination. Fourth, from each thematic category, representative quotations were selected based on clarity, narrative significance, representativeness, and analytical richness.

The analysis proceeded through five sequential steps. First, textual identification: passages manifesting rigid social structures were identified and documented with page numbers and narrative context. Second, structural description: each passage was described in terms of surface content—who is speaking, to whom, under what circumstances, and what economic or social stakes are involved. Third, Marxist interpretation: each passage was interpreted through the theoretical framework, asking how economic conditions shape character motivations, what class interests are being served, and how the passage reveals commodification of human relationships. Fourth, cross-passage synthesis: findings from individual passages were integrated across the four thematic dimensions to identify patterns and variations. Fifth, theoretical integration: synthesized findings were interpreted through Marxist literary criticism, engaging with concepts from Eagleton (1976), Goldmann (1977), and recent Marxist-feminist scholarship.

To ensure the credibility of findings, several strategies were employed. Theoretical triangulation was achieved by analyzing data through multiple Marxist concepts rather than a single lens. Textual consistency was maintained through systematic cross-checking, verifying that coded interpretations remained consistent with characters' overall narrative arcs. Through this multidimensional analysis, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the struggle against systemic restrictions and the social inequalities of the era.

4. Discussions

In this part, the researchers examine the rigid social structures depicted in *Pride and Prejudice*, where social hierarchy, status, and wealth fundamentally dictate character interactions and individual agency. The analysis is structured into thematic sections encompassing marriage as a social transaction, class-based etiquette, property ownership, and the systemic prejudice encountered by characters in their pursuit of autonomy. By interrogating the tension between individual desires and societal demands, exemplified by Elizabeth Bennet's resistance to transactional marriage and Mr. Darcy's representation of the landed gentry; this study uncovers Austen's sophisticated critique of nineteenth-century social norms. Furthermore, the analysis employs a Marxist lens to explore the power dynamics of class and gender, highlighting how Austen utilizes irony and satire to expose economic inequalities and the marginalized positions of women within a patriarchal framework. Ultimately, this part demonstrates that the novel transcends its romantic plot to serve as a profound critique of a rigid class system, where personal compatibility is perpetually forced to negotiate with socio-economic obligations.

4.1 Marriage as a Social Transaction

Marriage in nineteenth-century England functioned primarily as a social transaction, dictated more by class, wealth, and status than by personal affection. Within this framework, Jane Austen's narratives portray characters, particularly women who are inextricably entrapment within rigid social norms. Matrimonial choices were frequently governed by economic and reputational considerations rather than emotional bonds, forcing women to navigate a precarious dilemma between personal desires and societal imperatives. Austen underscores that marriage served as a fundamental mechanism for maintaining or enhancing social status and economic security. In a highly stratified society where social standing was contingent upon wealth and lineage, marriage emerged as the primary gateway for women to achieve stability and institutional recognition. Consequently, Austen's works transcend mere depictions of domestic life to offer a profound critique of social systems that stifle individual agency. The interactions between her characters vividly reflect the overwhelming pressure to conform to communal expectations, often necessitating the sacrifice of individual happiness in favor of socio-economic preservation.

"Indeed, Jane, you ought to believe me. – No one who has ever seen you together, can doubt his affection. Miss Bingley I am sure cannot. She is not such a simpleton. Could she have seen half as much love in Mr. Darcy for herself, she would have ordered her wedding clothes. But the case is this. We are not rich enough, or grand enough for them; and she is the more anxious to get Miss Darcy for her brother." (Austen, 2004, p.99)

This passage operates on two levels: the surface level of romantic concern and the deeper level of economic calculation masked as family loyalty.

Through a Marxist lens, this dialogue exemplifies the process of commodification—the transformation of human relationships into exchangeable goods with calculable market value. Miss Bingley does not oppose Jane because of personal animosity but because Jane lacks the requisite "value" measured in wealth and social connections. Elizabeth's diagnosis is strikingly materialist: the obstacle is not insufficient love but insufficient "richness" and "grandness." Miss Bingley's anxiety to secure Miss Darcy for her brother represents the ruling class's imperative to consolidate capital through strategic marriages, what Marx and Engels (1848) identified as the bourgeoisie's reduction of family relations to "mere money relations."

This finding aligns with Yakumbu and Ahmadi's (2025) concept of "constrained agency." Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic acceptance of Mr. Collins's proposal—which Elizabeth rejects—does not represent personal failure but rather different strategic responses to identical structural constraints. Charlotte, at twenty-seven without a fortune, recognizes that marriage is "the only safe path to survival" within a system where women are excluded from professions and inheritance. Her choice exemplifies what Marx (1844) termed alienation: the separation of individuals from their authentic desires under conditions where economic survival overrides personal fulfillment.

What distinguishes Austen's critique from mere economic determinism is her nuanced portrayal of class consciousness. Elizabeth Bennet demonstrates what Lukács (1971) called "imputed class consciousness"—an awareness of systemic injustice that transcends her immediate material interests. Unlike Mrs. Bennet, who has fully internalized the logic of commodification and views marriage exclusively as economic transaction, Elizabeth recognizes her mother's "mean understanding" and "illiberal mind" as products of the same system that oppresses her. This distinction between false consciousness (full internalization of ruling-class ideology) and critical awareness is central to understanding Austen's ambivalent position: she critiques the marriage market while acknowledging that even the most independent woman cannot fully escape it.

4.2 Social Hierarchy and Etiquette

In nineteenth-century England, social hierarchy and etiquette functioned as rigorous frameworks that dictated individual behavior and social interactions, with class identity fundamentally contingent upon wealth, lineage, and education. Within this stratified society, where layers ranged from the landed aristocracy to the burgeoning middle and working classes, etiquette served as a mandatory regulatory guideline; any deviation from these norms often resulted in social ostracism or the irreparable loss of reputation. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* meticulously delineates these dynamics through the contentious interaction between Elizabeth Bennet, who faces the prejudices inherent to her middle-class status, and Mr. Darcy, whose aristocratic background initially renders him hostage to the haughty expectations of elite decorum. Through their evolving relationship, Austen transcends a mere romantic narrative to offer a profound social commentary that interrogates the systemic injustices of social hierarchies. By highlighting how these rigid structures stifle individual autonomy, Austen invites a critical reflection on the tension between societal expectations and the intrinsic values of human dignity and love, ultimately challenging the very foundations of the era's social stratification.

““You are considering how insupportable it would be to pass many evenings in this manner – in such society; and indeed I am quite of your opinion. I was never annoyed! The insipidity and yet the noise; the nothingness and yet the self-importance of all these people! – What would I give to hear your strictures on them!”” (Austen, 2004, p. 23)

In this exchange, Miss Caroline Bingley attempts to consolidate her social bond with Mr. Darcy by expressing a shared disdain for a gathering she deems shallow and intellectually stagnant, seeking his validation of her elitist frustration. She strategically critiques the "meaningless noise" of those she considers socially insignificant, yet her performance of class-based boredom fails to achieve its intended intimacy. Instead of reciprocating her cynicism, Darcy subverts her expectations by confessing that his mind is "more agreeably engaged" by the striking beauty of Elizabeth Bennet. This pivotal interaction not only exposes Miss Bingley's pretentious efforts to maintain an exclusive social atmosphere but also highlights a significant shift in Darcy's internal priorities. By redirecting his attention toward

Elizabeth, Darcy introduces a profound emotional tension that challenges the rigid class boundaries Miss Bingley so desperately tries to enforce, thereby establishing one of the central conflicts and dynamic shifts within the novel's social fabric.

4.3 Land Ownership and Wealth

In nineteenth-century England, land ownership and wealth constituted the material foundation of the social hierarchy, where estates served as both primary capital and symbols of elite status. As reflected in *Pride and Prejudice*, the possession of significant acreage, typically exceeding 300 acres for the landed gentry, granted immense socio-political influence and distinguished the aristocracy from the subordinate classes. This rigidity was further perpetuated by inheritance systems such as primogeniture and entailment, which mandated that land remain within the male line, effectively disenfranchising women and stifling social mobility. The stark disparity between grand landowners like Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and smaller landholders like the Bennet family of Longbourn underscores the systemic inequality governing the marriage market and familial security. Through these dynamics, Austen critiques a stratified system where status is inherited rather than earned, positioning land ownership as a central instrument in maintaining the rigid social structures that drive the novel's primary conflicts.

“Mr. Bingley inherited property to the amount of nearly a hundred thousand pounds from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it.” (Austen, 2004, p.14)

This single sentence encodes the entire logic of class reproduction in Regency England. Bingley possesses liquid capital—mobile wealth derived from trade or commerce—but lacks landed property, the ultimate signifier of stable elite status. His father's unfulfilled intention to “purchase an estate” reveals that social mobility remains incomplete until mobile capital is converted into landed property, anchoring the family within the hereditary aristocracy.

From a Marxist perspective, this passage illustrates the relationship between economic base (property relations) and cultural superstructure (social status). Marx (1867) argued that the dominant class maintains power through control of the means of production, which in 19th-century England meant land. The Bennet family's precarious economic standing—dependent on an entail that will disinherit the daughters upon Mr. Bennet's death—demonstrates how property law systematically disenfranchises women. Without access to land, women have no independent economic base; they must marry to survive. This material condition, not individual failing, explains Mrs. Bennet's obsessive pursuit of advantageous matches for her daughters.

Matutes (2025) emphasizes that “incentives rooted in the law and social norms” rather than romantic inclinations primarily drive character behavior. The entail is not merely a plot device but a legal mechanism of class reproduction. It ensures that property remains within the male line, perpetuating class hierarchy across generations while excluding women from economic autonomy. Elizabeth's eventual marriage to Darcy—owner of Pemberley, producing £10,000 annually—does not challenge this system; it rewards her with entry into the class that the entail protects. As Khan, Khan, and Salman (2023) argue, “mobility in class, property, and inheritance” directly determined women's “level of agency and autonomy,” revealing that Elizabeth's journey toward independence was “shaped almost all the time by the struggle against the injustice of property standards.”

The novel's treatment of Pemberley as both physical estate and moral symbol requires careful analysis. Elizabeth's transformation upon visiting Pemberley—her growing attraction

to Darcy coinciding with her appreciation of his property—has been read as evidence of her complicity with class ideology. A more nuanced Marxist reading recognizes that Austen does not celebrate property but reveals its inescapability. Even Elizabeth, the novel's most critical consciousness, cannot imagine a future outside property relations. Her famous declaration to Lady Catherine—"He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal"—affirms class identity even as it claims equality within it.

4.4 Prejudice and Discrimination

In social studies, prejudice and discrimination, defined respectively as negative judgments based on stereotypes and the resultant unfair treatment are central themes that Jane Austen explores within the rigid social framework of nineteenth-century England. As illustrated in *Pride and Prejudice*, these concepts are inextricably linked to social class, gender, and economic status, where the stratified structure of the era reinforced systemic exclusion and limited individual opportunities. Characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy both experience and reflect these biases; Elizabeth is frequently marginalized due to her middle-class origins and limited social connections, while Darcy initially assumes a superior stance predicated on his aristocratic lineage. Their narrative journey demonstrates how such prejudices cloud individual judgment and obstruct social relationships, even within the intimate context of marriage. Ultimately, Austen transcends the romantic plot to offer a sharp critique of a discriminatory culture that restricts mobility based on birth and wealth, positioning the novel as a profound reflection on the social inequalities and the invalidity of established hierarchies in Regency society.

“‘Eliza Bennet,’ said Miss Bingley, when the door was closed on her, ‘is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex, by undervaluing their own; and with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. But, in my opinion, it is a paltry device, a very mean art.’” (Austen, 2004, p.34)

Here, delivered immediately after Elizabeth Bennet's departure, Miss Bingley employs biting satire to marginalize her rival, accusing Elizabeth of utilizing "contemptible and immoral tricks" to secure male attention by supposedly degrading her own gender. This vitriolic aspersion is deeply rooted in Miss Bingley's insecurity and resentment, as she feels increasingly threatened by Elizabeth's intellectual superiority, a trait that conspicuously captivates elite bachelors like Mr. Darcy. Characterized by her arrogance and habitual condescension, Miss Bingley seeks to undermine Elizabeth's growing influence within their social circle. However, her accusation is layered with profound irony; while she condemns Elizabeth's behavior, Miss Bingley herself frequently engages in the same performative disparagement of other women to enhance her own standing. Ultimately, this interaction underscores the broader social conflict and precarious competition among women in the nineteenth century, reflecting how rigid gendered expectations and limited socioeconomic pathways forced women into adversarial roles in their pursuit of marital security and status.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* reveals that nineteenth-century English society was governed by a rigid social structure where marriage functioned as a strategic social transaction, prioritizing financial survival and class consolidation over romantic affection. This systemic reality is exemplified by characters like Charlotte Lucas and Mrs. Bennet, whose actions underscore the precarious position of middle-class women within a patriarchal framework that restricts their access to power and land inheritance. Consequently, wealth, specifically through landed estates like Pemberley, serves as the primary signifier of authority

and moral worth, while the emergence of characters like Mr. Bingley represents the shifting boundaries between the traditional aristocracy and the rising mercantile middle class.

The implications of this study for contemporary literary scholarship are significant. Methodologically, it demonstrates the continued vitality of Marxist criticism for analyzing 19th-century British literature, provided that the framework is sufficiently refined to attend to gender, ideology, and individual agency alongside economic structures. The study also illustrates the value of integrating recent international scholarship—particularly from non-Western contexts—into the analysis of canonical Western texts, challenging the traditional dominance of Euro-American criticism. Theoretically, the study contributes to ongoing debates about Austen's political orientation: rather than resolving the question of whether Austen is a radical critic or conservative apologist, this study argues that the novel's ambivalence—its simultaneous critique of and accommodation to class hierarchy—is precisely what makes it enduringly relevant. Austen does not resolve the tension between individual desire and systemic constraint; she dramatizes it with such precision that readers continue to debate its meaning two centuries later.

The study demonstrates that social hierarchy and etiquette were utilized as instruments of class domination, maintained by elite figures such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Miss Bingley to preserve the status quo through exclusionary decorum. However, Jane Austen subverts this discriminatory system through Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, whose narrative journey necessitates the confrontation of entrenched prejudices regarding class and character. By juxtaposing Elizabeth's intellectual integrity against rigid social norms, Austen critiques a society that evaluates human worth through the lens of birth and wealth. Ultimately, the novel serves as a profound social commentary, illustrating that while the class system dictates the material conditions of life, individual agency and moral clarity remain the only viable means of challenging systemic inequality.

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