



Austen's Game of Feminism

A literary analysis of how Jane Austen showcases her views through her heroine in Pride and Prejudice

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Title

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Abstract

It is a universally acknowledged truth that marriage was a critical element in a woman's life in Regency England. In the patriarchal society, only men can inherit the wealth of their parents, forcing women to marry to climb the stairs of social status and wealth. Marriage became an instrument through which families could quickly gain capital and parents were desperate to marry their daughters to rich young men, leaving women with no choice but to bow to society's demands and be a slave to the system. But Elizabeth Bennet is a woman ahead of her time. Through the romantic and comedic scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Jane Austen orchestrates the heroine could live a life which finds herself marrying not for money, but for love and in so, setting herself apart from the traditionalist culture which has done so much to suppress a woman's right to choose who she wants to marry. She is different in that she refuses to be an object through which her cousin could use to gain her family's wealth despite there being no sons of her parents and the diminishing possibility of her finding a man who could secure her financial independence. Despite Collins's repeated attempt to push Elizabeth to accept his poor-thought marriage proposal and her own mother's disapproval of her actions, she stands her ground for what she believed to be true and free. But by refusing what might've been her only chance to escape her precarious position in a family with no sons and with an aging father, she is playing a game which sees her as the player who is willing to gamble her future to stand for her feminist values. This paper will attempt to assess the situation Elizabeth is in, the pressures inflicted upon her to make choices against her will, and how Austen's views of a post-patriarchal ideal woman influenced this single scene to paint a woman who is not only intelligent and brave but also willing to defy others whom she believes to hold opinions detrimental to the advancement of women. In this analysis, I will be explaining how Austen illustrates her liberal feminist views through Elizabeth and the other characters which contrast her progressive views and, will focus on this proposal scene which I believe best illustrates the liberal feminist views of Austen and Elizabeth through a game of chance, marriage, and integrity.

Key words

Austen, feminism, liberalism, marriage, *Pride and Prejudice*, patriarchy, Elizabeth Bennet, 18th century, Regency

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Artifact One: Pride & Prejudice & Play Critical Analysis

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Pride and Prejudice (1813) tells a story of a woman's fight for love and happiness in defiance of traditional norms. But how valuable is a woman's happiness? Taking place in 18th century England, Jane Austen writes a romantic novel illustrating the strategies used by the Bennet family to ensure financial independence for the daughters by marrying to climb in social status and money. But Elizabeth Bennet was a woman ahead of her time who strived not to succumb to society's traditional expectations but to attain the "felicity which a marriage of true affection could bestow" (Austen 86). This was shown when Mr. Collins, her cousin, proposed to Lizzy in Chapter 19 promising a life of prosperity and ease. By rejecting his proposal for the sake of happiness, she's playing a dangerous game which seeks her married in a way that ensures her independence from his father's income whilst simultaneously have her principles go uncorrupted – a rare occurrence for a bride of her time.

This game of marriage, danger, and romance is a beautiful way Austen uses to orchestrate a better understanding of the main characters in the novel and how their personalities shape their stories. From Collins's perspective, the proposal is a game of cat and mouse. And Elizabeth's the mouse. **His goal** is to secure a wife, preferably from the Bennet family, for *his* happiness. His strategy is simple (and somewhat immature) – go into the Bennet house, look for beautiful girls, and propose to her. By approach, he constructed three arguments for matrimony with Lizzy – to set an example in his parish; because he is convinced Lizzy would add greatly to *his* happiness; and because his patroness, Lady Catherine de Brough insisted on him choosing a "gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*" (92). He is being careful and constructive but failed, nonetheless. Here, Austen cleverly hints why by implying Mr. Collins was only marrying Lizzy for his own happiness as opposed to guaranteeing her interests like a faithful husband through emphasizing words such as *my* and *own* to illustrate that Collins only views Lizzy as an object to complete his life – such is the norm in Regency England. He failed to show any kind of

respect, nor even tried to be romantic by praising Lizzy for her beauty or intelligence which she clearly demonstrated throughout the book.

The proposal was business-like and although Mr. Collins persuaded that this marriage is to save her from the little 4 per cent of Mrs. Bennet's marriage settlement, it was clear the intention was not love but greed when he proposed to her friend just three days after. He himself said he was "coming over into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife." But Elizabeth rejected him. Three times. As a fundamentalist, he refuses to give up and to accept Lizzy's refusal be it for the second or third time. In saying "I shall hope to receive a more favourable answer" and "I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application" (94), Austen depicts him to be too selfish to understand and respect the demands of a woman. He expects Lizzy to be desperate and submissive that he thinks she was willing to play with his emotions to increase suspense and intimate his pleasure. Mr. Collins has tried to convince her by promising money, house, and good social connections. He gave her the cheese, insistent and confident he shall receive a positive answer, but Elizabeth's last reply was clear: "Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from the heart" (95).

He underestimated Lizzy. He reluctantly loses to the mouse – a brave, charming woman who refuses to bow down to the oppressive expectations of society. Elizabeth used the words "you puzzle me", "impossible", and "plainer" to strongly emphasize that she does not and will never marry a man of such uncompromising prideful character be it the expectation of her mother, Lady Catherine, Mr. Collins, and to a higher extent, her family and society. To defy these pressures is to defy Jane Austen's renowned line in 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" (1).

In her paper, Elin Blom explains,

“Placing such a statement at the very beginning of the novel indicates marriage is of great significance... the opening line highlight the importance of acquiring an advantageous marriage. Consequently, it can be suggested that the initial lines of the novel depict the ‘universally acknowledged’, traditional marital values” (8, 9).

When Lizzy saw Jane and Mr. Bingley together, the narrator noted Lizzy’s wishes as an unconventional marital view for Jane to have a marriage based on “true affection.” This view was not expressed much at that time as it would be considered highly inappropriate to traditionalists such as Mrs. Bennet – a firm believer in the patriarchy system who expects her daughter to marry Mr. Collins for money. But she unexpectedly rejected him. In this game of hers, **Lizzy’s goal** is to find a partner who would bring her eternal happiness and economic guarantee in terms of material wellbeing before her father’s decease. But there is no one. She hates Darcy, Bingley is her sister’s, other men were somehow not rich enough to be mentioned in the novel, and time is running out. She was presented with a window of opportunity to accomplish her mission when Collins announced he’s looking for a wife. Given he is to inherit her father’s property, his proposal is a one-way ticket to success other women could only dream of – but she said no. A simple choice that would’ve given her a good life, but she withdrew, and she had no strategy to achieve her goals. Ultimately, it was a gamble for Lizzy to reject Mr. Collins’s proposal as doing so may destroy her only chance to escape the humiliating dependence on the parental home and cause her to be “a stranger” to her own mother (93).

Rejecting his proposal in defiance of her precarious financial situation and the marital norms hoping to marry the right person was a play of fate and order. Such a controversy it was for a

woman to be married and still achieve Lizzy's idea of independence in 18th century England.

Blom brilliantly described Elizabeth's liberal feminist ideas of marriage:

"Austen's fictional character Elizabeth Bennet complies with this concept because she wants independence in her marriage. She refuses to be oppressed by the conventional idea that one should marry in order to achieve wealth or social status, only to be restrained in independence during marriage. A traditionalist character such as Mr. Collins would find that idea absurd, because he wants to have complete control over his wife" (4).

Lizzy was untraditional by refusing an offer from a man, and illogical in that she had a lot to lose by rejecting the financial independence and respectable social connections Mr. Collins promises. Could it be that her desire for women empowerment and happiness be clouding the rationality by blocking a chance so eager to be accepted? Sheehan argues that "Elizabeth is not financially independent, and in fact depends upon an advantageous marriage for her future survival. Yet throughout the novel, she asserts an intellectual and moral independence" (xxxii). Her idea of independence is progressive of the men of her time. 19th century women believed marriage to be an escape from their parental home and to acquire a household of theirs; hence even if they were financially dependent on their husbands, to marry is to be free. But Elizabeth was no ordinary woman. She rejects her cousin because she wholeheartedly believes the marriage would only end in unhappiness and regret. She believes she will lose whatever independence she has in her adolescent years (shown by her ability to travel alone and attend social gatherings) should she marry someone who lurks to be dominant in control (as shown by his persistence in the proposal). In her own words, "Mr. Collins is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man" (117). She believed this will lead to her demise, not her success and now, she's still waiting.

Ultimately, economic independence was only granted for male heirs, whilst women were expected to search for males to succeed financially. This notion correlates well with the Regency period when women were denied inheritance rights and thus must marry to climb the ladder of society, even through arranged ones. Jane Austen was one of the critics who openly disagreed with this suppressive system, spreading her ideas by writing through the portrayal of the feminist heroine Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth wants to marry, but not for “good fortune” entirely. By understanding this game of chances, we come to dive deeper into Elizabeth’s strong-willed character who isn’t chained to society’s standards – a topic relevant even today discussing the rights and position of women in all sectors. We see her intelligence and perseverance in finding the right marriage and happiness by taking risks and being brave in defying and standing up to other men who wish to take advantage of her position. I believe that this single scene was done beautifully to orchestrate Austen’s beliefs and the ramifications of a society which refuses to strive for gender equality.

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