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The Social Commentary of Jane Austen

The novels of Jane Austen are known for being escapist fictions and are often presented as idealized worlds in which the main character marries her prince charming in the end—perhaps not the man she was expecting to marry, but the one that was right for her nonetheless. What sometimes goes less noticed in these novels, hidden under the romanticism, is Jane Austen’s view of social classes and the people that make up these classes. In her novels, Austen presents a largely traditional view of social classes and favors a society where members of every class behave according to their station in life.

Austen’s novels primarily focus on the landed middle class, demonstrating her preference for this level of society. Austen uses a specific formula in her novels that is followed closely, which she has even recounted to family in letters. In one of her letters she states that she favors depicting “three or four families in a country village,” making the portrayal of her England quite narrow (Herbert 1991, 196). The small group of people that Austen depicts limits the number of different types of people she portrays in her novels. According to Herbert, this narrow scope reflects the setting in which she “is most comfortable,” but also hints at “the narrow lens through which she view[s] the world” (197). Austen simply writes about what she herself knows. Her focus is on “the world in which she herself live[s]” (205), demonstrating her preference for the landed gentry, which results in part from her own upbringing. While at times the poor are

mentioned in her novels, “it is in a fleeting and unsympathetic way” (197). Austen does not show sympathy for those who lack fortune in life, favoring a more practical view of acceptance of one’s lot in life. Austen’s novels embody the perspective of a member of the middle class and demonstrate the value of being born into the landed gentry.

While Austen has this narrow focus, it is clear through her novels that she believes that for any woman, the ideal situation is to be married. In Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s best friend Charlotte Lucas marries Mr. Collins, who is portrayed as obsequious to his patron Lady Catherine de Bourgh and innately “not a sensible man” with this “deficiency of nature [being] but little assisted by education or society” (79). Despite these deficiencies (which Elizabeth finds to be unacceptable as she refuses his offer), to Miss Lucas the allure of Mr. Collins is his interest as a suitor who has “the guilt of inheriting Longbourn,” the Bennet family home, after Mr. Bennet’s death (71). Readers are led to feel conflicted about this match, just as Elizabeth is. On the one hand, Charlotte marries an intolerable man, but on the other, Charlotte does get to marry. For Charlotte, merely getting to marry is a success as it is shown that in their small society she is often overshadowed by her friends Elizabeth and Jane, and she is already slightly older than the age at which women usually make matches. In the context of the match of Charlotte and Mr. Collins, which is not ideal, Austen reveals that in general, “Marriage is the goal of a woman’s life, and if [she] plays the courtship game right, and has a little luck into the bargain, she stands a good chance of having a rather pleasant life” (Scheuermann 1993, 199). While not every marriage will be perfect, Austen recognizes that any marriage is better than no marriage, and it is merely a matter of luck and a bit of skill in finding a good match. After their marriage, Austen does not portray Charlotte’s life as bad, since Charlotte arranges her life such that she rarely sees her husband, and Elizabeth finds her quite happy in her new married life.

Austen shows that for some, though not for all, marriage is not so much about compatibility, but about the opportunity to be comfortable in life. In the world she creates, Austen gives a less favorable alternative that is treated as an unfortunate fate. In the majority of Austen's novel *Emma*, Jane Fairfax is ostensibly destined for a position as a governess, but Austen treats these circumstances as unfortunate, and always makes any acknowledgement of them awkward. Austen "recognizes the problem in a situation like [Jane Fairfax's]" and "finds it regrettable that Jane Fairfax would have to waste her life as a governess if she could not find someone to marry her" (200). In marriage, Austen sees an alternative to work, which is portrayed to be a somewhat unpleasant way of life. In this way, marriage to Austen is a matter of practicality, as she "makes it clear that the way a woman makes a living is to marry a man" (200). Rather than just being about attraction, marriage is a means of survival for a woman in Austen's world. Austen presents the married life as preferable, but still takes a practical viewpoint on this preference. She acknowledges that "Life is difficult for a woman who has not married," but also "does not suggest that society needs to seek some answer to that problem (200). Austen sees misfortune as a reality, rather than a social problem. Austen does not portray this reality as wrong, and the characters do not "question the social structure that makes this so," instead, "each woman acts so as to maximize her chances for the marriage that will stand between herself and the unfortunate condition of spinsterhood" (200). Marriage is treated by Austen as the goal for a woman, but she also does not show pity for those who are not seemingly destined to be married, instead she recognizes but also accepts it as an unfortunate situation.

For Austen, marriage equally depends on money and on love. She treats it as "not only reasonable but unavoidable to look at money matters as part of any matrimonial pairing," as in Austen's novels, wealth is primarily "a fixed pool that is shared out according to marriage deals"

(Scheuermann 1993, 202). To Austen, there is an unavoidable link between money and marriage due to the way in which money is dispersed. Austen uses fine detail in description of money in her novels, such as in *Pride and Prejudice*, where in Mr. Darcy's entrance to the assembly hall, it only takes five minutes for the report "of his having ten thousand a year" to be circulated through the room (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 12). Likewise, in the descriptions of Mr. Bingley's sisters, the focus is on their wealth, as they "had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds" which they "were in the habit of spending more [of] than they ought" (18). Austen's focus on the wealth of her characters demonstrates an idea that their wealth is an important character trait, just as much as their appearance and their manners, and sometimes even more so, as she notes that Mr. Bingley's sisters are "in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others" due to their rank and wealth (18). While making fun of pride throughout this novel, Austen suggests that some pride is justified by wealth. This justification only works to a point though, as she favors wealth inherited, not earned in trade, as she notes that Bingley's sisters behave as if they don't remember that "their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade" (18). This distinction between the sources of wealth gives a closer look into Austen's values, as she favors not only the wealthy, but those who come from great families. She does not favor a complete focus on money in marriage; instead there is a "continuum of fortune/wishes" on which there is "the implicit suggestion that at some point interest in fortune is common sense, and on either side of that mark interest shades either into greed or desperation" (Scheuermann 1993, 209). Austen recognizes that there is a fine line between carelessness and greed in marriage choice, valuing both appropriate aspirations and keeping one's future finances in mind. Austen even sympathizes with Wickham's suit of Miss King, a young woman who is not described to have any real virtues except a sizable inheritance, only condemning him for his blackmail in

marrying Lydia. Elizabeth regards Wickham's suit of Miss King as "a wise and desirable measure" in recognition of her inheritance, rather than wishing him ill-will for his loss of interest in herself (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 170-171). On the other hand, the most unfavorable part of Wickham's relationship with Lydia is his conditional agreement to marry her for Darcy's money, an indication of greed that leaves the reader with mixed feelings about the affair, as it's still preferable to his leaving Lydia in disgrace. While Austen does not fully forgive a lapse in good character, she also values the ability to finance a comfortable lifestyle.

Austen's marriages always remain within class lines. While Austen "makes fun of pretensions of one sort of another," in all of her novels, final pairings "do not offend class lines" (Scheuermann 1993, 202). In *Emma*, Miss Woodhouse justifies dissuading Harriet Smith from marrying Robert Martin by explaining to Mr. Knightley that she "cannot admit him to be Harriet's equal" despite Harriet's class being in truth, completely unknown and her station in life not wholly genteel (Austen, *Emma* 61). Mr. Knightley, who is "always Austen's voice," (Scheuermann 1993, 222), rightly chides Emma that Martin is "as much [Harriet's] superior in sense as in situation" due to Harriet's unknown background, as Harriet has no claims "either of birth, nature, or education, to any connexion higher than Robert Martin" (Austen, *Emma* 61). Austen presents Emma's notion of allowing Harriet to marry up and deny her true social status as foolish. This is reinforced by the end of the novel, where Harriet does end up marrying Robert Martin, and her parentage reveals that she is "the daughter of a tradesman," and is merely equal to Robert Martin (501). By tying up loose ends in this way, Austen admonishes aspirations to marry out of one's class and demonstrates why it makes sense to marry within one's class.

While Austen sees marriage as important, she presents it as more of a fact of life rather than a priority. The women in her novels are not so concerned about the future and "spend little

time...imagining themselves in it” (Scheuermann 1993, 201). While the novels focus on marriage, the characters themselves discuss it occasionally but do not spend their time possessed by anxiety about their chances of getting married or wondering at who they will end up marrying. Instead, the novels focus on “their daily concerns” such as “A letter from Frank Churchill, a visit from Mr. Knightley,” or “a snub from Darcy at a ball” (Scheuermann 201). This portrayal of Austen’s characters, or at least the ‘reasonable’ ones she is sympathetic to, as being not wholly concerned with their future, demonstrates Austen’s attitude of acceptance of fate, despite the recognition that the ideal situation for a woman is to get married.

Austen ridicules people who act above their class and demonstrates the “rightness” in behaving appropriately to one’s class. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Sir William Lucas is described as having made “a tolerable fortune” and “ris[ing] to the honour of knighthood by an address to the king during his mayoralty” before settling into Lucas Lodge (20). This self-made man is portrayed as acting foolish as he now spends his time “think[ing] with pleasure of his own importance, and, unshackled by business, occupy[ing] himself solely in being civil to all the world” (20-21). As “neither [his] money nor his title are old,” his pride is treated as out of place by Austen, more inappropriate than a pride born of natural right such as Darcy’s (Scheuermann 1993, 204). Similarly, Mrs. Bennet is portrayed as behaving inappropriately when she openly hunts for a rich husband for her eldest daughter Jane. In Mr. Darcy’s explanation for discouraging Bingley’s pursuit of Jane, Darcy cites her “total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, by [Elizabeth’s] three younger sisters, and occasionally even by [Mr. Bennet]” (227). Mrs. Bennet’s public desire to raise her own family’s situation is treated as shameful, reflecting a view that one should stick to one’s own class, and her punishment is the near crushing of her dreams if not for Mr. Darcy’s own feelings for Elizabeth.

Austen differentiates between ambition and pride, demonstrating an expectation of behavior depending on one's class.

While Austen shows a disdain for the professions in her earlier writings, a change of heart, shown in her later writings, indicates an awareness of the decline of the landed class through her lifetime. In her early novels, Austen mocks those in the professions such as Mr. Collins, a priest *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr. Collins is utterly dependent on haughty figures such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh, to the extent that he cannot stop talking about her "condescension" to him and the honors she has thereby bestowed upon him. His foolish self-abasement demonstrates a disdain for those who do rise above their given station in life by means of a profession, especially those who only 'wear the collar' for its social status, rather than having a true calling by their religion. In later novels, though, such as *Emma*, a "less conservative and more inclusive world" is portrayed in relation to the professionals of the gentry (Drum 2009, 101). George and John Knightley represent these professionals, and Austen portrays them positively and with reverence to their professions and their professionalism. John Knightley, the younger brother, is portrayed to be hard working and in the business of law, though exactly what he does is unclear, but being the younger brother without the inheritance of the estate, he still provides for his family and is favorably portrayed by Austen in doing so. More significantly, George Knightley, the elder brother, is kept busy by his work as squire and magistrate, and his professionalism in his work demonstrates a strong character. Rather than portraying the working as insufferable as in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen portrays their professionalism and hard work as positive character traits, not necessarily preferable over a relaxed lifestyle, but a valid and respected alternative. This change in portrayals of the professions reflects Austen's acceptance of changing times, as there was a simultaneous decline of the landed gentry as she wrote her novels.

Corresponding with her acceptance of various social situations rather than crying for reform, Austen faces her reality and adapts her writing and her own mentalities to match the new world she finds herself in.

While Austen's writing demonstrates a slight alteration in attitude towards the English class system during her life time, by and large her novels portray a very traditional view in which social class is an absolute construct under which all people should behave. According to Austen, the ideal place in society is occupied by the landed gentry, who can just live off of their own wealth. While her novels remain popular today, her ideals are not widely accepted. Her novels' continued representation of what is considered by many to almost be a fairytale demonstrates the impact that wealth still has on the world today. While the strict class system of Jane Austen's England no longer exists, wealth still dictates social opportunity in many ways, and the security and comfort of a life lived wealthy is still as tempting an idea as the romanticized ideal of the handsome knight in shining armor.

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