

**TAKING THE HIGH ROAD: A STUDY OF JANE AUSTEN'S IDENTIFICATION
AND CLASSIFICATION OF CHARACTERS BASED ON 'CLASS'
IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an insight into Jane Austen's sharp observation and judgement of characters based on social behavior as depicted in Pride and Prejudice. Jane Austen belonged to an educated family with noble ties. She was deeply influenced by the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars which impacted the social life of Regency England in the late 18th and early 19th century. The Industrial Revolution proved to be a blessing in disguise for the middle class especially the traders and merchants who earned a great fortune because of industrialization which in turn stirred their desire to climb the social ladder and mingle with the upper class. Besides the social turmoil, Jane Austen's focus in the novel is marriage and courtship. Her characters belong to the upper and middle class in the novel Pride and Prejudice. The ambition of her characters at the personal level in finding an ideal man coupled with social aspirations of being acquainted and recognized as the upper class has been projected by Austen through the use of humour, satire, and wit. The social behavior of her characters, the dialogues and social interactions between them in the novel is a reflection of their class. Her novels are often identified as the novel of manners. Jane Austen critiques the social customs and norms of Regency England and is famous for her commentaries on the British landed gentry of Regency England which is evident in her novel 'Pride and Prejudice'. Jane Austen has been primarily recognized for her satire on social realism in the novel. She acknowledges the importance of noble inheritance and money but her judgement of characters in the novel is not based on social class alone but identifies the class as being directly proportional to social etiquettes and mannerisms of her characters.

KEYWORDS: Class, Novel of Manners, Regency England, Social Behaviour & Social Realism

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INTRODUCTION

ABBREVIATIONS: PP- Pride and Prejudice

Jane Austen highlights the social turmoil and class conflict of regency England through her male and female characters belonging to the upper and the middle classes. In PP her characters are judged by the extent to which they comply with the Regency England code of conduct defined for the upper- class men and women. Since a woman's respect and success lies in finding the right bridegroom at the right age, it is important for a woman to be well-accomplished and socially graced as expected by the society. It is also a reflection of her financial status and guarantees a better chance of a prospective groom. Jane Austen introduces the concept of a 'gentleman' to reflect upon her concept of class for her male characters. She uses the term 'gentleman' to enlighten the readers of the social class mobility and class conflicts. As a 'novel of manners' PP is a mirror of social etiquettes and mannerisms expected in Austen's times

and its impact on the characters in forming impressions and social judgement.

Jane Austen's PP gives a vivid description of the distinctions between the upper and middle class on the basis of social codes of conduct rather than on income generated from the land. Through her concerns over courtship and marriage, Austen highlights the social etiquettes and mannerisms of her characters in defining their journey to climb the social ladder in the prevailing social atmosphere.

ANALYSIS OF PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Austen introduces the Bennett family comprising of Mr. Bennett, who owns the Longbourn estate, his wife, Mrs. Bennet and their 5 daughters Jane, Elizabeth, the female protagonist, Mary, Catherine, and Lydia. Mrs. Bennet is desperate to get her daughters married to well-to-do upper class bachelors knowing that her daughters would be rendered destitute as Mr. Bennet's property would be entailed to William Collins a distant cousin of Mr. Bennet. Since Mrs. Bennet is unable to bear a male heir to Mr. Bennet's property, in the patriarchal hierarchy, her daughters would bear the burden of falling into the lower class if they are unable to captivate a good match and marry into the upper class. Since Mr. Bennet does not have to earn for a living the Bennet sisters are considered gentlewomen by virtue of birth. Mr. Bennet is introduced in the novel as a gentleman with a good sense of humour; he follows the etiquette calls on Mr. Bingley, who has shifted into his neighborhood in order to begin the acquaintance as followed in Regency England. On the other hand, Mrs. Bennet is excited about the idea of the eligible match for her daughters who have arrived in the neighborhood. She does not behave, but acts high class and is a woman of mean disposition belonging to the middle class by birth. Mr. Bingley belongs to the 'nouveau rich' upper-class gentry whose family has inherited money in trade during the Industrial Revolution and are soon to become landlords. Mr. Darcy the male protagonist a close friend of Mr. Bingley is a wealthy gentleman and the proprietor of Pemberley estate in Derbyshire, England who comes on a visit to his friend in Hertfordshire, England.

Besides gentle birth and wealth, Austen judges the conduct and mannerisms of her male characters in social gatherings. On a visit to Mr. Bingley at Hertfordshire, Mr. Darcy along with Mr. Bingley is introduced to the Bennet sisters at a ball which according to Austen plays a crucial role in courtship. The attitude and behavior of the two friends at the ball towards the young ladies are contrasting which Jane Austen conveys through the first impressions formed at first sight although, as the novel progresses she convinces the readers to be empathetic towards her male protagonist Mr. Darcy. Jane Bennet also is known as Ms. Bennet by virtue of being the eldest daughter of the Bennets according to Regency Era customs, comments about Mr. Bingley

'He is just what young man ought to be.. sensible, good -humoured, lively and I never saw such happy manners! so much ease with such perfect breeding.'

Through Jane's comments, one is convinced of Mr. Bingley's gentlemanly aura. At the ball the conversation between Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy when Mr. Darcy comments on being asked to dance with Elizabeth the female protagonist and the second daughter of the Bennets

'She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me;'

It is evident from his talks that Mr. Darcy is class-conscious, proud and arrogant and Austen satirizes social class by mocking at his disagreeable nature. Austen projects class differences by highlighting Mr. Darcy's demeaning attitude towards Elizabeth Bennet, although he falls in love with her later on. Austen is optimistic about the social class of the new

middle class, the tradesman, and merchants to which the two friends belong to, but her introduction of Mr. Bingley gives her perception of a gentleman as not determined by wealth alone. Austen emphasizes the power and influence of the landed gentry through Mr. Bennet. Through her portraits of Mr. Bennet, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy of different birth order and inheritance, Austen highlights social conduct as the key to a gentleman amidst class mobility and social turmoil of the late 18th and early 19th century caused by the Industrial Revolution.

George Wickham, Austen's militia officer is a gentleman bestowed upon him by Mr. Darcy's family on account of his father's virtuous deeds. Mr. Wickham's father has worked on Mr. Darcy's estate for his father. George Wickham is introduced as a charming, good-looking militia officer, but deceitful. Austen satirizes the social hierarchy by calling Wickham a gentleman for his appearance and the gentleness and goodness in his manner. The conversation between Ms. Bennet and Elizabeth about Mr. Darcy and Wickham, 'there certainly was some great mismanagement in the education of those two young men, one has got all the goodness and the other all the appearance of it' reveals Austen's views on the gentlemanly professions defined in Regency England. By comparing the two characters Austen highlights the correlation between gentle birth and good breeding. However, she does not ignore the mannerisms and conduct of her characters and projects it as a prerequisite for the title of a gentleman.

Through the themes of courtship and marriage, Austen has also projected that being socially adept and socially graced is equally important for women and also increases the chances of prospective grooms. Elizabeth the female protagonist is also the favourite daughter of Mr. Bennet. She is introduced as a girl with intelligence, good sense of humour, presence of mind, pleasant disposition, confident and a well accomplished lady. Although rejected by Mr. Darcy for a dance at the first ball Elizabeth's conduct and behavior captivates Mr. Darcy who falls in love with her. During a conversation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Darcy's aunt and the owner of the Rosalyn estate Mr Bennett tells her in marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal'. Austen is optimistic about being of noble birth and status associated with being the landed gentry, but she lays emphasis on chivalry for a gentleman and being well accomplished for a lady in identifying an individual to the social class they belong to. On the other hand Lydia, fifteen years old and the youngest of the Bennet sisters is an impulsive, self-centered girl thoroughly spoiled by her mother. Breaking Regency Era rules of conduct she is encouraged by Mrs. Bennet to attend balls and social gatherings at the age of fifteen. She elopes with the wicked Wickham put the family reputation at stake not realizing that she has four elder sisters to be married. Although Mr. Darcy comes to her rescue and forces Wickham to marry her, the credit goes to Elizabeth because of the love and respect she has earned from Mr. Darcy by virtue of her proper conduct.

CONCLUSIONS

Today 'money makes the mare go' but Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* can be viewed optimistically even today as it gives the relationship between class, money and social conduct. Her protagonists are a role model in being a true gentleman and a gentlewoman, and representation of class in its true essence.

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has embedded within deep concerns over money, status, and property. The novel deals with the landed gentry as well as the middle class, 'nouveau rich' which is the most influential class of the society in Regency England as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. *Pride and Prejudice* deals with the prejudiced patriarchal society and Austen has made use of satire to mock the English society of the times. Her characters belong to the upper and

middle class and are a realistic depiction of the society that existed in the late 18th and 19th century. Regency England society was guided by social rules, regulations, and customs for both men and women. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen describes her characters through dialogues and social interactions giving the readers a living and realistic depiction of the society and its expectations from individuals. Her protagonists Mr. Darcy and Ms. Elizabeth are not only an ideal representative of Austen's England but also a role model for the young men and women.

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