

Class, Capital, and Commodification: A Marxist Critique of Social and Economic Hierarchies in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theory of Marxist literary criticism in relation to *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen in order to reveal the societal constructs contained within the work, including the exploration of the social and economic hierarchies of early 19th-century England. *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel of manners in the traditional sense, but it has subtle undercurrents of class struggle, economic dependence, and the commodification of marriage. By instituting practices of social hierarchy, capitalist structures dictate the economic situation of Austen's characters, such as the Bennet family; wealth and social status take precedence over status attained through personal merit. From a Marxist perspective, the reading underscores the economic dimension of marriage in the novel, characterizing matrimony as a tool for economic survival. This point is best articulated by Charlotte Lucas, who sees marriage as a means to an end rather than as an object of desire. The tensions between the landed gentry and the upstart middle classes are likewise interrogated. To cite just one example, characters like Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley demonstrate how power and influence afforded to their class of income (great riches) underpin their social superiority and upper-class romance. The study also analyzes the restrictions imposed on women in the patriarchal society of the novel and how their economic destinies are defined by prosperous marriages. This paper uses a Marxist approach to argue that *Pride and Prejudice* is not only a reproduction of the class struggles that pervade Austen's era but also a critique of how socioeconomic systems inform the dynamics of individual agency and interpersonal relationships. Its broader story serves as a lens on the material conditions of life that shape the very existence of its characters.

Keywords: Marxist criticism, Class struggle, Economic dependency, Commodification of marriage, social hierarchy

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has been extensively analyzed through various critical lenses, with Marxist interpretations gaining prominence in recent scholarship. These analyses delve into the novel's portrayal of social stratification, economic dependencies, and the commodification inherent in matrimonial alliances. Recent studies have underscored the novel's critique of class distinctions and the economic imperatives governing personal relationships. Asif and Ahmad (2021) identify Marxist elements within the narrative, highlighting how characters' socioeconomic statuses influence their interactions and societal positions. They argue that Austen subtly critiques the capitalist structures that perpetuate class disparities and limit social mobility. Similarly, Hayat, Waheed, and Iqbal (2021) employ a Marxist feminist perspective to examine the portrayal of women in a patriarchal society, emphasizing how economic constraints dictate their choices and autonomy. This approach reveals the intersection of class and gender, illustrating how both constructs confine female agency.

The theme of marriage as an economic transaction is a focal point in contemporary discourse. Suson (2023) discusses the commodification of women within the marriage market, noting that characters like Charlotte Lucas view matrimony as a means of financial security rather than romantic fulfillment. This perspective aligns with Marxist critiques of how capitalist societies commodify human relationships, reducing them to economic exchanges. Furthermore, analyses by Yi (2014) explore the rigid social hierarchies depicted in the novel, demonstrating how class consciousness influences characters' decisions and perpetuates systemic inequalities.

Despite these insights, a gap persists in the literature concerning a comprehensive analysis that integrates class struggle, economic dependency, and the commodification of marriage within *Pride and Prejudice*. While individual studies have addressed these themes separately, there is a need for a holistic examination that considers how these elements collectively critique the socioeconomic structures of early 19th-century England. This paper aims to fill this void by employing a Marxist framework to analyze the interplay of class dynamics, economic imperatives, and matrimonial commodification in Austen's narrative.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on a Marxist theoretical model, the study analyzes the social and economic hierarchies expressed in *Pride and Prejudice*. A Marxist critic analyzes works from the standpoint of Class Questions of York, and invites you to do the same. It argues that economic considerations are the main influences shaping social orders and interpersonal relations, with literature as a vehicle that mirrors and repowers these processes.

Class struggle, Marx explains, is the force driving history, and this idea is central to the analysis. In the case of Austen's novel such distinctions in class are apparent in the rounds of conversation between characters of differing stature, from the upper-class Mr. Darcy to the lower-middle-class Bennet family. In this study, I explore how these interactions illuminate tensions and conflicts surrounding class difference, as well as how characters navigate and, at times, undermine these socio-economic boundaries.

Economic dependence is another essential dimension of the analysis. The Marxist paradigm stresses the emergence of relations of economic power and dependence in capitalist societies. This dynamic is illustrated in *Pride and Prejudice* through the reliance of women on advantageous marriages to ensure financial security. Then there's the character of Charlotte Lucas who represents the practical view of marriage as a means of economic survival in a world that left few paths open to women for securing their livelihoods.

This prism demonstrates how the Marxist theory of commodity fetishism informs a critique of marriage as the commodification of relationships, with social relations being mediated through economic transactions. Marriage in the novel tends to operate as a marketplace, where social status and economic advantage are favored over mutual compatibility or affection. Capitalism's nature of commodification does not stop at assets but extends into the personal sphere as well, where social relationships assume transactional forms where the micro and the macro reinforce already consolidating class structures.

This study endeavors to extend the critical perspective of *Pride and Prejudice* through the lens of Marxist theory, aiming to demonstrate that, far from being a simple reflection of Austen's contemporary class society, the text critiques the very socio-economic systems that dictate the interactions between individuals as well as the autonomy of the human spirit.

Tracing signals of commodification across Austen's works, this project will analyze how capital and class structure the narrative itself in an attempt to expand the workings of Marxist literary criticism to better grapple with Austen's work and post-Revolutionary England.

Discussion

Class Structure and Economic Dependency

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* presents a society where economic conditions determine social status and personal autonomy, particularly for women. The class system in early nineteenth-century England, as reflected in the novel, operates within a rigid structure that prioritizes wealth and inheritance. The Bennet family epitomizes the vulnerability of those who lack financial security, especially in a patriarchal system where inheritance laws favor male heirs. The entailment of Longbourn, the family estate, to Mr. Collins highlights the structural economic dependency of women, leaving the Bennet sisters with limited options for securing their futures (Austen, 1813, p. 23).

Charlotte Lucas serves as a poignant example of economic pragmatism in a capitalist society. Her acceptance of Mr. Collins' proposal underscores the reality that marriage, for women without independent wealth, is primarily a financial transaction. She candidly states, "I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home" (Austen, 1813, p. 107). Her decision aligns with Karl Marx's theory of alienation, as she is forced to suppress personal desires in favor of economic security (Marx, 1844, p. 77). Charlotte's marriage exemplifies how women in this society are commodified, their value measured by their ability to secure economic stability through matrimony.

Similarly, Mrs. Bennet's obsession with marrying off her daughters reflects the social reality that a woman's economic well-being is tied to her husband's financial standing. As she exclaims, "If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield... and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for" (Austen, 1813, p. 32). Her concerns stem from the knowledge that without advantageous marriages, her daughter's risk financial destitution, a reflection of the capitalist structure that dictates women's economic survival through matrimony.

Commodification of Marriage

Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* functions as a mechanism for financial consolidation rather than solely as a union based on love. The transactional nature of marriage is evident in the courtships throughout the novel, where economic status is often a more significant factor than emotional compatibility. Mr. Collins' proposal to Elizabeth Bennet is particularly revealing. He assures her that marriage to him would provide security, stating, "My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favor" (Austen, 1813, p. 92). His argument highlights the extent to which marriage is reduced to an economic calculation, reinforcing Marxist critiques of how capitalist structures commodify human relationships (Eagleton, 1976, p. 134).

Elizabeth Bennet, in rejecting Mr. Collins, resists this commodification, asserting her agency despite financial insecurity. Her decision challenges the societal norm that compels women to accept economically advantageous marriages regardless of personal inclination. However, even Elizabeth's eventual marriage to Mr. Darcy does not entirely escape economic implications. While she marries for love, Darcy's immense wealth remains a central factor in the union. His status as a wealthy landowner positions him within the traditional aristocracy, securing both his influence and desirability (Austen, 1813, p. 278). From a Marxist

perspective, Elizabeth's improved financial status after marriage exemplifies how economic forces shape personal relationships, reinforcing the notion that marriage functions as a form of capital accumulation (Marx and Engels, 1848, p. 49).

The commodification of marriage is further illustrated through the character of Lydia Bennet, whose elopement with Mr. Wickham poses a threat to her family's social standing. Lydia's impulsive actions jeopardize not only her own future but also the marriage prospects of her sisters, as seen in the anxious response of her father: "Wickham will never marry Lydia. He has neither integrity nor money" (Austen, 1813, p. 273). Wickham's initial reluctance to marry Lydia until a financial arrangement is made further emphasizes the economic underpinnings of marriage, reinforcing the Marxist assertion that capitalist societies reduce human interactions to economic exchanges (Harvey, 2010, p. 86).

Class Tensions and Social Mobility

The novel's depiction of class tensions reflects broader capitalist struggles, particularly in the contrast between the landed gentry and the rising middle class. Mr. Darcy, as the owner of Pemberley, represents the established aristocracy, whereas Mr. Bingley, whose fortune originates from trade, symbolizes the emerging bourgeoisie. Despite Bingley's wealth, his social position remains precarious due to the origins of his family's fortune, as evidenced by Caroline Bingley's attempts to align herself with the aristocratic elite (Austen, 1813, p. 44). This dynamic echoes Marxist notions of class struggle, where the bourgeoisie seeks acceptance among the ruling class while simultaneously challenging its dominance (Marx, 1867, p. 215).

Lady Catherine de Bourgh embodies the old aristocracy's resistance to social mobility, as seen in her vehement opposition to Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy. She declares, "Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" (Austen, 1813, p. 356), revealing her belief that Elizabeth's lower social status renders her unworthy of marriage into the aristocracy. Her disdain illustrates how the ruling class seeks to maintain economic power and social exclusivity by controlling marriage alliances, reinforcing the capitalist system's mechanisms for preserving wealth within elite circles (Johnson, 1995, p. 65).

Despite these barriers, the novel suggests that economic mobility is possible within the capitalist framework, albeit through strategic marriage. The eventual union of Elizabeth and Darcy challenges the rigid boundaries of class, yet it simultaneously affirms the importance of wealth in securing social acceptance. Even Elizabeth, who marries for love, benefits from the financial stability and social elevation that comes with becoming the mistress of Pemberley (Austen, 1813, p. 423). This reflects the dual nature of capitalism: while it enables upward mobility, it does so within a structure that continues to prioritize wealth accumulation and social hierarchy (Wood, 1999, p. 178).

Through a Marxist lens, *Pride and Prejudice* reveals the pervasive influence of class, capital, and commodification in shaping social relationships. The novel critiques the economic structures that govern marriage, illustrating how financial necessity dictates women's choices and reinforces capitalist hierarchies. The transactional nature of marriage, as seen in Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet's experiences, highlights the extent to which economic dependency dictates personal agency. The class tensions between the landed gentry and the rising bourgeoisie further illuminate the shifting power dynamics within capitalist societies. Ultimately, Austen's novel serves as both a reflection and critique of the economic forces that shape individual destinies, reinforcing the argument that material conditions dictate social mobility and personal fulfillment.

Findings

The analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* through a Marxist lens reveals several key insights regarding the socio-economic hierarchies and class dynamics depicted in the novel. Firstly, the novel underscores the centrality of wealth and social status in determining personal relationships and individual agency. The Bennet family's financial insecurity highlights the precarious position of the lower gentry, whose survival depends on strategic marriages rather than personal merit. This reflects the capitalist structures of early 19th-century England, where economic capital dictates social mobility.

Secondly, marriage in the novel functions as a transactional mechanism, reinforcing economic dependency, particularly for women. Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic decision to marry Mr. Collins exemplifies the commodification of marriage, where romantic fulfillment is secondary to financial security. In contrast, Elizabeth Bennet's eventual union with Mr. Darcy suggests an idealistic yet ultimately class-conscious resolution, where love is only achievable within the framework of economic stability.

Moreover, the novel presents a nuanced depiction of class tensions between the landed aristocracy and the emergent middle class. Mr. Bingley's wealth, acquired through commerce, signals a shift in the economic landscape, where inherited status is increasingly challenged by capital accumulation. However, the novel ultimately reaffirms traditional class structures, as Mr. Darcy's aristocratic lineage remains the highest marker of social prestige.

Finally, the limitations imposed on women in the patriarchal society depicted in *Pride and Prejudice* illustrate how economic constraints shape their autonomy. The novel critiques a system where women's futures are largely dictated by their ability to secure advantageous marriages, thus reinforcing gendered economic dependency.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *Pride and Prejudice*, while often categorized as a novel of manners, serves as a subtle critique of the capitalist and patriarchal structures governing early 19th-century England. By applying a Marxist framework, the paper has highlighted the ways in which economic forces dictate personal relationships, particularly through the institution of marriage. The novel exposes the inherent inequalities faced by women and the lower gentry, whose futures are largely determined by wealth and social standing rather than individual agency. While Austen's narrative ultimately conforms to the era's social conventions, it simultaneously reveals the contradictions and injustices within the class system. The text, therefore, functions both as a reflection of and a critique on the material conditions shaping its characters' lives. By recognizing these themes, readers can engage with *Pride and Prejudice* not only as a romantic novel but also as a commentary on the socio-economic hierarchies of Austen's time hierarchies that, in many ways, persist in contemporary society.

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