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### Pride, Prejudice, and Marriage

One of the major themes in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and also throughout the Victorian Period of literature, is that of marriage. Society held expectations that men and women of suitable socioeconomic backgrounds would marry and procreate so that their children could one day be matched up into equally suitable matches and thus continue the expected cycle. The question of what makes a desirable match is one that is examined in this novel. Marriage can be based on beauty, financial standing, personality, or some combination of these three or more factors. Also there is the issue of what role love will play in a marriage match versus the role of practicality. We see these issues exemplified in the various marriages that exist in the text.

For the Bennett family, marriage was a pressing concern as they had multiple daughters and no sons. This was a problem because of English inheritance laws of the period. Mr. Collins, a cousin, would receive the Bennett estate after Mr. Bennett's death rather than his wife and daughters due to entailment. The threat of this occurrence hanging over the Bennetts is another reason the subject of marriage is so critical to the family and to Mrs. Bennett in particular as it was the "business of her life to get her daughters married" (Austen 5). Sandra MacPherson, however, argues that the entailment in the novel was more than a plot device and that "what is entailed in *Pride and Prejudice* is an argument about short- and long-term obligations: an argument on behalf of a model of obligation whose durability and impersonality, whose extension through time and social space, is enabled by the technology-at once conceptual and historical-of

entailment” (MacPherson 2). Austen’s probable knowledge of Estate Law in England during this period allowed her to add in this element of social commentary as well as more tension to the situation of the Bennett girls.

The novel’s opening lines focus on marriage as they state that “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1). It is important to note the qualification placed on the man in question, as it is not all men that are in want of a wife but specifically those who have ample financial stability who are to make good potential husbands. These opening lines set the stage for the entire novel and out of the five Bennett sisters, three will be married by the close of the story.

Jane, Elizabeth, and Lydia will all enter into marriages that were formed based on different criteria. Austen seems to emphasize the use of reason in mate selection but a large part of the story’s narrative is compelled forward due to chance; chance meetings, schedules rearranging, misunderstandings etc but that Austen uses chance in such a realistic way that it seems natural rather than contrived (Weinsheimer 406). So in addition to the individual and their economic standing, self-awareness and chance should be added to the list of things needed to create a successful marriage.

Out of the three Bennett marriages that occur within the novel the one that takes place between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy is the closest to the ideal that is provided, with Lydia and Mr. Wickham being the least successful of the bunch. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth are a barely suitable match as she is upper-class but nowhere near the elite standing of Mr. Darcy and they are both aware of this. In some sense marriage during this period was an act of combining the incomes of two willing individuals to achieve a comfortable

lifestyle as is seen in Charlotte and Mr. Collins. When Elizabeth learns of Charlotte's practical choice of marrying Mr. Collins she is furious and declares against the defense of Charlotte's actions that you must not "for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavor to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness" (Austen 121). Elizabeth has a strict sense of moral righteousness when it comes to relationships and Charlotte violates her code by marrying Mr. Collins for practicality's sake rather than love and companionship.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy though, do create a marriage of companionship when they ultimately decide to marry at the end of the novel. This occurs after agreeable Jane and Bingley have been paired as well as Lydia entering into an unsatisfying marriage with Wickham. The latter married so quickly and at only sixteen because she longed for the idea of marriage rather than the actual partnership with a compatible person. James Sherry, who sees the novel in terms of society versus the individual states that "Elizabeth, then, reveals the energy, the impulsiveness, the respect for personal merit which characterizes individualism, while Darcy, with his sense of propriety and his noble family connections, stands for "society" or the established social codes" (Sherry 611). It is interesting with these representations assigned to these two characters that they both break free of them to marry.

Elizabeth may have been a strong individual throughout the novel but she conforms to marry a wealthy man in the end and this satisfies the societal and familial demands that were placed on her. Likewise, Darcy may represent society and its strict expectations and yet deviates from them in his early constant display of bad manners and

disagreeableness and then with marrying below his station to a girl with almost no financial contribution to the marriage. Whatever deviations these characters made throughout their journey it landed them in a happy marriage of both companionship and extreme financial stability.

In the end, Darcy and Elizabeth found the best of both worlds with their marriage. Ultimately a shift towards companionate marriage being preferred to a strict business arrangement between families was seen as preferable in this Jane Austen novel. The marriage was possible though only because of Mr. Darcy's large yearly income as Elizabeth had no family income available to her. This demonstrates that while a couple must have a compatibility there must also be financial considerations made. It is also interesting that one was expected to enter into a marriage, companionate or any other kind, with little to no alone time with the other person to truly discover their personality as the social customs demanded that the opposite sex should not be left alone until they are at least engaged. So while companionate marriage was a step in the right direction for young people in this era looking to marry it was still likely that their marriage would be based also on financial standing and friendship rather than an in-depth knowledge of an individual that led to a love of true understanding.

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