

# Marriage As Empowerment and Constraint: Women's Agency in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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## Abstract

*Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice as a crucial social institution that both empowers and restricts women. The novel, which is set in the strict class and gender structures of early nineteenth-century England, examines how women use marriage to balance social expectations, financial security, and personal desire. In order to make the case that Austen depicts marriage as a complicated setting where women have few but significant options, this essay explores women's agency in Pride and Prejudice by concentrating on three important female characters: Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, and Jane Bennet. Austen portrays marriage as a possible path to moral development and self realization, even as it frequently serves as a tool of patriarchal control. Austen challenges social conventions and promotes unions founded on respect and understanding through sarcasm, characterization, and narrative contrast.*

**Keywords: Marriage, Women's Agency, Patriarchy, Social Class, Jane Austen.**

Marriage has a big impact on women's lives in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The early nineteenth-century piece depicts the reality of Regency England, where a woman's social status and financial survival depended on marriage. In a society that denied women the chance to inherit, pursue professional careers, and have legal independence, marriage was often the only way to ensure stability. Instead of viewing marriage as merely a societal necessity, Austen presents it as a complex institution that has the power to either empower women or restrict their freedom. Through a range of female characters and marital outcomes, Austen explores women's agency and their capacity to make choices within restrictive social institutions.

This essay examines how marriage is portrayed in *Pride and Prejudice* as a source of both empowerment and limitation, arguing that Austen questions established marriage traditions while advancing moral, intellectual, and emotional equality between men and women. Feminist, historical, and cultural readings of Jane Austen's portrayal of marriage, gender, and women's agency in a patriarchal society have influenced the critical reception of *Pride and Prejudice*. Feminist

critics like Mary Poovey (1984) argue that Austen employs conservative narrative conventions that ultimately uphold social norms, despite the fact that Austen's heroines demonstrate moral intelligence and personal integrity. Poovey claims that despite the novel's seeming autonomy, women in the novel remain socially and economically vulnerable.

According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) interpretation of Elizabeth Bennet as a proto-feminist figure whose resistance to male authority is expressed through moral independence and rational judgement rather than overt rebellion, Austen similarly quietly challenges gender hierarchy within socially acceptable bounds. In England Rigid patriarchal standards regulated women's life in Regency England. Women were financially vulnerable because property regulations like entailment made sure that estates went via the male line. This fact is demonstrated by the Bennet family's situation, as the daughters are forced to look for favourable marriages because Longbourn is entailed away from them. In Austen's day, marriage was "the only socially sanctioned career available to women," as Mary Poovey observes. Austen places her book in this framework, showing how marriage serves as both a business deal and an emotional bond. Austen asks if such marriages actually serve women's happiness or dignity, despite the fact that society encourages women to marry for stability. Austen reveals a variety of matrimonial options. The restrictions imposed on women while offering opportunities for defiance and autonomy.

Elizabeth Bennet, who emerges in *Pride and Prejudice* as an intelligent, independent, and outspoken symbol of female agency, is the most powerful example of choice and empowerment. The most potent illustration of choice and empowerment in marriage is Elizabeth Bennet, who appears in *Pride and Prejudice* as a perceptive, self-reliant, and vocal emblem of female autonomy. Elizabeth consistently opposes restrictive social norms that require women to enter into marriage just in order to secure their financial future. The most obvious illustration of her bold act of self-assertion is her rejection of Mr. Collins's proposal, even if it promised financial stability. Elizabeth is adamant that pleasure and personal happiness are crucial in marriage and rejects any relationship that lacks love, respect, and emotional compatibility.

Despite social pressure and the potential for financial instability, Elizabeth prioritises moral integrity over material gain. The moral foundation for her ultimate marriage to Mr. Darcy is laid by her insistence on mutual respect and emotional understanding. Rather than being the result of passive compliance, this partnership is the result of both parties' conscious self-reflection and moral growth. Darcy's moral growth and Elizabeth's introspection result in a partnership built on equality rather than power. Instead of dismissing marriage as an institution, Elizabeth's assertiveness reimagines it as a place of equality and connection. Her story shows that instead than depending just on rebellion, women can be powerful by negotiating their own values within social constraints.

Austen envisions a more equitable and balanced kind of marriage while indirectly criticizing the restrictions placed on women by allowing Elizabeth to make her own decisions. Lydia Bennet, whose marriage to George Wickham is the most problematic union in *Pride and Prejudice*, serves as the most striking example of social ramifications and a lack of agency. In contrast to other female characters, Lydia is forced into marriage in order to protect her family's social standing following the embarrassment produced by her impetuous elopement.

Therefore, her marriage is an act of social containment rather than personal satisfaction, carried out to fulfill social norms rather than personal desire. The most obvious illustration of societal repercussions and a lack of autonomy is Lydia Bennet, whose marriage to George Wickham is the most troublesome union in *Pride and Prejudice*. Unlike other female characters, Lydia is compelled to marry in order to preserve her family's social status after her hasty elopement causes shame. As a result, her marriage is an act of social containment rather than personal fulfilment, performed to satisfy society expectations rather than personal desires. Unlike Elizabeth or Charlotte, Lydia's

marriage lacked stability, mutual respect, and a moral basis. It is not the result of love or pragmatic considerations, but rather of masculine intervention and social pressure. Despite her apparent enthusiasm for marriage, Lydia lacks genuine autonomy; she exhibits minimal moral development and is largely unaware of the effects of her decisions. Her vulnerability in a patriarchal society that gives young women freedom without direction but harshly punishes them for transgressions is highlighted by her lack of self-awareness.

Furthermore, Lydia's tale highlights patriarchal society's double standards, in which males like Wickham avoid long term repercussions but women face the weight of moral responsibility. Austen criticizes a system that forces women into marriages that uphold family honor rather than personal dignity, putting social appearance ahead of women's well being. Austen uses Lydia to support the main thesis of the book, which is that moral autonomy, guidance, and social obligation are just as important for true empowerment in marriage as freedom of choice. In the absence of these, marriage turns into yet another tool of limitation rather than freedom.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen offers a subtle feminist critique of marriage while interacting with patriarchal systems without overtly challenging them. Instead Austen subtly defends women's freedom to make deliberate moral and emotional choices while reaffirming independence, rationality, and self-respect. Through characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Austen demonstrates how moral judgement and intellectual independence become tools of resistance in a restrictive social order. Austen deliberately and realistically draws attention to the limitations imposed on women's autonomy rather than romanticising marriage as a purely romantic institution. She deliberately avoids romantic excess and sensationalism in favour of depicting marriage as a balance between personal desire and societal duty.

Austen is able to acknowledge the material realities that women confront while simultaneously criticizing patriarchal expectations thanks to this balanced portrayal. Austen implies through this conflict that ethical development on an individual basis, as opposed to social uprising, is the source of significant change. In her narrative, marriage can only be empowering when it is based on moral compatibility, equality, and respect for one another. Austen redefines marriage as a place of ethical negotiation rather than blind obedience by highlighting both the limitations and opportunities that come with it. In the end, her criticism upholds women's ability to make logical decisions by presenting marriage as a possible area for independence within patriarchal constraints.

In the end, *Pride and Prejudice* portrays marriage as a range of experiences influenced by class, character, and situation rather than as a standard answer for women. Through Elizabeth Bennet's self-determined choice, Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic compromise, Jane Bennet's emotional control, and Lydia Bennet's forced union, Austen demonstrates how women's agency operates in various and uneven ways within patriarchal society. In a marriage, empowerment is possible but never assured; it depends on mutual respect, moral growth, and thoughtful decision-making.

Lastly, *Pride and Prejudice* remains a powerful literary exploration of women's agency because it acknowledges both resistance and compromise as acceptable responses to patriarchal constraint. Instead of fully supporting or opposing marriage, Austen redefines it as a moral union that must be freely chosen. Austen highlights women's ability to make rational decisions, emphasising perseverance and autonomy as essential weapons for overcoming restrictive societal circumstances. Because of this, the book is always pertinent to discussions about gender, power, and choice

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