



Jane Austen and Feminist Thought: Subversion of Gender Roles in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* offers more than a romantic narrative; it operates as a subtle critique of the patriarchal structures of Regency England. While marriage, inheritance, and social class dominate the lives of women in the novel, Austen uses irony, satire, and strong characterization to reveal the limitations imposed upon them. The text challenges the conventional portrayal of women as passive figures by presenting Elizabeth Bennet as an assertive, intelligent heroine who resists societal pressures and redefines femininity on her own terms. Through contrasting female figures such as Charlotte Lucas, Lydia Bennet, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Austen illustrates the varied negotiations of gender roles within a restrictive social order. By exposing both conformity and resistance, *Pride and Prejudice* subverts rigid gender expectations while anticipating later feminist concerns about autonomy, agency, and equality. Thus, Austen's work occupies a pivotal space in feminist literary discourse, bridging tradition and transformation.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, feminist thought, gender role subversion, Elizabeth Bennet.

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) stands as one of the most celebrated novels of the English literary canon, not only for its wit, irony, and masterful characterisation, but also for its subtle interrogation of the gendered structures of Regency society. Written during a time when women's roles were largely confined to domesticity and marriage, Austen's novel offers a unique literary space where issues of gender, class, and social mobility intersect. The novel

presents marriage as both a social necessity and a site of negotiation, where women are often reduced to their economic value or capacity to secure advantageous unions. Yet, beneath this surface of conventionality, Austen crafts characters—particularly Elizabeth Bennet—who challenge and subvert the very norms that constrain them. Through satire, irony, and narrative strategy, Austen critiques the patriarchal expectations that define women's lives, offering a proto-feminist perspective that continues to resonate in contemporary feminist thought.

At the heart of this subversion lies the tension between individual agency and societal expectation. Elizabeth Bennet emerges as an unconventional heroine, refusing to accept proposals that compromise her autonomy, defying the submissive ideal of womanhood, and asserting her right to marry for love rather than financial security. Her rejection of Mr. Collins, her critical stance towards Lady Catherine de Bourgh's authoritarianism, and her intellectual sparring with Mr. Darcy reflect a woman who disrupts gender hierarchies through wit, intellect, and self-respect. At the same time, Austen contrasts Elizabeth's resistance with the choices of Charlotte Lucas, Lydia Bennet, and Jane Bennet, each of whom represents alternative negotiations of womanhood within patriarchal structures. By embedding such diverse portrayals, Austen does not simply reject gender roles but rather exposes their complexity, fragility, and dependence on social and economic power. *Pride and Prejudice*, therefore, may be read as a nuanced feminist text—neither overtly revolutionary nor passively conservative—but one that subtly unsettles patriarchal values through its heroines, narrative voice, and social satire.

Background of the Study

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) was written during the Regency era, a period when women's lives were predominantly confined to marriage, domesticity, and dependence on male authority. Property laws, such as entailment, barred women from inheritance, reinforcing their reliance on husbands for financial and social security. Within this restrictive framework, literature often reflected and reinforced traditional gender expectations, portraying women as embodiments of beauty, virtue, and obedience. Austen, however, used her novels to interrogate these norms through irony, satire, and character development, presenting a subtle but sharp critique of patriarchal structures.

The novel's exploration of marriage, class, and gender highlights how women navigated limited choices within rigid social hierarchies. Characters like Charlotte Lucas embody

pragmatic submission, while Elizabeth Bennet challenges convention with her wit and independence. By juxtaposing conformity and resistance, Austen subverts fixed gender roles and anticipates feminist concerns about autonomy, equality, and women's agency in both private and public life.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* subverts traditional gender roles and engages with themes that anticipate feminist thought. By situating the novel within the patriarchal context of Regency England, the study aims to highlight how Austen critiques societal expectations imposed upon women, particularly in relation to marriage, property, and social status. Austen's portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet as a woman of intellect, independence, and moral conviction challenges the submissive feminine ideal and asserts the possibility of female autonomy within a restrictive social framework. At the same time, the study also explores the contrasting representations of other women—such as Charlotte Lucas, Lydia Bennet, and Jane Bennet—to reveal the multiple ways women negotiated gender norms, either through conformity, compromise, or resistance. In doing so, the research underscores Austen's nuanced approach to gender politics, which blends critique with subtle advocacy.

Another key purpose of this study is to investigate how Austen's male characters contribute to the discourse on gender dynamics, illustrating both the privileges and limitations of patriarchal authority. Figures like Mr. Darcy, Mr. Collins, and Wickham serve as lenses through which Austen examines pride, entitlement, and masculinity, revealing the ways in which male behavior shapes women's choices and reputations. By analyzing these character dynamics, the study seeks to show how Austen destabilizes the assumption of male dominance, offering instead the vision of relationships based on respect, equality, and mutual understanding. Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate that *Pride and Prejudice* is not only a work of social commentary but also a proto-feminist text that continues to resonate with contemporary feminist debates about agency, autonomy, and the redefinition of gender roles.

Literature Review

Chang, H. C. (2014). In this article, Chang highlights the impact of Elizabeth Bennet as a feminist heroine in *Pride and Prejudice*. The study positions Elizabeth as a groundbreaking character who challenged early nineteenth-century ideals of femininity by embodying independence, rationality, and self-respect. Chang emphasizes Elizabeth's resistance to societal pressures, particularly her refusal to marry Mr. Collins and her initial rejection of Mr. Darcy, as pivotal moments that subvert patriarchal expectations. These acts demonstrate that marriage should not be a transaction based on wealth or convenience but a union grounded in mutual respect and love. The article further argues that Elizabeth's character has had lasting influence, inspiring later generations of feminist readings and adaptations of Austen's work. By presenting Elizabeth as a role model who redefined the feminine ideal, Chang situates *Pride and Prejudice* within a feminist framework that extends beyond its historical context, proving its relevance to modern discourses on gender equality and female autonomy.

Chen, W. (2010). Chen's study approaches *Pride and Prejudice* through a linguistic lens, focusing on how female characters are portrayed by Austen's choice of adjectives and nouns. The research shows that the descriptive language attached to women often reflects societal expectations of beauty, virtue, and morality, reinforcing traditional gender ideals. However, Chen also notes that Austen employs subtle variations in diction to distinguish between conformity and resistance. For instance, while Jane Bennet is described with terms emphasizing sweetness and beauty, Elizabeth is characterized through language that highlights her intelligence, wit, and independence. This contrast underscores Elizabeth's subversive role as a heroine who challenges conventional femininity. By analyzing these linguistic patterns, Chen reveals how Austen both reflects and critiques the gendered discourse of her time, using characterization as a means of feminist commentary. The study demonstrates how literary style itself becomes a tool for negotiating gender representation, positioning Austen as a writer deeply attuned to the cultural implications of language.

Marzec, J. C. B. (2014). The work argues that relationships in Austen's novels are more than romantic entanglements; they are social negotiations where power, status, and personal values intersect. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Marzec highlights how Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy's evolving relationship illustrates the tension between pride, prejudice, and genuine emotional growth, ultimately suggesting that equality and mutual respect are necessary for successful unions. Other relationships, such as those between Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins or Lydia

Bennet and Wickham, reveal how social pressures and gender roles often drive individuals into pragmatic or destructive choices. By comparing two of Austen's novels, Marzec demonstrates the consistency of Austen's critique of patriarchal society, showing how she uses relationships to expose structural inequities while also offering possibilities for transformation through empathy and self-awareness.

Al-Salim, A. A. (2015). This master's thesis focuses on marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* as both a social and economic institution, reflecting the constraints and opportunities of Regency England. The thesis highlights how different marriages in the novel exemplify this duality. Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr. Collins embodies the pragmatic approach, prioritizing survival over affection, whereas Lydia Bennet's elopement illustrates the dangers of impulsivity and social recklessness. By contrast, Elizabeth Bennet's eventual union with Darcy models the possibility of reconciling love and respect with economic stability. Al-Salim concludes that Austen uses these portrayals not simply to reflect her society but also to critique it, suggesting that true fulfillment in marriage must transcend economic necessity and embody mutual understanding and equality.

Leeds, J. A. (2011). The study argues that Austen embeds subtle but significant representations of homosocial and homoerotic bonds, particularly among female characters. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Leeds points to the intensity of Elizabeth and Jane Bennet's relationship as an example of deep emotional intimacy that rivals their heterosexual attachments. These relationships, while not explicitly sexual, offer alternative models of female solidarity and emotional fulfillment outside patriarchal structures. Leeds suggests that Austen's nuanced depictions open the possibility of reading her novels as both conforming to and subverting heteronormative expectations, leaving space for same-sex attachments in the emotional landscapes of her characters. By foregrounding these dynamics, the dissertation enriches feminist and queer readings of Austen, positioning her work as more complex and layered than traditional interpretations allow, and expanding the conversation about desire, identity, and social roles in her fiction.

Wilhelm, J. (2014). The study argues that Austen's narrative structure—a blend of romance, irony, and social critique—established a literary model that influenced both contemporaneous authors and later adaptations. In particular, Wilhelm highlights how Austen balances the conventions of courtship plots with subtle feminist subversion, creating a template that appeals to diverse audiences over time. The book traces how *Pride and Prejudice* has been reinterpreted

in different historical moments, from Victorian moral readings to modern feminist and postmodern reinterpretations, showing that the novel's themes of gender, class, and autonomy remain adaptable and relevant. By analyzing adaptations and critical reception, Wilhelm demonstrates that Austen's "formula" works because it combines universal human concerns with pointed social commentary. This contribution underscores Austen's role not only as a novelist of her era but also as a foundational figure whose narrative strategies shaped literary traditions and cultural imagination across centuries.

Haydar, A. N. (2014)... The study emphasizes how Austen's critique of gender roles translates into contemporary contexts, demonstrating the timelessness of her feminist insights. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet challenges patriarchal norms through independence, wit, and refusal to compromise her values, while other characters illustrate varying degrees of conformity and resistance. Haydar argues that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* reimagines these dynamics for a twenty-first-century audience, showcasing how themes of female agency, social pressure, and the negotiation of love and autonomy remain pressing. The article highlights how new media platforms allow for feminist reinterpretations of Austen, proving her relevance beyond the historical context of Regency England. By linking the novel to its modern adaptation, Haydar demonstrates that Austen's feminist legacy continues to inspire fresh narratives that critique gender expectations and celebrate women's empowerment across cultural and temporal boundaries.

Historical Backdrop of Regency England

The Regency era (1811–1820) in England was characterized by strict social hierarchies, rigid class structures, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Women's roles were primarily defined by their marital status and domestic responsibilities, as they were legally and socially dependent on men for financial and social security. Property and inheritance laws, such as entailments, excluded women from direct ownership, reinforcing their reliance on fathers, brothers, or husbands. The marriage market thus became a central institution for securing stability, where beauty, virtue, and obedience were prized qualities in women. At the same time, class distinctions dictated personal interactions, with wealth and land ownership determining power and respectability. Within this backdrop, women had limited opportunities for education, intellectual engagement, or public life, which made literature one of the few accessible forms of influence. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is deeply rooted in this historical context, critiquing the gender and class restrictions that shaped daily life. Through her nuanced

portrayals, Austen both reflects and questions the inequities of Regency society, revealing its vulnerabilities through wit, irony, and satire.

Jane Austen as a Woman Writer

Jane Austen's position as a woman writer in the early nineteenth century was both remarkable and precarious, given the limited space available for female authors in a male-dominated literary world. Women writers often published anonymously or under pseudonyms to avoid social stigma, as novel-writing was not considered a respectable pursuit for women. Austen herself initially published her novels as "By a Lady," highlighting both her gendered identity and the constraints imposed on her. Despite these barriers, Austen carved a unique place for herself by focusing on themes central to women's lives—marriage, social mobility, and gender relations—while also critiquing the very systems that confined them. Her sharp use of irony and subtle narrative strategies allowed her to critique patriarchy without overtly transgressing social boundaries, ensuring her work's acceptance while embedding radical ideas. Austen's success demonstrates her ability to negotiate a literary career in a context where women's voices were marginalized, establishing her as both a product of and a challenger to the gendered limitations of her time.

Feminist Literary Criticism and Relevance to Austen

Feminist literary criticism, which gained prominence in the twentieth century, examines how literature reflects, reinforces, or subverts gendered power relations. It focuses on the representation of women, the construction of femininity, and the ways in which texts challenge patriarchal ideologies. In the case of Jane Austen, feminist criticism has been particularly fruitful, as her novels subtly interrogate the restrictive gender roles of her era. Critics like Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have argued that Austen's works anticipate feminist concerns by giving her heroines agency, intelligence, and the ability to critique societal norms. *Pride and Prejudice*, in particular, resonates with feminist readings because Elizabeth Bennet embodies resistance to patriarchal expectations through her wit, independence, and refusal to marry for convenience. By privileging female voices and perspectives, Austen's narrative strategies align with feminist ideals of representation and critique. Thus, feminist literary criticism not only illuminates the radical undercurrents in Austen's fiction but also reaffirms her relevance to contemporary debates about gender, autonomy, and women's place in society.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen situates gender roles within the intersecting frameworks of marriage, inheritance, and social status, where women's futures are often defined by the men they marry. Marriage is portrayed both as an avenue of social mobility and as a potential source of personal fulfillment, creating a tension that frames the choices of different characters. For many women in Regency society, securing a wealthy or well-connected husband was the only viable means of stability. Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic acceptance of Mr. Collins highlights this reality: she views marriage not as romantic fulfillment but as survival within patriarchal limits. In contrast, Elizabeth Bennet rejects both Collins's and Darcy's initial proposals, privileging autonomy and emotional compatibility over economic necessity. This refusal to conform underscores Austen's subtle critique of societal expectations, suggesting that true fulfillment lies in balancing personal choice with social realities. Through this dual perspective, Austen challenges the rigidity of gender roles while acknowledging the economic and social pressures shaping women's lives.

The interplay of mothers, daughters, and patriarchal authority further deepens Austen's examination of gender. Mrs. Bennet, preoccupied with securing advantageous marriages for her daughters, embodies the anxieties imposed by a system where female worth is measured by beauty, virtue, and obedience. Jane Bennet's gentle disposition conforms to ideals of femininity, yet her passivity delays her union with Bingley, revealing the limitations of submissive virtue. Lydia Bennet, by contrast, defies moral expectations through reckless behavior, and her near-ruin dramatizes how a woman's reputation could imperil an entire family. Elizabeth, however, stands apart: her wit, independence, and refusal to marry without affection subvert traditional norms of female obedience. Parallel to this, men remain gatekeepers of power and property—Darcy as master of Pemberley, Mr. Collins as heir to Longbourn, and Wickham manipulating women for personal gain. The legal framework of entailment starkly illustrates how women were excluded from inheritance, reinforcing their dependency on male choices. Through these portrayals, Austen exposes both the fragility and inequity of gender roles in her society, while simultaneously offering characters like Elizabeth as figures of resistance who redefine womanhood within the constraints of their age.

Elizabeth Bennet as a Feminist Figure

Elizabeth Bennet emerges as one of the most strikingly unconventional heroines of early

nineteenth-century literature, embodying qualities that resist and subvert patriarchal expectations. Unlike many women of her time, she asserts her independence through wit, sharp intellect, and the confidence to question societal norms. Her refusal to adopt the passive, obedient role expected of young women sets her apart from both her sisters and her peers. Elizabeth's ability to challenge men on equal intellectual footing—whether in conversations with Darcy, debates with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, or dismissals of Mr. Collins's condescension—marks her as a character who refuses to be silenced. Her self-assurance demonstrates that women are capable of independent judgment and rational thought, directly challenging the patriarchal assumption that women's worth lay only in beauty, obedience, or marriageability. Through Elizabeth, Austen constructs a heroine who, while existing within a restrictive social framework, embodies resistance and self-determination, qualities central to later feminist thought.

Perhaps the most explicit act of feminist defiance occurs when Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins's marriage proposal, despite the economic security it promised. In rejecting him, she undermines the prevailing gender expectation that women should prioritize financial stability over personal happiness. This act redefines female choice as a moral and emotional necessity rather than a transactional arrangement, symbolizing the right of women to marry for love instead of survival. Similarly, Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy becomes a negotiation between love and autonomy rather than submission to male authority. Her initial rejection of Darcy, rooted in her sense of dignity and independence, compels him to reassess his pride and prejudices. By demanding respect and equality within their eventual union, Elizabeth demonstrates that marriage can serve as a partnership rather than a hierarchical contract. In this way, she represents an early model of the feminist heroine—one who resists patriarchal constraints, asserts her voice, and insists on her right to both affection and autonomy. Austen's creation of Elizabeth not only critiques the rigid gender roles of her society but also anticipates the feminist insistence on agency and selfhood that would gain prominence in later centuries.

Narrative Strategies and Subversion

One of the most distinctive narrative strategies in *Pride and Prejudice* is Austen's masterful use of irony and free indirect discourse, both of which function as tools to critique gender roles

and social expectations. Irony pervades the novel, beginning with the famous opening line, which satirizes the cultural obsession with wealthy bachelors and the assumption that marriage is the ultimate goal for women. Through irony, Austen exposes the absurdity of a system that reduces women's value to their capacity for advantageous marriage. Free indirect discourse, meanwhile, allows Austen to merge the narrator's perspective with her characters' inner thoughts, offering insight into Elizabeth's critical reflections while maintaining narrative distance. This technique not only underscores Elizabeth's skepticism toward patriarchal norms but also empowers readers to question social conventions alongside her. By blurring the boundary between narrator and character, Austen creates a narrative space where patriarchal authority is constantly destabilized through wit, critique, and reinterpretation.

Satire further strengthens Austen's subversion of traditional gender expectations, particularly in her treatment of marriage-market conventions. Characters like Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh become objects of ridicule, their obsession with advantageous matches presented as shallow and mechanical. Mr. Collins's pompous proposal to Elizabeth exemplifies how patriarchal entitlement turns marriage into a transactional arrangement, stripping it of emotional authenticity. Elizabeth's rejection of him satirizes the notion that women should marry purely for financial stability, instead asserting the importance of autonomy and personal happiness. Likewise, Mrs. Bennet's single-minded pursuit of wealthy husbands for her daughters is mocked as both ridiculous and symptomatic of societal pressures that equate a woman's worth with her marital prospects. Austen's comic exaggeration exposes the fragility of these conventions, encouraging readers to recognize the inequities of a system that forces women into choices dictated by economic survival rather than individual preference. Through this satirical lens, marriage is no longer an unquestioned ideal but a contested institution, ripe for critique and redefinition.

Beyond irony and satire, Austen's narrative voice itself functions as a subtle feminist intervention. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Austen refuses to portray women as passive or voiceless; instead, she crafts heroines like Elizabeth who actively question and challenge male authority. The narrator's tone often aligns with Elizabeth's independence and intelligence, privileging her perspective and affirming her resistance to patriarchal constraints. For instance, Elizabeth's assertive dialogues with Darcy and Lady Catherine are not only given narrative weight but are framed as moments of moral and intellectual triumph. By granting Elizabeth's voice authority within the narrative structure, Austen subtly reconfigures literary norms that traditionally centered male perspectives. The balance of critique and empathy in Austen's

narrative style suggests a feminist consciousness that refuses to conform to rigid binaries of submission or rebellion. Instead, the narrative champions the possibility of equality and mutual respect, gesturing toward a vision of gender relations that was both radical for its time and deeply influential for feminist literary traditions to come.

Male Characters and Gender Dynamics

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen constructs her male characters not merely as romantic interests or foils but as embodiments of different dimensions of patriarchal authority. Mr. Darcy represents the archetypal wealthy landowner whose initial pride reflects the privilege of status and masculinity in Regency society. His dismissive attitude at the Meryton assembly and his first condescending proposal to Elizabeth highlight the arrogance that social power fosters in men. Yet Darcy's transformation is central to Austen's critique of gender roles. Elizabeth's rejection of his proposal forces him into self-examination, reshaping his perception of class and female agency. His eventual humility, demonstrated through his role in resolving Lydia's scandal and his second, more respectful proposal, signifies a redefinition of masculinity. Rather than dominance, Darcy comes to embody respect, equality, and partnership. Through his arc, Austen suggests that male identity is not fixed in patriarchal superiority but can evolve in response to female strength and autonomy.

While Darcy illustrates the potential for change, Mr. Collins and George Wickham expose the failings and dangers of unchecked patriarchal privilege. Mr. Collins, heir to the Bennet estate, embodies the absurdity of inherited male authority. His pompous manner, servility toward Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and presumption in proposing to Elizabeth demonstrate Austen's satirical portrayal of patriarchal entitlement. Collins's belief that his position ensures acceptance highlights how social structures favored male power regardless of merit, turning him into a figure of ridicule. In contrast, Wickham represents a more insidious masculinity—outwardly charming yet morally corrupt. His deceit about Darcy and his elopement with Lydia reveal how men could manipulate women's trust with little regard for consequences, threatening female honor and social stability. Whereas Collins symbolizes the comic absurdity of patriarchy, Wickham dramatizes its dangers, showing how male irresponsibility could destroy reputations and futures. By presenting these contrasting figures, Austen critiques the structures that empowered men irrespective of their integrity, while also elevating female judgment as the key to discerning genuine character. In doing so, *Pride and Prejudice* exposes the contradictions of male authority, suggesting that true worth lies not in privilege or charm but in the capacity to

respect women as intellectual and moral equals.

Conclusion

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* endures not only as a celebrated romantic novel but also as a subtle yet powerful interrogation of gender roles in Regency England. Through her sharp use of irony, satire, and free indirect discourse, Austen critiques the restrictive social framework that reduces women's worth to marriageability, beauty, and obedience. The character of Elizabeth Bennet stands as the novel's most compelling challenge to patriarchal expectations: witty, independent, and unwilling to compromise her autonomy, she exemplifies the possibility of a female voice that resists submission. Her refusal of Mr. Collins and her critical stance toward Darcy's initial pride dramatize a woman's right to agency and self-respect, anticipating feminist ideals of equality and autonomy. At the same time, Austen contrasts Elizabeth with characters such as Charlotte Lucas, Jane Bennet, and Lydia Bennet to illustrate the varied strategies through which women navigated oppressive gender systems, from pragmatic compromise to reckless defiance. The male characters further expose the fragility and contradictions of patriarchal power. Mr. Collins's entitlement, Wickham's deception, and Darcy's transformation collectively reveal how masculine authority operates, sometimes absurdly and sometimes destructively, within a system designed to privilege men. Yet, by allowing Darcy to change under Elizabeth's influence, Austen also gestures toward the possibility of redefining masculinity through humility, respect, and partnership. Ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* cannot be seen merely as a domestic romance; it is a text that subtly unsettles the patriarchal structures of its age. Austen's narrative voice—humorous, ironic, and quietly subversive—functions as an early feminist intervention, offering readers a vision of relationships grounded not in hierarchy but in equality. In this sense, Austen's work bridges the conventions of her time with the transformative questions of feminist thought, ensuring its relevance for modern readers and scholars alike.

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