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# Class, Rank and Status in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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## Abstract

*Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, is one of Jane Austen's best known novels but there is much hidden from a modern reader when encountering the text. Being unfamiliar with the class system of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century England and its complexities will diminish the impact of the novel that would be apparent to an early reader of Austen. In this essay, I discuss class, rank and status by taking into consideration the historical background as well as the biographical background of Jane Austen. Based on these aspects, I have located where Jane Austen has placed important characters within the class system as well as examined how this affects the characters' own perception of class and the resulting impact on the events of the novel. I conclude that notions of class and rank most significantly influenced marriage and are therefore used to drive the plot. I also found that through exploring class and marriage, Jane Austen's commentary on early 19<sup>th</sup>-century English society is more easily discerned.

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# Introduction

*Pride and Prejudice* was first published in 1813 and can therefore be better understood by a modern reader equipped with a greater awareness of its historical and biographical context. The decades before the publication saw social and political change in England. The most important factor was the Industrial Revolution but these changes were accelerated by the French Revolution and later by the Napoleonic Wars that were a “cultural watershed comparable to that of the Great War” (qtd. in Davidoff and Hall 19). This led to the creation of a middle class whose members, according to Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (18), shared similarities with the upper classes – the gentry and the aristocracy – but were distinguished by their source of fortune and their principles. There was thus an ongoing change in Jane Austen’s own time – a shift from society being dominated by the values and ideals of the aristocracy to being dominated by the middle class.

The Austen family were “upper-middle-class” (Nicolson 175) and growing up in these circumstances, Jane Austen could interact with those above and those below her, which meant that she was “excellently placed in the middle-ground to observe English society upward and downward” (176). Christopher Gillie points out that looking at the biographical context of Jane Austen will “illuminate her art only in so far as we seek in them what is illuminating” (3) and connects this idea to the content of her novels, stating that Austen’s texts are not judged for their shock value but for their “luminousness” (3). Gillie means that Austen’s stories are not outlandish, fantastical stories but rather the opposite; they are a realistic representation of the contemporary English society which she aimed to portray and that studying the biographical background will increase our sense of the realism of her writing. Her social circumstances, especially her relevant place in society highlighted by Nigel Nicolson, makes Jane Austen’s novels a prime example for exploring and understanding 19th century England.

*Pride and Prejudice* is arguably Jane Austen’s most popular work and a central question posed by the novel is how its characters will be brought together across class differences in their fictional “world of distances” (Duckworth 117). Alistair Duckworth discusses how the novel critiques “automatic social responses” while simultaneously “validat[ing] inherited social principles” (118). The mix of characters and social classes being depicted, but more importantly their interactions across the social playing field, is one of the reasons *Pride and Prejudice* is of interest from a class perspective.

In order to better understand *Pride and Prejudice* and what is really being depicted and reflected, I will endeavour to see how class is portrayed in the novel by examining its historical and biographical context. In other words, this essay aims to explore the class system of the early 19th century and what significance it has in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. I will do this by providing an account of the historical class system and presenting a biographical background of Jane Austen in order to accurately place her in the class system of her time. I will then discuss and compare selected characters from *Pride and Prejudice* in order to determine to which class they belong and how this affects the way they are portrayed in the text as well as how they perceive and judge class themselves within the novel. It should be noted that although our definition of class is a relatively modern concept that is not fully suited to Jane Austen's time it is a useful term that will be used as the starting point of this essay.

## Background

The social groups whose values and ideals long dominated England were the upper classes – especially the aristocracy. The gentry were also included in the upper classes and these were all unified by the shared fact that they did not have to work for a living. Instead of working, the gentility could spend their time on “honour-advancing activities” like “politics, hunting and social appearance” (Davidoff and Hall 20) rather than on their immediate economic survival. This was made possible by another significant circumstance that set the upper classes apart from those below them, namely that they owned land.

To own land was so influential that “the association of name and birth with land [...] provid[ed] the model of leadership” (19) and this idea of absolute property was not a status that could be acquired when buying new land. There was also an important connection between land and political power; E. A. Wasson writes that “‘political influence’ was the first object of owning a landed estate” (28). The importance of land and of keeping the family ties to it also led to a particular attention to inheritance, especially since land itself was not an infinite resource. The practise at the time was primogeniture, meaning that the firstborn son would inherit the land, but if there was no direct male heir, entailment meant that a close male family relation would inherit instead. Entailment also meant that it would be more difficult for an heir to let someone who did not belong to the family purchase or be given the land (Davidoff and Hall 205-206).

A crucial matter to ensure the inheritance of the land and to produce legitimate heirs was of course marriage. It was becoming less unusual to marry for love but the primary concern for the aristocracy when marrying was wealth, making men with large estates and women with large dowries attractive to the upper classes. People did not easily approve of marrying outside the social class because of “hypocrisy and snobbery” (Adkins and Adkins 4), but there was still a possibility for a successful match bringing about a better social standing within the class itself. However, with ongoing wars claiming the lives of many, the assortment of eligible men was dwindling. The easiest way to meet such an eligible man was at social occasions like balls (5) or through siblings (Davidoff and Hall 326).

The landed gentry is not to be seen as one group where everyone held the same position as there could be significant variation between different gentlemen, especially in terms of income. But their most important shared quality was that they had to be gentlemen. What it meant to be a gentleman could be presented as a long list of requirements, but could also be summed up as having “possession of enough wealth to support a gentleman’s style of life” – including “a certain kind of education, a standard of comfort, and a degree of leisure and a common interest in ways of spending it” (Mingay 2).

Some people did not own land but were still considered gentry as they were connected by the qualities assigned to gentlemen, or by shared blood, while living in towns or villages. These people belong to the so-called urban gentry or pseudo gentry and also included the “impoverished landowners [and] the better clergy” (3) among others.

A number of social, political and economic changes around the turn of the century between the 1700s and the 1800s paved the way for a new social class in England. Formerly known as the ‘middling’ groups that did not belong anywhere in particular, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and especially the Industrial Revolution, brought change that created a larger gap between them and the labouring class and so the need for a more established middle class emerged. This middle class had plenty in common with the upper classes as their values and ideals had shaped the early middle class people but the “basis of their property and their value system [...] set them apart” (Davidoff and Hall 18).

The middle class did not own land and they were as aware as the landed upper classes that this distinction was their greatest difference (20). While the values of the middle class would cause a shift away from upper class values, the middle class would be very much influenced by their superiors in the early days. The “aristocratic disdain for sordid money matters” (21) would be cognisant to the middle class and so a main goal for a newly wealthy middle class man (or his son) – the *nouveau riche* – was to purchase a landed estate in an

attempt to be included in the landed upper classes (Wasson 41; Mingay 7). Many of these men would be merchants from London “who aspired to leave the plebeian purlieus of Cheapside or Billingsgate for a more refined air of a not-too-distant countryside” (Mingay 7). Wasson concludes that the door between the middle class and the landed upper class was “always at least ajar with plenty of room” for new money and that successful upward social mobility was possible (44).

Much like the landed gentry, the middle class was divided into different sections depending on income. One way of differentiating between the lower middle class and the upper middle class would be that the wives of the first group had to work while the wives of the second could stay at home (Davidoff and Hall 24). Davidoff and Hall note that according to general consensus an average middle class family would have an income of £200-300 a year but that it is decidedly problematic to try and categorise class by income as some historians have placed the number below and others far above (23).

Clergymen could belong to the middle class or the upper classes (if the clergyman was not the firstborn son and could not inherit the estate). As the most important difference between the upper classes and those below was that they did not have to work themselves, this created a problem for second-born sons who could not inherit but had to work themselves. For this reason, many would not join the Church for religious reasons but because it was a “traditional career choice” (Adkins and Adkins 148) where the clergymen performed work that was not straining manual labour or tainted by trade. Another accepted profession was to join the army.

The clergyman would perform his duties on land belonging to the landed upper classes and was thus dependent on them. The clergymen were for this reason chosen from “friends, family, influence and attending the right university college” (147), but due to these connections to the upper classes there was often a gap between the class of the clergyman and the class of most of the people whom he served. A clergyman could also better his social standing by an advantageous marriage as this, too, was a factor that played into whether the particular clergyman was appointed.

The lower classes, or the labouring classes, did not live easy lives. Manual labour was straining and, in addition, wages were cut while the taxes were raised with a new tax on income that came into effect in 1799 (Adkins and Adkins 173-174). Even though some charitable work was done to alleviate their struggles, they were “expected to know their place and show absolute deference to their betters” (xix).

In the eyes of the upper classes, the lower classes were not meant to be especially noticed at all. This is particularly recognisable in regards to the texts of Jane Austen as they

are seemingly absent from her works. However, as John Mullan points out, the early readers of Austen would “expect to ‘see’” the lower classes (particularly the servants) and while they may be hidden to a modern reader, they are still very much present in the text (131). Nicolson acknowledges that the “rich were getting richer as the poor grew poorer” during Austen’s lifetime (181) but argues that there was no real “protest from below” (182) and he therefore concludes that Austen should not be condemned for omitting circumstances that were not publicly criticised in her day. Other defenders of Austen will also note, according to Mullan, that she only wrote of what she personally knew, “limiting herself to the world and the genteel classes” (115).

Jane Austen’s world was made up of the more genteel classes as the Austens were upper middle class. Her mother, Cassandra Leigh, came from a family of whom some were titled, and was thus from a family more distinguished than her husband – Jane’s father – George Austen. George Austen was a clergyman whose education was sponsored by his uncle since his own father, who was a relatively poor surgeon (Gillie 5), had died when his children were young, and so he was able to provide his wife and their eight children with a quite agreeable life. For example, like many other clergymen, the family did supervise the farming of the land near George Austen’s rectory (Adkins and Adkins 195) but the horses used for farming were also used for a family carriage (Nicolson 175). Important for Jane’s future writing, the family were also on good terms with the upper classes, enjoying an “easy friendship with richer neighbors” (175).

George Austen was a cultural man and many in the family read a good deal of literature from his considerable library. This meant that Jane was able to get a broad understanding of what was published and could distinguish herself from contemporary literature by focusing on the real world of English society in which she lived in and realistically portray genteel society, as opposed to other unrealistic “pulp fiction of their time” (Adkins and Adkins xxi). In addition to the library at home, and a father who not only taught himself but highly encouraged all his children to further their education, Jane went to school with a Mrs Cawley in Oxford and later at the Abbey School, a boarding school, for a brief period before her formal schooling was considered complete in 1786, when she was ten years old (Cecil 43-44; Tomalin 42). This means that Jane Austen’s formal education was quite scant, but that did not hinder her authorial accomplishments.

It is important to remember that although the classes above have been distinguished and presented as distinctively different social groups, the reality of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century England was much more complex. Even the term ‘class’ was not very present in Jane Austen’s time, as



Graham Martin argues in “Austen and Class” (1998). Martin states that using “‘class’ language is “anachronistic” and argues that using the “leading social concepts” of the historical period in question – such as ‘gentleman’ (131), ‘rank’, ‘degree’ and ‘connection’ (133) – is more suitable when dealing with Jane Austen’s work (131). The use of ‘class’ is further problematised by a distinction between the “economic sense of class” and “the descriptive sense with the descriptive sense constituting “‘social’ groups whose members share observable and [...] measurable characteristics” (132). The difference between these two senses of class is exemplified by Martin arguing that the minor clergy, as belonging to the middle classes (in the descriptive sense), would not be considered middle class (in the economic sense) regarding their views of the Corn laws – as they instead would share the views of the upper class. This means that the minor clergy would belong to two classes across two senses, which reveals the complexities of their society (132-133).

A more suitable term might be ‘rank’ which refers more to matters of family ties such as parents, titles, how closely related one was to titled members and whether one was born or married into the family; as Martin puts it “individuals within a particular rank ought to be suitably interconnected” (133). While ‘class’ entails a modern sense of economy, ‘rank’ does not include money in that way and would be more appropriate to use since wealth was not so much the defining factor determining whether or not one was upper class or of high rank as the manner in which the wealth was acquired. A titled person could very well be poorer than a rich tradesman.

Another useful term is ‘status’, but it is not so easily defined as it is more personal. Despite its elusiveness, status is perhaps the most adequate tool to distinguish between people across and within all social classes, because it has to do with how a person is perceived by others. This means that although an aristocrat could enjoy being part of the upper classes and the higher ranks, that did not necessarily equate to being admired and respected. Status could be connected to being ‘gentlemanlike’, a word that takes into consideration a man’s social graces rather than his actual class or rank.

## Discussion

### The Landowning Classes

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is the character of highest rank as she belongs to the aristocracy. She is a daughter of an earl and she is therefore styled ‘Lady

Catherine' instead of the usual style of wives of knights: 'Lady de Bourgh'. Her late husband, Sir Lewis de Bourgh, was not from an aristocratic family but she still respected him and his ancestors, describing his family as "respectable, honourable, and ancient, though untitled" (Austen 232). Together they have a daughter, Anne de Bourgh, and since their estate, Rosings Park, is not entailed, she and Lady Catherine reside there.

Lady Catherine certainly cares about class and rank but does not seem to consider status. Mr. Collins states that she "likes to have the distinction of rank preserved" (107) and when Elizabeth Bennet meets her she does not doubt this as she observes that Lady Catherine appreciates keeping herself above all others and does not hesitate to speak her mind on all matters imaginable. Lady Catherine does seem to want to be in control of everything. At one point she declares to a party of people what the weather will be like the next day and sternly rules over her parish with great authority: "whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented, or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaint, and scold them into harmony and plenty" (112). She also seems genuinely surprised that Elizabeth once dares to not give her a direct answer.

Despite her high rank, Lady Catherine does not have a high status. She is praised above all by Mr. Collins but more aptly described, perhaps surprisingly, by Mr. Wickham. Mr. Wickham tells Elizabeth that he finds her an unpleasant woman and while she is said to be "remarkably sensible and clever", he claims that she "derives part of her abilities from her rank and fortune" (57). Lady Catherine does rely on her class and rank, but she would in reality not need to care much about her status so long as she surrounds herself with people like Mr. Collins who will always value rank and class above status.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy is Lady Catherine's nephew and is thus related to the same aristocratic family. He is a very wealthy landowner with an income of £10,000 a year and owns the great Pemberley estate where he resides with his younger sister, Georgina Darcy, during the summer months. Mr. Darcy's father was a good man who gave him "good principles" (241), but due to Mr. Darcy long being an only child, he was spoilt and did not abide by the principles he had been given. While he is certainly of high rank, he often acts superior to those around him and is described as "haughty, reserved, and fastidious, and his manners, though well-bred, were not inviting" and was "continually giving offense" (12). When meeting inhabitants of Meryton and the surrounding area, his presence is initially very much appreciated with his physical appearance, noble air and his £10,000 a year, but he leaves them disappointed and filled with "disgust" as he does not act in accordance with his gentlemanlike appearance and instead lets his pride consider him "to be above his company, and above being pleased" (8).

However, another side of Mr. Darcy is presented by his housekeeper at Pemberley, Mrs. Reynolds. She can only say good things about him, calling him “the best landlord, and the best master” (161) and describing him as selfless and gracious toward the poor. She resolutely disagrees with the notion of him being considered proud, dismissing it and stating that the reason people would believe this is because he does not “rattle away like other young men” (161). Mr. Darcy’s close relationship to Mr. Charles Bingley, who is very fond of him, is also telling in the question of Mr. Darcy’s true nature. Still, Mr. Darcy does judge the society around him by their class and rank and particularly their status.

In his proposal to Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy expresses his displeasure for her poor family connections – her “inferiority” (125) – but clarifies that it was not just Mrs. Bennet’s and her family’s background but more so the way he perceived their behaviour. “The situation of your mother’s family, though objectionable”, he says, “was nothing in comparison to that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, by your three younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father” (130-131). Not only does this show the importance of status for the previously middle class Mrs. Bennet, but also for Mr. Bennet who was born a gentleman. Mr. Darcy’s concern with status could also be seen when visiting his aunt, Lady Catherine, where there is an instant of him possibly being “a little ashamed of his aunt’s ill-breeding” (115) even though she is of higher rank than Mr. Darcy himself.

The Bennet family belongs to the gentry and owns the Longbourn estate. Mr. Bennet’s income is £2,000 pounds a year, significantly less than Mr. Darcy, which is an example of the range of income difference between gentlemen of the time. While belonging to a similar class, Mr. Darcy is of much higher rank than Mr. Bennet. One reason for this is Mr. Bennet’s marriage to Mrs. Bennet.

Mr. Bennet comes from a landowning family and could therefore afford to marry whomever he wanted and thus married Mrs. Bennet, of low class and rank, because of her “youth and beauty” – a decision he would come to regret as Mrs. Bennet’s “weak understanding and illiberal mind [...] put an end to all real affection for her” (Austen 155). Mrs. Bennet comes from a middle class family and her father was an attorney in Meryton who left her £4,000 pounds, a sum “ample for her situation in life” (19). Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet shows a vulgarity and a stupidity that come from her past and she is happy to point out the class she married into – especially when comparing herself to the Lucas family, to whom Mrs. Bennet considers herself superior. She very proudly states: “I always keep servants that can do their own work; *my* daughters are brought up very differently”, when implying that Lady Lucas’ daughter Caroline needed to return home in order to bake mince-pies (30).

Mrs. Bennet's side of the family, and her own low status, directly impacts her daughter's potential marriages. With five daughters and no male heir, Longbourn is entailed to Mr. Bennet's closest male relative, which means that when Mr. Bennet passes away, Mrs. Bennet and her daughters will neither have a home nor a fortune to support them. It also means that Mrs. Bennet needs to marry off her daughters. However, when Jane Bennet's connection with Mr. Bingley is broken due to "very strong objections against the lady" (123), one possible reason is her family connections through Mrs. Bennet. When Lady Catherine is made aware of the link between her nephew Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet she travels to Longbourn herself to tell Elizabeth that the match between them is not possible due to Mrs. Bennet's family's "condition" (232) – their class and rank.

## The Army and the Clergy

Colonel Fitzwilliam is related to Lady Catherine through his father, Lady Catherine's brother Lord—, making him a cousin of Mr. Darcy. He is described as "about thirty, not handsome, but in person and address most truly the gentleman" (Austen 113) and throughout the novel he is repeatedly portrayed as a very amiable man who is both a gentleman and gentlemanlike.

His desirable qualities, as well as his admiration for Elizabeth, make him a possible romantic interest for a short while when he and Elizabeth spend time together when visiting Lady Catherine at Rosings. During a visit to Rosings, they have a conversation "with so much spirit and flow" (114) that Lady Catherine interrupts them and he continues to visit the Parsonage to see Elizabeth. Elizabeth does come to care for Colonel Fitzwilliam but after Mr. Darcy gives her a letter she concludes that Colonel Fitzwilliam is "no longer an object" (138). Elizabeth is not alone in considering a match between herself and the Colonel, Mrs. Collins (Charlotte Lucas) also briefly contemplates a possible marriage but remembers that his social graces will not make up for the fact that the Colonel will not inherit his father, unlike Mr. Darcy, and will therefore need to marry for wealth instead (120).

Colonel Fitzwilliam is a prime example of a second son who will not inherit his father. Instead of inheriting an estate, he has entered into one of the few occupations that were acceptable to the upper classes, namely the army. Still, to continue to live a life of the comfort he is used to he needs to marry for wealth and cannot afford to marry for love. He is very aware of this fact himself as he tells Elizabeth that "[y]ounger sons cannot marry where they like [...] [o]ur habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money" (121).

Another military man is Mr. George Wickham, who is the son of Mr. Darcy's late father's steward and also the late Mr. Darcy's godson. Due to this fact, the late Mr. Darcy wanted to provide for Mr. Wickham by supporting his education in order to make Mr. Wickham a clergyman in the Pemberley Parsonage. However, when both his father and his godfather had passed away, Mr. Wickham instead asked Mr. Darcy for a thousand pounds upfront to study law, which he received. However, instead of education, Mr. Wickham spent the money on an extravagant lifestyle which soon had him returning to Mr. Darcy for more funds. In another attempt to acquire enough wealth to match his spending habits, he almost succeeded in eloping with Mr. Darcy's sister, Georgiana, but when this failed he joined the army instead. However, as Mr. Wickham, unlike many in the military, does not have a family fortune of his own, he struggles to finance the lifestyle of an army officer.

Instead of wealth or birth, Mr. Wickham has to rely on his charms, and he ultimately hopes to marry someone else with a large fortune as he soon moves on from Elizabeth, who does not have a large dowry, to a Miss King when she inherits ten thousand pounds. However, Miss King departs from Meryton and Mr. Wickham leaves with his regiment for Brighton, Lydia Bennet following suit. Since Lydia does not have a large fortune Mr. Wickham never planned to marry her, but when they leave Brighton together it is rumoured that they will elope to Gretna Green to get married. However, Mr. Wickham only left in order to escape a new round of debts of honour – gambling debts.

Like Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Wickham is described as a man "of most gentlemanlike appearance" (Austen 49) but ultimately Mr. Wickham is not the gentleman Colonel Fitzwilliam is, even though Mr. Wickham is very skilled at acting in a gentlemanlike fashion. Mr. Wickham is also the complete opposite in class ambition as he desperately tries to climb higher in terms of class, rank and fortune, while Colonel Fitzwilliam is secure and stable in his place in society.

Mr. Collins, a distant relation of Mr. Bennet's, is fixated on the idea of class and rank. Because all the Bennet children are female, Longbourn is entailed to Mr. Collins, but he has already made something of himself as he is the clergyman of the parish on Lady Catherine de Bourgh's land. He takes immense pride in his connection to Lady Catherine and is thus willing to act on her every command, even though the circumstances of this connection are attributed to chance rather than any quality of Mr. Collins himself.

Mr. Collins is described as a "mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility" with some of his un-gentlemanlike qualities blamed on his father who was "illiterate and miserly" (48). These defects were not rectified by Mr. Collins' education. This means that while Mr. Collins' place in life certainly demands respect, with Lady Catherine as

his patroness and his relatively high position as a clergyman with a “good house and very sufficient income” (48), he does not have the high status that he could have had, had he not been so bothersome and difficult to socialise with.

Because Longbourn is entailed on Mr. Collins, meaning that Mrs. Bennet and her unmarried daughter would have to leave in the event of Mr Bennet’s death, Mr. Collins aims to amend this by marrying one of the Bennet sisters himself. It is Lady Catherine who has encouraged him to look for a wife and Mr. Collins does not hesitate to perform accordingly. He is eager to talk about his patroness and her rank as he proudly states at dinner with the Bennet family that he “[has] never in his life witnessed such behaviour in a person of rank – such affability and condensation” and that she “always [spoke] to him as she would any other gentleman” (45).

Mr. Collins further proves himself to be a shallow man, hastily jumping between considering Jane Bennet, Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas, as a potential wife. His haste to marry is probably due to his desire to follow Lady Catherine’s wishes as soon as possible, but Charlotte Lucas’ titled father Sir William Lucas – a knight – would perhaps also aid Mr. Collins in his decision to marry Charlotte. By marrying well, Mr. Collins would also further secure his place in society.

## The People in Trade

The Bingley family enters *Pride and Prejudice* through renting Netherfield Park in search of an estate. Mr. Charles Bingley’s father made his fortune in trade and intended to purchase an estate, but after his death, this task was left to his son. They are in possession of large sums for a middle class family; Mr. Bingley inherited nearly £100,000 pounds and his two sister’s fortune is £20,000 pounds. The purchase of an estate is an important undertaking since this would make them land-owners, something that the Bingley sisters Charlotte and Louisa are desperate for their brother to be. They would rather not be reminded that their fortune came from trade and their own insecurities show through when they look down on others for their associations with trade – and not in the least the connections The Bennet family has through Mrs. Bennet. They state that even though Jane Bennet is a sweet girl, her “vulgar relations” – a lawyer in Meryton and an uncle living near Cheapside in London – make her unsuitable for their brother. Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, exclaims: “If they had uncles enough to fill *all* Cheapside [...] it would not make them one jot less agreeable” (Austen 25).

One of the Bingley sisters is already married – Louisa has married a Mr. Hurst who lives on Grosvenor Street in London, a much more fashionable area than Cheapside. Since Louisa does not need to marry for money but rather to achieve a higher rank, she could afford to marry “a man of more fashion than fortune” (11). The same principle applies to her sister Caroline who is very interested in Mr. Darcy, not because of affection or his wealth, but because of his considerably high rank and status.

Mr. Bingley is a close friend of Mr. Darcy and is repeatedly described in contrast to his friend. Mr. Bingley is described as “good-looking and gentlemanlike” (7) but “Darcy was the superior” (12) in most ways but amiable manners. There does not seem to be any specific disregard for Mr. Bingley with everyone considering him a very good match in marriage for any daughter of theirs as his fortune, physical appearance and gentlemanlike manners makes him more of a gentleman than many of those already in possession of land.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner belong to the middle class, and Mr. Edward Gardiner is Mrs. Bennet’s brother that the Bingley sisters look down on for being in trade. However, as opposed to Mrs. Bennet, and their other sister Mrs. Phillips, Mr. Gardiner is a rational person who is very favourably described as a:

sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister, as well by nature as education.

The Netherfield ladies would have had difficulty in believing that a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses, would have been so well-bred and agreeable. (93)

This disconnect between ‘breeding’ and ‘gentlemanlikeness’ marks a difference between the perception of the middle class and the actuality of it. When the Bingley sisters consider the “vulgar relations” (25) of Jane Bennet they are thinking of both the Phillips family and the Gardiner family but there is a difference between the *status* of the two families even if they are of a similar rank and class. Mrs. Gardiner is described as being “an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman” (93) while Mrs. Phillips is quite the gossip, further establishing this variance in status.

Before the Gardiners are introduced to Mr. Darcy, he seems to mistake them for people of higher class and rank as Elizabeth expects him to be surprised when he realises that Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are middle class when he has taken them for “people of fashion” (165). While not belonging to the upper class or being of high rank, the Gardiners give the impression of being genteel.

Another family who made their fortune in trade is the Lucases who live at Lucas Lodge close to Mr. Bennet’s Longbourn. Sir William Lucas made his money in trade but after being awarded a knighthood he moved from Meryton as his new title had “given him a disgust to his business, and to his residence in a small market town” (12). He is described as being a pleasant

man who, despite his rank, does not act superior to everyone else and when “unshackled by business” (12) he is able to devote his time to being a gentleman. However, he still seems very interested in ensuring his place in society. He tells Mr. Darcy that he is “fond of superior society” (18) and while visiting Lady Catherine at Rosings, Sir William does not participate much in the conversation as he is “storing his memory with anecdotes and noble names” (111) – perhaps to feel a certain stability when his family is so close with the Bennet family where Mr. Bennet has been a gentleman all his life.

Lady Lucas and Mrs. Bennet certainly have a rivalry between them, perhaps born out of their shared upward social mobility. They are united by misfortune: Sir William’s title is not hereditary so it will not pass to his son, and Mrs. Bennet does not have a son and heir at all. Hence, they clash over their competition to make the most successful possible marriages for their children. When it is announced that Caroline Lucas, Lady Lucas’ eldest daughter, is engaged to Mr. Collins and therefore set to inherit Longbourn through entailment, Lady Lucas immediately starts to ponder how long it will be before Mr. Bennet dies and his wife and daughters are removed from their estate (83).

## The Importance of Class, Rank and Status

As the very first line of *Pride and Prejudice* reveals – “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 3) – the novel focuses heavily on matrimony. Marriage drives the plot. Those already married, as well as those in search of a partner, and how these relationships are portrayed and played out, are not only greatly affected by matters of class, rank and status but they also serve as commentary on 19<sup>th</sup>-century society from Jane Austen herself.

As mentioned above, Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet’s marriage was not founded on solid ground as Mr. Bennet married for physical attraction rather than for real love or with some consideration for rank, class or wealth. This is important for the novel as their greatest task is to marry off their daughters as Longbourn is entailed and they lack a male heir. Had Mr. Bennet chosen a different wife, the struggle of finding suitable matches for his daughters could have been less of a problem, for example if he had married a woman with a large fortune and thus could provide his daughters with large dowries. The fact that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s marriage is not a happy one also serves as judgement on them for marrying for the wrong reasons.

The consequence of unhappy marriages made for the wrong reasons can be seen generally in the text through those who place too much importance on their respect for rank



and class, or wealth. Mr. Wickham is desperate to marry a girl with a large fortune; he attempts to marry Georgiana Darcy, tries to get close to the heiress Miss King and dismisses Elizabeth Bennet as a serious interest because she lacks the wealth he desires. In the end, Mr. Wickham marries Lydia Bennet; while she is young and beautiful there is no other reason Mr. Wickham would want to marry her and he only does so when he is bribed. Although this unsuccessful marriage could be seen as justice being dealt for his dishonest and distasteful actions, one could also argue that he got more than he deserved.

The marriage of Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas is more successful since it is a rational marriage based on a kind of mutual respect. Like Colonel Fitzwilliam, Charlotte is a very realistic person who is very aware of their position in life and does what she can to make that life as good as she can hope for. I would therefore hesitate to argue that her interest in Mr. Collins – that is undoubtedly not because of his physical appearance nor his genteel manners – is based on greed, but would rather say that it is a practical marriage for practical reasons. Additionally, I would say it shows that Jane Austen seems to have more sympathy for those types of people – as she allows them a successful marriage. However, this type of marriage is not the ideal partnership as they never achieve the same type of happiness as the marriages of the Gardiners or Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth.

The pairing of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner is very successful. They represent the balanced couple of shared respect and genuine love that I would argue is the one of the most important marriages of the entire novel. Even though they are the poor connections other characters dislike and one might expect them not to lead a good life (since other characters desperately try to escape their association with trade and being middle class) they seem very happy with their place in life in general.

A successful relationship that develops during the course of the novel is that of Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet. Their relationship is not based on either wealth or rank and class but on genuine love that would probably not have had any issue throughout the text if Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley's sisters had not conspired to separate him from Jane – likely on the basis of her poor family connections.

The absence of marriage is also telling. Caroline Bingley, who throughout the novel seeks to marry Mr. Darcy, is neither married nor presented with any potential match in the end. When she perceives the connection between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy she attempts to separate them: "She often tried to provoke Darcy into disliking her guest, by talking of their supposed marriage, and planning his happiness in such an alliance" (36). As described above, Caroline is not in need of a great fortune but rather feels the need to marry for class and rank in order to

distance herself from the middle class and being 'tainted' by trade. Her ambitions are not successful and she is not rewarded with any sort of relationship.

Most significant, of course, is the marriage of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet and not only in their own reasoning but also in that of Lady Catherine. Lady Catherine reveals her strong belief in the system of class and rank when she confronts Elizabeth on her supposed engagement to her nephew Mr. Darcy. She questions Elizabeth directly and delivers her reasons why her daughter Anne and Mr. Darcy is the proper match:

My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended, on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and, on the father's, from respectable, honourable, and ancient – though untitled – families. Their fortune on both sides is splendid. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune. (232)

While it is known that Lady Catherine places great emphasis on rank and class, her mentioning the fortunes of her daughter and Mr. Darcy also reveals a certain greed. Unlike in the case of Charlotte Lucas or Colonel Fitzwilliam, who are dependent on money, Lady Catherine does not need to worry much over her own or her daughters finances and so it is strange that she puts such an emphasis on the importance of fortune. The passage from which I have quoted is perhaps the most important conversation of the novel as the divide within class is clearly discussed. Elizabeth, when confronted by Lady Catherine, replies that "[Mr. Darcy] is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter, so far we are equal" (232) pointing out that where Lady Catherine sees a massive difference between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth's father Mr. Bennet because of their rank, Elizabeth sees two people of the same class. To this Lady Catherine has to agree, but her main point concerns Elizabeth's mother as well as her uncles and aunts, asking Elizabeth if she thinks Lady Catherine "ignorant of their condition" (232).

These matters of class and rank are also important for Mr. Darcy as he struggles with his attraction to Elizabeth while wanting to uphold his pride by refusing to marry 'down'. He is mostly concerned by her mother's relations, but when he apologises for upsetting Elizabeth by insulting her family he expresses instead a distaste for the manners of her younger sisters, as well as her mother and her father – who is a gentleman by birth. Mr. Darcy's judgemental attitude towards status is revealed earlier in the novel as well: he is close with Mr. Bingley who is of middle class but also has impeccable manners and a welcoming attitude. However, status does not seem to matter as much to Mr. Darcy in the question of marriage as he does not want himself to desire Elizabeth.

Mr. Darcy's change from a man who cannot see Elizabeth behind the supposed 'vulgarity' of her connections to a man who appreciates her for her personal merits is the most important example of Jane Austen's criticisms of the society of her time. Elizabeth's and Mr. Darcy's marriage represents the ideal marriage in Jane Austen's eyes: a marriage based on genuine love and mutual understanding and respect. Even though Mr. Darcy initially cares for class and rank, he realises that he is wrong and changes his behaviour and through this Austen tells us that he is a good person – and consequently rewards him with a happy marriage to the woman he loves. Had Elizabeth accepted his hand because of his wealth and high rank in the first place, Mr. Darcy would not have had the same opportunity to change and thus their relationship would not have been founded on sound reasons and would therefore be unsuccessful.

Mr. Darcy's change also functions as a symbol of the shift in society caused by the rise of the middle class when people started seeing individuals instead of classes and rank. Generally, Austen ridicules those who care very much about those things. I would say that Mr. Collins is the character most obsessed with such notions and he is also the most stupid character in the novel. Lady Catherine could also be described as stupid and this match between her and Mr. Collins I have no doubt is deliberate. There are also characters who are not stupid, such as the Bingley sisters, but who are still not portrayed in the best light because of their fixation on improving their social standing. While the Bingley sisters are not stupid, they are shallow and unpleasant.

The difference between characters like the Gardiners and Lady Catherine further shows that it is not class and rank that inherently determine whether an individual is a good person and deserving of respect. The middle class Gardiners are portrayed very favourably while aristocratic Lady Catherine is an arrogant, unpleasant and quite stupid woman. Jane Austen also balances her views by including other middle class characters who, in fact, are vulgar and lack good manners. She also complicates the reality of her fictional world by creating more characters of different statuses. There are those who seem gentlemanlike but are not gentlemen – like Mr. Wickham – or those who are gentlemen but do not have the manners to match, like Mr. Collins. Jane Austen successfully spotlights the fact that men and women can be good or bad people regardless of their presumed high or low rank or their being upper or middle class.

## Conclusion

This aim of this essay was to discuss *Pride and Prejudice* and to consider the significance of class – and rank and status – in the novel in terms of how the characters are portrayed and furthermore how they perceive and judge class themselves. To do this I have presented the historical background of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century class system as well as contextualised the novel by reviewing Jane Austen's own biographical background. I have also problematised the usage of the term 'class' and therefore discussed the novel from the point of view of other terms in order to provide a broader understanding of the society alongside the characters of the novel.

By identifying the class, rank and status of selected characters according to the class system of Jane Austen's time, I have been able to see a strong correlation between the characters' class, as well as their own perception of class, and the marriage plot which is central to the novel. The way marriage is connected to class is not as apparent to a modern day reader as to a contemporary reader, who would most likely have been able to more easily discern Jane Austen's criticisms of their own time. She is critical of those who do not marry for genuine love, but is more sympathetic toward those who instead marry for class, rank and fortune as long as they do so for practical reasons rather than out of greed. Those who do not, she regularly ridicules and never portrays them in a good light.

I have come to the conclusion that Jane Austen thought of people who cared too much about class and rank as problematic and that the ideal marriage is not one founded on these principles but rather on genuine love and, most importantly, on the ability to see people not for their class or rank but for their personal merit – and it is only when this is achieved that characters are rewarded with successful and happy marriages, as is the case of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet. Mr Darcy's reassessment of the importance of class and rank in favour of personal qualities is the strongest symbol of Jane Austen's critical view of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century class system.

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