

The Intersection of Class and Feminism: Women's Roles in Austen's Conservative Society

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricate intersection of class and feminism in Jane Austen's novels, where women's roles are largely defined by the rigid social hierarchies of early 19th-century England. Although Austen's works are often regarded as conservative in their setting, her nuanced depictions of female characters reflect a subtle critique of the societal constraints placed upon women, particularly in terms of marriage, education, and economic independence. By analysing characters such as **Elizabeth Bennet** in **Pride and Prejudice**, **Fanny Price** in **Mansfield Park**, and **Emma Woodhouse** in **Emma**, this study highlights how Austen contrasts the experiences of women from different social classes, showing how class distinctions influence their agency and personal choices. While wealthier women like Emma Woodhouse possess a degree of autonomy, they are not immune to the pressures of societal expectations, whereas lower-class characters like Fanny Price must rely on moral integrity and resilience in their quest for recognition and self-worth.

Through a feminist lens, this paper investigates how Austen's heroines navigate the boundaries of class to assert their identities and resist subjugation, whether by seeking equality in marriage, as seen in the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, or by quietly asserting moral superiority, as embodied by Fanny Price. Austen's critique of the limitations imposed on women of different classes reveals her proto-feminist ideals, emphasizing the need for education, personal integrity, and economic independence as pathways to female empowerment. This study ultimately argues that Austen's treatment of class and gender challenges the entrenched norms of her society, offering a radical vision for women's roles within a patriarchal and classist framework. In doing so, Austen's work remains a critical reflection on the intersection of feminism and social justice, resonating with modern feminist discourse.

Keywords- Feminism, Class Hierarchies, Women's Roles, Gender and Social Justice, Patriarchy, Female Agency, Marriage and Autonomy, Proto-feminist Ideals, 19th-Century Society, Economic Independence, Social Mobility, Intersectionality.

Introduction

Jane Austen's novels, often celebrated for their wit, social commentary, and masterful characterization, offer more than romantic narratives centered on marriage and courtship. Beneath the surface of her seemingly conventional plots lies a sharp critique of the social and gender inequalities pervasive in the early 19th-century English society. Austen's works subtly challenge the rigid structures of class and gender, exposing the limitations imposed on women based on their social standing. At a time when women's roles were primarily defined by their relationships with men and their place within a strictly stratified society, Austen presents her female characters as agents navigating the boundaries of class and gender. The intersection of class and feminism in Austen's novels provides a rich field for scholarly exploration, revealing how issues of social rank and gender converge to shape the experiences and opportunities of women. Her characters are not only bound by patriarchal norms but are also constrained by their class, which determines their prospects for marriage, education, and financial independence. For women like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, these intersecting forces dictate the choices they can make and the ways in which they assert their autonomy within a restrictive society. Austen's more affluent heroines, such as Emma Woodhouse, may enjoy greater freedom, yet they are still entangled in the expectations of a class-conscious world where a woman's worth is measured by her social and economic status.

This paper examines how Austen uses the intersection of class and gender to critique the societal limitations placed upon women and to portray female agency in complex and varied forms. By focusing on key protagonists from *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*, this study explores how Austen's heroines conform to and resist the structures of their time. Whether through marriage, moral integrity, or personal independence, Austen's characters seek to redefine their roles within a patriarchal and classist society. Through this analysis, the paper argues that Austen's portrayal of women reflects an early form of feminist thought, revealing a deep awareness of the social justice issues that resonate with contemporary feminist discourse.

This introduction sets the stage for the paper by outlining the key themes of class, gender, and female agency in Austen's

works, while framing her novels as critiques of the societal structures of her time.

Theoretical Approach & Method

The literature of Jane Austen is often analysed through a feminist lens, highlighting her critique of gender roles and the restrictions faced by women in a patriarchal society. However, understanding these dynamics requires not just a focus on gender, but also on class. This intersection of class and gender in Austen's novels reveals a nuanced portrayal of women's roles and agency within a rigidly stratified society. To delve into this intersection, it is crucial to employ a theoretical approach that accounts for both feminist and class considerations.

Theoretical Approach

This detailed exploration delves further into the theoretical underpinnings by dissecting how Intersectional Feminism and Marxist Feminism interact to reveal a multi-dimensional understanding of women's roles in Jane Austen's works. Each theory provides a distinct yet complementary lens through which to analyse the ways class and gender intersect, influencing female agency, autonomy, and identity within a conservative society.

1. Intersectional Feminism in Austen's Context

Intersectionality as a feminist theory, articulated by Kimberley Crenshaw, argues that gender cannot be understood in isolation from other social identities, such as race, class, and sexuality. Austen's novels, while not directly engaging with race or sexuality, provide a fertile ground to explore the intersection of gender and class. This approach recognizes that women's experiences of subordination are not uniform but vary depending on their social and economic status. Austen's focus on the British landed gentry, the rising merchant class, and the impoverished gentlewoman captures the varying layers of oppression and privilege experienced by her characters.

a) Gender and Class as Co-Constructed Identities:

Intersectionality posits that gender and class are not separate but co-constructed categories that define women's identities and social roles. For instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's gendered experience as a woman is intrinsically linked to her status as a lower gentry's daughter with no substantial dowry. Her inability to access the privileges of higher-class women shapes her response to Mr. Darcy's proposal and her scepticism toward traditional marital expectations. Conversely, Emma Woodhouse's identity as an independent, wealthy woman is shaped by her upper-class privilege, allowing her to defy some gender norms (e.g., delaying marriage) while still maintaining authority within her social sphere.

b) The Impact of Social Stratification on Female Agency:

The stratification of social classes in Austen's society limits or enhances women's agency depending on their class status. For example, the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* experience a dramatic loss of agency after the death of their father leaves them without a male protector or financial security, making them vulnerable to economic and social marginalization. Intersectional feminism here helps illuminate how women's experiences of patriarchal subjugation are magnified or mitigated by their class status.

c) The Fluidity of Social Identity and Class Mobility:

Intersectionality also examines the fluidity of social identities and how class mobility impacts women's gendered roles. Characters like Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, whose ambiguous class position oscillates between that of a poor relation and a member of the Bertram household, reveal the instability of female identity within a rigid class structure. The fluctuating power dynamics experiences underscore how class mobility (or lack thereof) can complicate women's negotiation of gender norms.

2. Marxist Feminism: Class, Economy, and the Commodification of Women

Marxist Feminism situates women's oppression within the larger framework of capitalist class structures, examining how economic dependence on men, lack of property rights, and the commodification of women in the marriage market are foundational to female subjugation. In Austen's time, women's social and economic security was largely determined by their fathers and husbands, making them economically dependent and reducing them to objects of exchange in the marital economy.

a) Marriage as an Economic Transaction:

Marxist feminist theory highlights how marriage, in Austen's novels, operates as an economic transaction where women's value is determined by their dowries, social connections, and physical beauty. This commodification of women's worth is evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, where the Bennet daughters' economic vulnerability (due to the entailment of the family estate to a male heir) pushes Mrs. Bennet to treat her daughters as commodities to be "sold" to the highest bidder, regardless of love or compatibility. The pragmatic marriages of Charlotte Lucas and Maria Bertram illustrate how women, in a patriarchal and capitalist society, are compelled to prioritize financial security over personal happiness.

b) Women as Economic Dependents and the Critique of Patriarchal Capitalism:

Austen critiques the economic foundations of women's subjugation by portraying the limitations placed on women without wealth or property. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters' precarious situation after being deprived of their inheritance exposes how women's social status and security are entirely contingent upon male relatives. Marxist feminist analysis reveals that this dependency is not just a gender issue but a class issue that ties women's survival to their access to wealth, reinforcing patriarchal capitalism's grip on female autonomy.

c) Class Struggle and Marriage Politics:

The class struggle in Austen's novels is played out through the politics of marriage. Marxist theory views marriage as a means to preserve class boundaries and transfer wealth, thus maintaining the power of the aristocracy. For instance, in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot's rejection by her family for considering a marriage beneath her social rank highlights how class structures shape and constrain personal choices. This critique of classist values is central to Austen's portrayal of love and marriage, where genuine affection is often sacrificed to uphold class expectations.

3. Integration of Theories: The Dual Oppression of Women

Combining Intersectional Feminism and Marxist Feminism offers a comprehensive framework to understand the dual oppression women face in Austen's conservative society. While patriarchal gender norms restrict women's agency, class structures further exacerbate their subordination by dictating access to power, wealth, and social mobility.

a) Class-Influenced Gender Norms:

Gender expectations vary according to class status. Upper-class women, like Emma Woodhouse, are expected to maintain strict standards of decorum and adhere to social rituals, while lower-class women, such as Harriet Smith, face condescension and dismissal. These class-inflected gender norms determine not only women's behaviour but also their value in the marriage market.

b) Economic Dependency and Social Value:

Women's social value is linked to their economic status. Those with wealth, like Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, wield significant social power, while women without wealth, like Miss Bates in *Emma*, are socially marginalized and rendered powerless. This dependency creates a hierarchy among women themselves, complicating feminist solidarity.

c) Resistance and Agency:

Despite these constraints, Austen's heroines often find ways to assert their autonomy. Elizabeth Bennet's refusal to marry Mr. Collins, despite the economic security he offers, represents a form of resistance against both gender and class expectations. This study will delve into how Austen's protagonists negotiate their identities within the intersectional framework of class and gender, seeking empowerment without entirely escaping the confines of their society.

Expanded Methodology

The expanded methodology builds on qualitative textual analysis and historical contextualization to offer a deeper examination of Austen's critique of class and gender dynamics.

1. Historical Contextualization:

Understanding the socio-economic and legal constraints of Regency England is critical to this study. Issues such as primogeniture (inheritance by the firstborn son), entailment (legal restriction preventing women from inheriting estates), and the status of unmarried women will be analysed. This contextual grounding will inform the reading of key texts to demonstrate how Austen reflects and critiques these social realities.

2. Narrative and Structural Analysis:

The study will analyse Austen's use of narrative structure to critique class and gender. For instance, the resolution of romantic conflicts often aligns with class stability, suggesting Austen's conservative leanings. At the same time, her use of irony and free indirect discourse subtly undermines these norms, indicating a more complex social commentary.

3. Comparative Character Analysis:

Detailed character studies will be conducted to compare how class and gender intersect in different characters' lives. For example, a comparative analysis of Fanny Price and Elizabeth Bennet will reveal how class status affects their access to agency and autonomy, shaping their respective approaches to social expectations and marital choices.

By delving deeper into both theoretical and methodological approaches, this study will provide a robust, multi-dimensional analysis of the intersection of class and feminism in Austen's conservative society, highlighting how these forces shape women's identities, roles, and resistance.

Arguments and Discussion

1. Introduction to Arguments and Discussion

Jane Austen's novels are set in a society where women's roles and agency are tightly controlled by intersecting forces of class and gender. The complexity of this intersection reveals the nuanced ways Austen critiques the limited options available to women, who must navigate both their gendered subordination and their class-based status. This discussion centers on three main arguments to illustrate how Austen's work provides a subtle but powerful critique of both patriarchal and class structures:

Class Position as a Determinant of Female Agency and Identity:

Austen portrays class as a key factor that shapes women's ability to exercise agency and resist patriarchal norms.

Marriage as a Site of Class and Gender Oppression:

Marriage, a central theme in Austen's novels, is depicted as a transactional space where women are commodified based on their class status and economic value.

Resistance within Boundaries: Female Defiance and Complicity:

Austen's heroines exhibit forms of resistance against both class and gender expectations, but this resistance is often limited by the conservative social framework in which they exist.

2. Argument 1: Class Position as a Determinant of Female Agency and Identity

Austen's novels suggest that women's identities and their ability to assert themselves are not determined by gender alone

but are deeply influenced by their class positions. Women of different social standings experience varying degrees of freedom, respect, and influence, demonstrating that class and gender operate together to either enhance or constrain their agency.

2.1. The Impact of Class on Autonomy and Social Mobility

Argument: In Austen's society, class serves as a determinant of autonomy and power, often dictating women's access to personal agency and social mobility.

Example 1: *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates this dynamic through the juxtaposition of Elizabeth Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Although both are women subjected to patriarchal expectations, Lady Catherine's aristocratic status grants her a commanding influence over others, including men. She exercises a form of authority unavailable to lower-class women, even challenging Mr. Darcy's decisions about marriage.

Example 2: Conversely, Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* has little social power despite being the novel's heroine. Her lower status as a poor relation restricts her ability to voice her opinions, making her dependent on the goodwill of her wealthier relatives. Her struggles for agency are not just gendered but are compounded by her precarious class position.

2.2. Class as a Marker of Social Value and Respectability

Argument: Class determines not only a woman's social status but also her intrinsic value and respectability. Austen critiques the superficiality of this valuation system by exposing its impact on women's self-worth and identity.

Example: In *Emma*, Harriet Smith, an illegitimate daughter of unknown parentage, is dismissed as an unsuitable match for any respectable gentleman despite her good character. Emma's own attempts to elevate Harriet's status by manipulating her romantic prospects ultimately fail, as class boundaries prove insurmountable.

2.3. Discussion

Austen's critique is that class stratification magnifies gender oppression, placing further constraints on women's freedom based on their economic status. The discussion reveals that while gender norms restrict all women, the extent of their oppression is contingent upon their class standing. For example, upper-class women like Emma can wield some influence, but lower-class women like Harriet Smith remain perpetually marginalized. Austen's portrayal of these classed gender dynamics exposes the hypocrisy and rigidity of a society that values women's worth based on their social and economic rank rather than their individual merits.

3. Argument 2: Marriage as a Site of Class and Gender Oppression

Marriage is portrayed as a transactional space where women's worth is measured in economic and social terms. Austen critiques the marriage market as a site of both gender and class oppression, where women are commodified and their autonomy is sacrificed in favour of economic stability and class preservation.

3.1. The Economic Basis of Marriage

Argument: Austen uses marriage to expose the economic vulnerability of women, who, in a patriarchal and capitalist society, are valued for their dowries and social connections rather than their personal attributes.

Example 1: In *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr. Collins is a pragmatic decision driven by her need for financial security. At twenty-seven, Charlotte is considered a spinster with diminishing prospects. Her acceptance of Mr. Collins's proposal highlights how economic desperation can compel women to enter loveless marriages, reflecting the transactional nature of marriage for women without independent wealth.

Example 2: Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters are deprived of their inheritance due to the entailment of their father's estate to a male heir. This economic insecurity forces Marianne to seek a wealthy suitor, while Elinor must suppress her affection for Edward Ferrars because of his financial instability.

3.2. Marriage as a Means of Class Preservation

Argument: Marriage is depicted as a tool for maintaining class boundaries and perpetuating the existing social order. Women are married off to suitable partners not for love but to preserve family wealth and status.

Example: In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot's initial engagement to Captain Wentworth is broken off due to his lack of wealth and status. Lady Russell, acting as the voice of conservative class values, convinces Anne to end the relationship, prioritizing social standing over personal happiness. This reinforces the idea that class dictates not only women's choices but also their romantic desires, as love is subordinated to the demands of social rank.

3.3. Discussion

Austen's portrayal of marriage as a site of class and gender oppression underscores her critique of a society that treats women as commodities whose worth is determined by economic value. Women's identities and choices are subordinated to the imperatives of class preservation and wealth consolidation. This system reduces marriage to a business arrangement where women's autonomy is traded for economic and social security. Austen's irony and narrative techniques reveal the tragedy of this reality, making her critique both poignant and subversive.

4. Argument 3: Resistance within Boundaries: Female Defiance and Complicity

Austen's heroines often exhibit forms of resistance against both class and gender expectations, but this resistance is limited by the conservative framework in which they exist. Austen's critique is subtle, as her characters navigate a delicate balance between defiance and complicity, revealing the constraints placed on women's ability to achieve genuine empowerment.

4.1. Defiance against Patriarchal Expectations

Argument: Heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot resist patriarchal expectations by asserting their right to marry for love rather than economic necessity. Their defiance challenges both gender norms and the class system's emphasis on wealth.

Example: Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of Mr. Collins, despite his potential to secure her family's financial future, is a radical assertion of personal choice over economic stability. Her later rejection of Mr. Darcy's initial proposal further challenges the class hierarchy, as she refuses to be treated as an inferior despite her lower status.

4.2. The Limits of Female Autonomy

Argument: Despite their resistance, Austen's heroines often conform to the very social norms they critique. Their rebellions are contained within the boundaries of the existing social order, reflecting the limitations placed on female autonomy.

Example: In *Emma*, despite her independent spirit and initial desire to avoid marriage, Emma ultimately marries Mr. Knightley, reaffirming her place within the conservative social structure. Her "independence" is shown to be illusory, as her marriage reinforces the class and gender expectations she initially resisted.

4.3. Complicity in Class Hierarchies

Argument: Austen's heroines are complicit in perpetuating the class hierarchies they ostensibly resist. This complicity reveals the inescapability of the class system and suggests that genuine female empowerment is unattainable within the conservative framework of Austen's society.

Example: Elizabeth Bennet, despite her critique of Mr. Darcy's arrogance, ultimately marries him, thus ascending in social rank and securing her family's position. Her marriage to Darcy can be seen as both a triumph of love and a reinforcement of the class system, as it aligns her with the very aristocratic values she initially disdained.

4.4. Discussion

Austen's critique is not one of complete defiance but rather one of negotiation and compromise. Her heroines seek empowerment within the limits imposed by their society, finding ways to assert their autonomy without wholly rejecting the class and gender norms that define their world. This nuanced portrayal of resistance and complicity highlights Austen's realism: she acknowledges the constraints of her society while subtly advocating for incremental change.

5. Conclusion

The discussion reveals that Austen's critique of women's roles is deeply intertwined with class considerations. While her heroines challenge gender norms, their struggles are also shaped by the class system that determines their value and autonomy. Austen's portrayal of marriage, class, and female agency underscores the complex interplay of class and gender, making her novels both conservative and subversive critiques of women's positions in her society. Through this nuanced intersectional analysis, Austen emerges as a keen observer of the ways class and gender work together to limit women's roles and their potential for true empowerment.

Conclusion

Jane Austen's novels, often perceived as romantic tales set within the genteel society of Regency England, offer a deeper, more subversive critique of the intersection of class and gender in shaping women's roles. Through her nuanced portrayal of women navigating a patriarchal society that values them based on both their economic status and adherence to gender norms, Austen exposes the limitations placed on female autonomy and agency. Her works illustrate that while gender norms are restrictive, women's experiences of oppression are further exacerbated or alleviated by their class positions, making their struggles for identity, power, and freedom complex and multifaceted.

Austen's exploration of the marriage market as a site of both economic exchange and gender subjugation highlights the commodification of women in a society that reduces their value to financial and social considerations. This dual oppression is poignantly portrayed in the fates of her heroines, whose choices are constrained not only by the expectations of a patriarchal society but also by their precarious class positions. While characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot challenge some of these constraints, their eventual marriages reflect a negotiation with, rather than a rejection of, the social order.

Ultimately, Austen's critique is both conservative and progressive. On the one hand, her novels often reaffirm the existing social hierarchies by rewarding characters who conform to societal expectations, suggesting that true autonomy for women is unattainable within the confines of their world. On the other hand, Austen subtly advocates for a reimagining of women's roles, portraying heroines who assert their right to marry for love, defy class prejudice, and seek intellectual and personal fulfillment. By highlighting the ways in which class complicates women's struggles for empowerment, Austen's works remain deeply relevant to contemporary feminist discourse, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of how intersecting identities shape women's experiences of power and subordination.

Thus, Austen's novels provide a compelling critique of the intersection of class and feminism in her conservative society, revealing that the pursuit of female empowerment is fraught with contradictions, compromises, and negotiations. Her characters' attempts to carve out spaces for autonomy within a rigid class and gender system underscore the ongoing relevance of her insights into the complexities of women's lives. In doing so, Austen emerges not only as a keen observer of her society but also as a writer who challenges us to question the subtle forces that shape women's identities and destinies.

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