

Finding Happiness



What is the perfect marriage based on? Is it genuine affection? Is it passion? Is it esteem? Can marriages of convenience and social expectations be happy ones?

In Jane Austen's **Pride and Prejudice** we observe the unique marriages of four very different couples. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas, Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet, and Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet all married for different reasons. These reasons are ultimately responsible for the success or lack of success within the various marriages. Jane Austen illustrates, through conversations and actions, that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have the greatest chance of happiness, because their marriage is based on the qualities of "affection, esteem, and passion."¹

The marriage of Mr. Bennet to Mrs. Bennet is a prime example of how a marriage formed due to social expectations. When Mr. Bennet first met Mrs. Bennet, he was "captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty usually give."² He asked Mrs. Bennet to marry him because marriage was required of the gentlemen in society. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."³ Mr. Bennet kept in custom with this old saying by choosing to marry a woman who only offered him passion.

Mrs. Bennet, in turn, agreed to marry Mr. Bennet because marriage, for women of the early 1800's, was a necessary action. Unlike women in today's society, females of the early 1800's could not have careers and be respected at the same time. While some women chose to become governesses, they were referred to as "dependents,"⁴ which was not a preferred label. Therefore, only two respectable ways for women to acquire money existed. The first way was through the inheritance of money from a family member. This, however, was not a common occurrence because sons usually inherited before daughters did.⁵ Consequently, the most common choice for women to ensure comfortable futures was to marry. Mrs. Bennet needed a husband and Mr. Bennet was offering. Jane Austen once said, "Single women

have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony.”⁶ Mrs. Bennet accepted Mr. Bennet’s proposal because she really had no other choice. Mr. Bennet offer of a respectable life was, therefore, readily accepted by Mrs. Bennet.

The relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is a comical one. The two are completely mismatched. While Mr. Bennet is “A mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice,” Mrs. Bennet is “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper.”⁷ It was not until after they were married that Mr. Bennet found out Mrs. Bennet was a woman of “weak understanding and illiberal mind.”⁸ Finding out that Mrs. Bennet was not the wonderful woman he had thought her to be, Mr. Bennet looked to his other interests for enjoyment, only relying on Mrs. Bennet for amusement.

Throughout this story we laugh at the witty remarks that Mr. Bennet is constantly throwing at Mrs. Bennet. We are likewise amused at the silly retorts Mrs. Bennet returns. However, one must look at the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and realize that theirs is not a very happy one. While initial passion and social expectations may have brought the two together, it did not give them much happiness. After a while the passion ran out, and all the two were left with was a passel of girls and an unhappy marriage.

Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas’s marriage, like that of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, was one of social expectations. Mr. Collins came to visit the Bennets in order to find a wife. Since he was to inherit the Bennet estate, he figured that it would be most convenient to marry one of the Bennet girls. Upon his arrival he decided that Jane would suit him best. Unfortunately, Jane was already being courted, so Mr. Collins decided that Elizabeth would be a fine second choice.

Mr. Collins, in his proposal to Elizabeth, said that when he came into the Bennet household he had chosen her as, “the companion of my future life.”⁹ He went on to say that he wanted to marry because it is the right thing for a clergyman to do, that he was convinced that it would add to his happiness, and that Lady Catherine de Bourgh advised him to marry. Elizabeth was appalled at his lack of interest in her feelings. She tried, despite her disgust of him and his ideas, to

let him down easy. Mr. Collins, however, would not take the hint. In fact, it wasn’t until Mr. Bennet told him in no uncertain terms that Elizabeth would not be marrying him, that Mr. Collins decided to transfer his attentions to one Charlotte Lucas.

Charlotte Lucas readily accepted Mr. Collins’ attentions. She wanted a husband and saw some appealing qualities in Mr. Collins. She later tells Elizabeth, “I am not a romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.”¹⁰ When Mr. Collins proposed to Charlotte, she accepted “solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment.”¹¹ Charlotte agreed to marry Mr. Collins because she didn’t want to die an old maid. She, like Mrs. Bennet, saw a chance at a comfortable life and took it.

The marriage of Mr. Collins and Charlotte is not based on passion, mutual affection, or even esteem. It is simply based on convenience. Charlotte enjoyed the social standing her marriage to Mr. Collins brought her, and Mr. Collins enjoyed the presence of a wife. The arrangement worked well because neither of the two expected love from each other. They lived as husband and wife as society deemed appropriate, yet they did not have a happy marriage.

In the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas, love and genuine affection never were mentioned. Both couples married out of necessity. Neither couple had a long courtship. They met, became acquainted, and married. In the next two relationships, we will see what happens when love and time come into play.

Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley first meet at a ball being held at Meryton. Much to Mrs. Bennet’s delight, the two dance twice, and a mutual attraction forms. Soon, Jane is invited to dinner at Netherfield, Mr. Bingley’s estate. Upon her arrival Jane becomes ill and is forced to spend her time recuperating there. After her recovery Bingley begins to visit Jane quite often. The Bennet household begins to believe that in the near future Jane will become the wife of Mr. Bingley. Everything seems to be going smoothly until, suddenly, the Bingleys leave town.

Jane Bennet is known by all as a kind and pretty girl. Jane would never do anyone harm, nor would she choose to see the worst in any person. Jane is the type of girl who always looks for the silver lining on things. When the Bingleys leave Netherfield, at first Jane chooses to believe that they would come back soon. However, as time goes by, Jane begins to feel that she has been mistaken in supposing Mr. Bingley's affection towards her. When Jane visits with Caroline Bingley, she is lead to believe that Mr. Bingley doesn't want to see her and that their relationship, such as it were, was over. This crushes Jane's feelings, yet she makes no attempt to get into contact with him.

Mr. Bingley is a man who is well liked by most people. He is good looking, well mannered, friendly, and generally considered fun. Upon meeting Jane, he began to develop feelings of fondness towards her. He only left town under the advisement of Mr. Darcy who told him that Jane did not seem to truly care about him. Mr. Bingley left for London because he couldn't be near Jane, knowing that his feelings were not being reciprocated.

At the end of the story, Mr. Darcy explains to Mr. Bingley that he was mistaken about Jane's lack of feeling for him. Mr. Bingley almost immediately goes back to Netherfield and once again becomes acquainted with the Bennets. He professes his love to Jane, asking her to marry him. Jane accepts out of mutual affections.

Jane and Mr. Bingley's marriage is one based love and passion. Mr. Bennet says to Jane on hers and Mr. Bingley's future, "I have not a doubt of your doing very well together."¹² At the end of this story Jane professes that she is "certainly the most fortunate creature that ever existed!"¹³ Everyone seems to think that Jane and Mr. Bingley will live happily ever after.

While, at the end of the novel Mr. Bingley and Jane are headed for marital bliss, who knows what will happen in the future. How far can love and passion take them? All it took for Mr. Bingley to doubt Jane was the mere suggestion that she did not care for him. Although they eventually did get back together, it was only because Mr. Darcy, a third party, told of his mistake. Had he not spoken out, Mr. Bennet and Jane would still be separated. The two were not willing to take the chance of confronting each other when their relationship was on

the rocks. This suggests that in the event of future misunderstandings, love and passion will not help them to hold on to their present happiness.

The relationship of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in **Pride and Prejudice** falls into a category which may be described as love/hate relationship. Elizabeth's first impression of Mr. Darcy is that he is a total snob. When Mr. Bingley suggests that Mr. Darcy dances with Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy says no. This doesn't get their relationship off to a great start. However, by the end of the story it is clear that Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet will have the happiest marriage of all, despite their rocky start.

Jane Austen describes Elizabeth Bennet by saying she is as "delightful a character as ever appeared in print."¹⁴ In this story we see Elizabeth as a girl who will not marry just because it is the thing to do. Unlike other girls of the time, Elizabeth doesn't accept the first or even second proposal she gets. She turns down both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy because they asked her to marry them without first considering her feelings. Elizabeth is also very opinionated. She doesn't hesitate to speak her mind. Unlike her sister, Jane, she is not adverse to thinking the worst of people. She also considers herself to be a good judge of character. That is why Mr. Darcy frustrates her so much. At times, like the Meryton ball, she sees him as a snob, but at other points in the story he is very kind to her, such as when he helped arrange the marriage of Elizabeth's sister, Lydia, to Mr. Wickham. All his life Fitzwilliam Darcy has been told that he is better than most people. He admits, that his upbringing made him "selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle."¹⁵ Yet, Mr. Darcy isn't the total snob everyone, including Elizabeth, thinks him to be,

Throughout this story Mr. Darcy battles his feelings for Elizabeth because he cannot stand her family, at least not her mother. However; in the end, his feelings for Elizabeth cause him to see that everyone has family members that are embarrassing, and that an individual cannot be held accountable for a family member's actions. Mr. Darcy realizes that his feelings for Elizabeth are all that really matters in the long run.

Elizabeth also has some lessons to learn. Ever since Mr. Darcy

snubbed her at the Meryton ball, she was determined to see the worst in him. Every time she heard something about Mr. Darcy, she was inclined to believe the negative, because she had built up prejudices against him. When Mr. Darcy proposed to her the first time, Elizabeth is quick to say no. She tells him that she could never marry someone as bad as he is. She lists off the things she has heard about him, and tells him that she could never marry a man who purposely broke up her sister's relationship with Mr. Bingley.

Mr. Darcy, in effort to clear up the charges Elizabeth has accused him of, writes her a letter explaining each of his 'crimes.' Eventually Elizabeth comes to realize that she let her prejudices against Mr. Darcy cloud her judge of character. She finds herself analyzing her feelings for Mr. Darcy and realizes that she loves him, despite his faults.

In the end Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy decide to marry, not just for love, but because they truly like each other. When Mr. Bennet asks Elizabeth if she is sure that she wants to marry Mr. Darcy, she replies, "I do, I do like him. I love him."¹⁶ Elizabeth explains that in the time she has known Mr. Darcy she realized that he truly loves her. He never left her, or stopped caring about her, even when they had rough times.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have the best chance for happiness because they are not marrying for one single reason. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had a mutual liking for each other. They felt passion, love, and esteem for each other. Unlike Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins and Charlotte, they didn't choose to marry because it was the thing to do. They didn't marry for social position and wealth, in fact they married in spite of it. Unlike Jane and Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were able to talk their arguments and misunderstandings through. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy will live a happy life together, because they compliment each other. They are different people, who when put together, fit perfectly.

NOTES

- 1 <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/ausmarrg.html>
- 2 Austen, p. 198
- 3 Austen, p. 5
- 4 <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/pptopic2.html#protofem3>

5 <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/pptopic2.html#monmarr1>

6 <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/pptopic2.html#protofem3>

7 Austen, p. 7

8 Austen, p. 198

9 Austen, p. 91

10 Austen, p. 108

11 Austen, p. 105

12 Austen, p. 290

13 Austen, p. 292

14 <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/ppdrmtis.html#index3>

15 Austen, p. 308

16 Austen, p. 314

John C. Rezmerski

MAY

It's May—green again, and rain—and I'm feeling better about spring. Names jump like fish in my wet green brain. It's spring-sweet again, insane, and love plays a game of crazy pain, but such air, such arms, such blue eggs in Ohio, in China, in my lover's eyes. Oh, here comes the trillium, the dutchman's britches, here's the tune the road hums, here's the day all soft inside and here are the latest buds ready to bust and puff dusty pollen. I want to be sprung as much as I can, get aloft and love the fluff of clouds. Oh, yeah, spring again and hold me, hold me tight, hold me steady while I try to fly—a kite unstrung soon come down.

