

# Female Predicaments: From the Letters in *Pride and Prejudice*

Feiyue Liu

School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, China

## Abstract

The epistolary form of writing grew quite popular in the eighteenth century. Despite the fact that *Pride and Prejudice* is not an epistolary novel, Austen wrote it with the help of twenty-one letters. Many letters, for example, reveal the predicaments of women's lives in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this paper, the female predicaments reflected in the letters will be explained in detail, including the predicaments of women's economic and social status, appeal in marriage and bondage of traditional ideas.

## Keywords

**Pride and Prejudice; Letters; Female Predicaments; Economic and Social Status.**

## 1. Introduction

Letters have a long history, and in ancient times they were mostly used for official purposes and rarely for private communication. However, during the eighteenth century the epistolary form of writing, which means using the medium of letters written by one or more of the characters to compose works, grew quite popular, because at that time letter writing was a primary source of communication. In Li Weiping's words, the 18th century, characterized by rather restricted and tedious entertainment and an extremely backward form of social communication, saw the growing popularity of letter writing among the general English population.[1] Samuel Richardson, the founder of the modern epistolary novel, discovered the special effects of letter writing and was clearly aware of the potential of it to bring about a new style of writing. In Wu Houkai's view, Richardson is remembered "not only for his first successful use of the epistolary form of fiction, but also for his great influence on the eighteenth-century novel and on subsequent generations in terms of both subject matter and formal technique.[2]

Austen lived during a period in which a national postal system was in place and every-day correspondence begun to become fashionable. The advent of private correspondence, while expanding the range and capacity for human communication, also pointed the way to a new direction in literary development. Austen was fond of writing letters, and her best friend throughout her life was her sister Cassandra, who wrote to her regularly when they were away from home. Most of what people know about Austen comes from her letters to Cassandra and her own family, of which more than 150 have been preserved. And much of these letters have been collected in her autobiography. Austen inherited the epistolary style adopted by Samuel Richardson and considered letters to be the most useful tool for novel writing. Some critics thought the reason that Austen chose the epistolary form to tell stories was that she viewed the letters as good vehicles for the female voice.[3] In her most renowned work *Pride and Prejudice*, there are over 30 long and short letters, 21 of which have special content. Letters are extremely significant in the novel because at the time when Jane Austen wrote her novels, letters were the only form of communication other than speech. "The letters, in varying degree, play an important role in the narrative mode of all the novels of Jane Austen".[4] "The function of the letters in *Pride and Prejudice* is as important as the monologue on stage".[5] In fact, "*Pride and Prejudice* was originally written in epistolary form, later revised by the author. There are still

many complete or fragmentary letters in the novel, which is helpful to promote the plot and shape the characters".[6] In addition, there are a number of episodes described in the book about writing, reading and talking about letters which are relatively uncommon in works of fiction in general.

The original version of *Pride and Prejudice* was titled *First Impressions*, which was written in 1796-1797 and was most likely created as an epistolary novel. The use of epistolary narrative in Austen's early writings, according to some scholars, was simply an expedient adoption of a readily available mode of story-telling. The adolescent Austen, these critics argued, unself-consciously latched onto a familiar fictional convention and later abandoned it when she required, and achieved, a more versatile voice. Although Austen revised *First Impressions* and made it into a non-epistolary *Pride and Prejudice*, she did not entirely abandon epistolary novel, but left many letters unabridged in the novel.[7]

Finding out what kind of roles these letters play in *Pride and Prejudice* or what kind of functions these letters perform is the main purpose of this paper. The topic is not new in the research field of Austen's works, but only a few critics have focused on this aspect about the letters in *Pride and Prejudice*. They mainly analyzed the narrative functions of letters, such as the dramatic effect of discovery and suspense in the novel; and the artistic value of letters, such as reflecting the style of the novel, manifesting diverse observation and narrative perspectives. The above studies definitely have certain reference for this paper, but the existing study of letters in *Pride and Prejudice* is not thorough and comprehensive, necessitating further research. The goal of this paper is to help the readers to understand the novel better and draw their attention to the use of letters in literary works. This paper will study the letters in *Pride and Prejudice* which show the predicaments of women's economic and social status, appeal in marriage and bondage of traditional ideas.

## 2. Awkwardness in Women's Economic and Social Status

### 2.1. Women's Awkward Economic Status

Jane Austen lived at a time when men were able to work for a living, whereas women were not, and they had to ensure financial security by marrying a man of a good fortune. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Bennet is extremely worried about the marriages of her five daughters. It is the economic predicaments of women that force them to find a financially secure husband and this kind of predicaments can be seen throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most single women had to face financial hardship. And at that time most economic and social activity was based on property, without which there was no way to get a foothold in society.

The unfair property law and inheritance law is evident in Collins' letter to Mr. Bennet in chapter 13 "And that the circumstance of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch".[8] It was during this time that the system of primogeniture was founded, under which the eldest son would inherit all of his father's property. Contracts known as "strict settlements" or "entails", on the other hand, were in existence. As a result, in the event that there was no son in the family, the property would be handed to the collateral male who was the nearest male relative in another branch of the family. Therefore, unmarried women had no property to inherit upon the death of their parents and were forced to earn a meager living by working as servants, governesses, and other menial jobs, which was barely enough to cover their basic living expenses and support their families. Due to the unfair property law and inheritance law, the five daughters of the Bennet family cannot inherit the property of their father after his death. It is a wise decision to find a wealthy husband instead of trying to make a life on their own. Just as the first sentence of the novel "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good

fortune must be in want of a wife”[8] indicates, the status of women is much lower than that of men, and women are merely the goods of men. A man who has a lot of money can buy a woman to be his wife. I think the sentence is a verbal irony. It shows the lower economic and social status of women, but the real intention is to express the author’s dissatisfaction with this reality. So in the rest of the novel, the author depicts the female character Elizabeth who ignores sexual discrimination and seeks for her own happiness.

Charlotte Lucas is presented to readers as a lady of twenty-seven years old at the start of the novel. At that time, if a woman is twenty-seven years old, she should be aware that she has already passed the age for a healthy marriage and must take into account the possibility of disappointing outcomes. Charlotte Lucas is proposed to by Collins after Elizabeth rejects his proposal. To Elizabeth’s surprise, Charlotte is willing to marry Collins who is a mediocre and even foolish man. However, their marriage is not a happy one, and it is merely based on money and secure home. The female economic predicaments are also reflected in Charlotte’s letters to Elizabeth:

Though, when the letters were read, Elizabeth felt that Charlotte expressed herself on every point exactly as she might have foreseen. She wrote cheerfully, seemed surrounded with comforts, and mentioned nothing which she could not praise. The house, furniture, neighbourhood, and roads, were all to her taste, and Lady Catherine’s behaviour was most friendly and obliging. It was Mr. Collins’s picture of Hunsford and Rosings rationally softened; and Elizabeth perceived that she must wait for her own visit there to know the rest.[8]

In a sense, Charlotte has no choice, as her family is not rich. It is materially wise but spiritually stupid for Charlotte to make her determination to make it the business of her own life to marry prudently and create a secure home and future for herself through marriage instead of continuing to find an appropriate husband with whom she could share a romantic life. By boasting to Elizabeth about her new home, Charlotte is actually covering up the spiritual inadequacies of the marriage. “Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.”[8] Although Charlotte is well educated, she is not as beautiful as Elizabeth. More importantly, she has no property for dowry and is not young at the age of 27. Marriage is the only decent way out for Charlotte, although she may not be happy. But Collins has enough money to protect her from cold and hunger. As a plain single woman with intelligence and sensibility without good social status and large fortune, Charlotte knows that she must seize every possible opportunity to get herself a husband.

Through these letters, it can be seen that in Jane Austen’s time unmarried women were in economic predicaments. And most women had little choice but to get into practical marriages of economic security and social dignity rather than love and respect. Single young women did not ponder their power of choice, did not dispute the importance of finding a husband, and rarely considered the value of one husband over another.

## 2.2. Women’s Awkward Social Status

The western world in the eighteenth century was still a patriarchal society. In the aspect of love and marriage, Victorian and Edwardian women were mostly in a passive situation. Due to the limited medical standards, abortion, puerperal fever and other conditions made women feel helpless and even die. Influenced by the deep-rooted concept of “men are superior to women”, women are in a subordinate position in family life, and they are doomed to do complicated and trivial housework. For women, there was always work to be done because they had to raise children, including nephews, siblings and so on. Compared with many eastern countries,

western women were endowed with more rights and they could freely associate with men and participate in social balls. However, in the patriarchal society, women were still subordinate to men which can also be shown in the letters of the novel.

In the first sentence of Miss Bingley's letter to Jane, she conveys "the assurance of their being all settled in London for the winter"[8] and concludes "with her brother's regret at not having had time to pay his respects to his friends in Hertfordshire before he left the country".[8] In fact, Miss Bingley had written earlier to tell Jane that they were leaving Netherfield for a long time. Miss Bingley's letters mean that Mr. Bingley is a man of changeable behavior and does not think much of Jane's feelings. We know that at the beginning of the book, Jane and Bingley fall in love at first sight in an assembly. Jane is flattered by Bingley's attachment and compliment, such as asking her to dance a second time. And her preference to Bingley from the first has developed into deep love gradually. However, Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley's persuasion makes him leave Jane for several months. During this time, Jane is in a state of abandonment and depression. Later, when Mr. Bingley comes back to Longbourn, Jane has to agree to his proposal. To some extent, Jane is subordinate to Mr. Bingley.

In chapter 42, as Elizabeth and the Gardiners are about to begin their northern tour, Mrs. Gardiner writes to tell Elizabeth that

Mr. Gardiner would be prevented by business from setting out till a fortnight later in July, and must be in London again within a month; and as that left too short a period for them to go so far, and see so much as they had proposed, or at least to see it with the leisure and comfort they had built on, they were obliged to give up the Lakes, and substitute a more contracted tour; and, according to the present plan, were to go no farther northward than Derbyshire. In that county there was enough to be seen to occupy the chief of their three weeks; and to Mr. Gardiner it had a peculiarly strong attraction. The town where she had formerly passed some years of her life, and where they were now to spend a few days, was probably as great an object of her curiosity as all the celebrated beauties of Matlock, Chatsworth, Dovedale, or the Peak.[8]

Men, because of their economic status, have absolute decision-making power in social and family matters which is shown clearly in Mrs. Gardiner's letter to Elizabeth. At that time, women were considered to be intellectually inferior to men and were subordinate to men and not born with the ability to think independently. Although Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner had already made plans for the places to visit, they have to abandon their plans and make new plans according to Mr. Gardiner's schedule. The readers can easily find that at that time, men's will and business were always more important than women's wishes. In Britain, the issue of equality between men and women had not even been raised, and women were suppressed by the patriarchal society.

In summary, through the analysis of the letters we can see that in Austen's age, women were just a subordinate of men. Women's economic status and social position were far lower than that of men. A woman was in desperate need of a man who could elevate her to a higher economic status and social position. Women were in the predicaments of economic dependence and social inferiority.

### **3. Predicaments in Women's Appeal of Marriage**

#### **3.1. Lydia Bennet's Difficulties**

If a young lady engaged in sexual intercourse without marrying, she was considered "fallen" and lost her reputation in Austen's time. Unless her seducer could be bribed into marrying her,

it was impossible for a fallen woman to marry a man for the rest of her life. Furthermore, she would be barred from holding any position of authority such as a governess, teacher or paid companion.

Lydia's difficulties and dilemmas can be reflected in Jane's letters to Elizabeth in chapter 46. Although Lydia and Wickham have eloped, Wickham never intends to marry Lydia at all:

Since writing the above, dearest Lizzy, something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature; but I am afraid of alarming you—be assured that we are all well. What I have to say relates to poor Lydia. An express came at twelve last night, just as we were all gone to bed, from Colonel Forster, to inform us that she was gone off to Scotland with one of his officers; to own the truth, with Wickham!—Imagine our surprise. . . Though Lydia's short letter to Mrs. F. gave them to understand that they were going to Gretna Green, something was dropped by Denny expressing his belief that W. never intended to go there, or to marry Lydia at all, which was repeated to Colonel F. , who, instantly taking the alarm, set off from B. intending to trace their route.[8]

After their elopement, Wickham admits that he has no intention of marrying Lydia and lays all the evil-consequences of Lydia's flight on her own foolishness alone. Lydia, the youngest of the Bennet family, enters society at an early age and is spoiled by her mother. She inherits Mrs. Bennet's beauty as well as her foolishness and vanity. Her mother, who behaves indiscreetly herself, thinks that it does no harm to Lydia and indulged her, which makes her all the more wild and credulous. She is only fifteen years old, but her mind is full of thoughts about flirtation and how to attract admiration. As soon as an officer comes to Meryton, she would go to hook up. The most happy scene in her mind is that she is sitting in the officers' tent and flirting with at least six officers. Wickham is a morally corrupt loafer, but he pretends to be an elegant and charming young man. Lydia is fascinated by his appearance and elopes with him on impulse. Wickham is forced by gambling debts to escape from Brighton. Lydia is powerless and unprofitable. Wickham does not love her at all, but he is happy to have a woman with him on the way out. He also looks forward to a marriage so that he could make a fortune, because marriage is an opportunity for him to get rich. Lydia is likely to be abandoned by Wickham and become a fallen woman who is rejected and reviled by the townspeople. Therefore, if both the woman and her seducer were unmarried, and if the family of the woman was willing to make a deal with the seducer that was to his advantage, a hasty marriage could be arranged, as it was with Lydia Bennet and Wickham.[9] It is in the days after marriage that Lydia sees Wickham's true nature: a dissolute and prodigal flaneur. However, in her letter to Elizabeth, Lydia covers up her true opinion of Wickham and stresses that she is very happy to live with Wickham. In fact, it is a verbal irony because they live a extremely hard life and have no money left. Lydia in the letter also asks Elizabeth to help Wickham find a job at court, and even asks for money. But it seems too late for Lydia to regret and she has to pay for what she has done. Lydia's miserable fate is caused by both her nature and the society.

However, we can find that Lydia's marriage would be worse than that of her mother in her letter to Elizabeth at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*: "I wish you joy. If you love Mr. Darcy half as well as I do my dear Wickham, you must be very happy. It is a great comfort to have you so rich, and when you have nothing else to do, I hope you will think of us. I am sure Wickham would like a place at court very much, and I do not think we shall have quite money enough to live upon without some help".[8] Here, the dramatic irony can be seen from the second sentence. The love of Lydia and Wickham is not true love, but rather a blind love based on beauty and impulse, which causes her to have no fixed abode and live a floating life. However, in the letter to Elizabeth, Lydia conveys the message that she lives a happier life with the handsome Wickham



than Elizabeth. Actually, Wickham does not love Lydia. He eloped with Lydia just for the sake of sensual pleasure. But in innocent Lydia's mind, Wickham loves her as much as she loves him. Lydia and Wickham are impoverished and unable to find a satisfying job by the end of the story. They have to live on the help of Lydia's two sisters. Readers could find out that Lydia's unfortunate life was an accurate reflection of patriarchal society, in which female social status was inferior and female consciousness was limited. In order to get an appropriate husband, genteel single young women were reduced to the status of merchandise, as the victims of those economic and social forces.

### 3.2. Jane Bennet's Dilemmas

Mr. Darcy's letter to Elizabeth in Chapter 35 is the longest and the most important of all in the novel. The letter takes up almost the whole chapter, and it can be regarded as the turning point of the novel. In this letter, Darcy explains two reasons for separating Jane and Bingley: one is that Jane does not show any peculiar affection for Bingley; the other is Jane's family is objectionable and lacks propriety.

Actually, both of the facts reveal Jane's predicaments in her appeal of marriage. In Austen's time, women were expected to be gentle and submissive "ladies", and even after marriage they were expected to play the role of "household angels". Jane is a lovely young woman without judgment and insight, whose behavior is in line with the moral standards at that time. In a sense, Jane is a victim of the patriarchal society. Although Jane and Bingley fall in love at first sight, Jane cannot show any symptom of peculiar regard to Bingley. It is Jane's superficial indifference that staggers and delays Bingley's determination of returning to Netherfield to propose. To get out of this dilemma, single young women should learn to be independent and in charge of their own fate, like Elizabeth does. The second factor that contributes to the predicaments is Jane's family, with the exception of herself and Elizabeth. For one point, the economic condition and social status of Jane's family are far from that of Bingley's. For another, the total want of propriety of her family members is so frequent. Marriage at that time was based on the two families well-matched in social and economic status. It is quite difficult for Jane and Bingley to overcome the conventional ideas, and fortunately they succeed.

Through the letters in the novel, we can feel the difficulties and dilemmas of women in the pursuit of marriage. Some are caused by their own nature, some are caused by their families, and some are due to the ills of the times. But in any case, women should pursue the right marriages with an independent and rational mind.

## 4. Predicaments in Bondage of Traditional Ideas

The use of letters in the novel also reveals female predicaments in bondage of traditional ideas. Women's rights to attend parties, balls, and the ability to socialize with males were provided in 18th century English society, but these rights did not meet their daily needs. "There is no equality between men and women," it was claimed in 1974, "Men, as legislators, are naturally more rational than women, and this is the general basis for our evaluation of all issues." [10] It briefly reflects the spirit of that time, men were endowed with reason, women were labeled as weak, and their lives were at the center of the family and domestic chores. Any ability women possessed was rejected, except for patience and obedience. In addition, many aspects of women's rights, such as freedom of movement, access to education and property inheritance, were restricted by laws and traditional ideas. They did not have the same opportunities as men to go out and fight for their careers. If they went out, they had to be accompanied. It should be noted that in Austen's time, the social circles of women were undoubtedly narrow. Even Mrs. Bennet, who wants to get a wealthy son-in-law, can only get close to Bingley through Mr. Bennet's introduction. This constraint becomes more apparent in the book's climax, the farce of Lydia's elopement. At the beginning of chapter 48, Austen wrote:

The whole party were in hopes of a letter from Mr. Bennet the next morning, but the post came in without bringing a single line from him. His family knew him to be, on all common occasions, a most negligent and dilatory correspondent; but at such a time they had hoped for exertion. They were forced to conclude that he had no pleasing intelligence to send; but even of that they would have been glad to be certain. Mr. Gardiner had waited only for the letters before he set off. When he was gone, they were certain at least of receiving constant information of what was going on.[8]

It is clear that the women of the Bennet family are unable to go out to find their father and the youngest sister Lydia due to social restrictions, and have to wait anxiously every day for the letters from their father informing them of the latest news. And in the next chapter, when Mrs. Hill tells Elizabeth and Jane that Mr. Gardiner has sent a letter to Mr. Bennet, the two girls run home, "too eager to get in to have time for speech".[8] Finally, they find their father in the copse. Elizabeth eagerly cried out, "Oh, Papa, what news? what news? Have you heard from my uncle?"[8] Here, Elizabeth repeats "what news?" twice, showing her eagerness to know the content of the letter. After her father tells her that he had a letter from her uncle by express, Elizabeth immediately asks "good or bad?". This kind of female anxiety and bondage is what Austen quietly tells her readers through the use of letters.

In the book, women are unable to have a room of their own and are always worried about being interrupted or seen when they write and read letters, which leads to anxiety of writing and reading. In chapter 32, when Elizabeth is writing a letter to Jane, someone comes. "As she had heard no carriage, she thought it not unlikely to be Lady Catherine, and under that apprehension was putting away her half-finished letter that she might escape all impertinent questions".[8] Elizabeth does not have her own room to do what she wants to do, and she is interrupted by Lady Catherine when she is writing a letter to Jane. In fact, at that time, women sometimes did not have their own private space and were in a state of "gaze". If Lady Catherine knows that Elizabeth is writing a letter, she would ask Elizabeth who she is writing to and what she is writing. Of course, she does not want Lady Catherine to know what has happened, so she puts away the half-finished letter. To some extent, the female characters in the book like Elizabeth cannot act on her own will. And in chapter 33, when Elizabeth is reading Jane's last letter, Colonel Fitzwilliam comes to meet her. In a hurry, she "puts away the letter immediately and forces a smile, and said, I did not know before that you ever walk this way".[8] As a matter of fact, the predicaments of the characters actually imply the difficulties of Austen's process of creation. At the time when Austen was writing, it was clear that women still faced many restrictions. They did not have the freedom to actively pursue love, nor their own spiritual world. These were the predicaments and reality of women's existence at that time, and Austen certainly gave it some deep and serious thought.

## 5. Conclusion

Jane Austen conveys her ideas of female predicaments in patriarchal society in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century to readers through the use of letters in *Pride and Prejudice*. By analyzing these carefully laid-out letters, we could have a deeper understanding of the predicaments which were faced by the women in the novel. Bennet daughters and Charlotte Lucas are often in the economic predicaments. Jane and some female characters, such as Mrs. Gardiner, are in the predicaments of social status. Lydia and Jane are in the difficulties and dilemmas in their appeal of marriage. The freedom of Elizabeth and some women are often severely constrained by social rules. In addition to the female predicaments as reflected in the letters, we can find that letters were a bridge of communication for women at that time and an

effective tool of expressing personal feelings. And in my opinion, the value of letters in fiction deserves further study.

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