

"Threadbare morality": debate on human nature in *Pride and Prejudice*

Xiaochan CHEN

School of International Studies, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou 311121, China

Abstract: This paper centers on the debate between innatist and developmentalist views of human nature to explore the contemporary relevance of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. From the developmentalist perspective, the Regency-era social institutions such as entailment, primogeniture, and rigid chastity norms make the novel's marital crises and social pressures create an alienating effect on modern readers, weakening its thematic resonance. Conversely, the innatist view holds that Austen's depiction of universal human instincts—including maternal care, pragmatic life decisions, inner anxiety, and the pursuit of security and dignity—transcends historical boundaries. By analyzing character behaviors and psychological dilemmas in the novel, this study argues that the core of human nature remains constant despite shifting social contexts, confirming the novel's enduring relevance and literary value for modern audiences.

Keywords: *Pride and Prejudice*; human nature; innatist; developmentalist; Austen; contemporary relevance

1 Introduction

Are the writings of Jane Austen relevant to us today? The answer to this question will depend largely on another question, namely the constancy of human nature over time. Writing is an author's endeavor to explicate the nature of humanity. Similarly, reading is an investigation into the stories of human life. Both writing and reading occur, however, within the context of a given time and place. It is thus safe to say that our connection with Austen's novels rests largely on whether the aspects of human nature illustrated in her works are innate or develop over time. These differing views of human nature are termed "innatist" and "developmentalist" respectively. In carrying out my analysis, I will first define these terms and then discuss to what extent they elucidate the question of the ongoing relevance of Austen's novels.

The "developmentalist" view, advanced by eighteenth-century philosopher John Locke, holds that humans come into the world as "blank slates" [1]. Accordingly, we are thrown into a world with a multitude of contextual influences that powerfully shape what we pursue in life, what we value, and how we act. If Locke is correct, then Austen's works will have less relevance today than in her own time, as we live in a world where our social customs vastly differ from those of Austen and her characters. This will make it challenging for us, as modern readers, with changed sensibilities to relate fully to her characters and apply what we read to our own lives.

On the other hand, contemporary psychologist Steven Pinker argues that there are innate aspects of human nature—consisting of qualities and values that are passed down across generations. Social factors influence us, but instead of readily submitting to the dictates of our environment, we have something in our nature that determines how we respond to external circumstances. Accordingly, Austen's novelistic inquiry into human nature and interpersonal relationships connects us with her characters via a shared emotional language. From this "innatist" perspective, Austen's works continue to be

relevant to us because core aspects of human nature have changed little over the past two centuries. In this essay, I will use Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to expound upon and critique the "developmentalist" and "innatist" views to examine the proposition that Jane Austen's novels are still relevant and speak to us after two hundred years.

2 Austen's novels are irrelevant: the "developmentalist" view

As one of the most prominent voices in English literature, Austen offers insight into the emotional and material details of fictional characters with privileged lives in Regency England. This era was marked by distinct social stratification in which the aristocrats and wealthy landed class, especially men, possessed a disproportionate political and societal influence. The system of entailment stipulates that succession to landed property, and title remained within the male line of the family, specifically that of the eldest son, through the custom of primogeniture. These social constructs, specific to Austen's England, are at the heart of the conflict that drives the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, and many other of Austen's stories. If a heroine hoped to maintain her family's position and status, there existed only one viable path: to marry a suitor benefited from the rules of entailment and primogeniture. Today, however, the stakes involved in love and marriage are fundamentally different, as are the basic values that animate society and gender relations. In modern society, there is far more gender equality, and the rights of women have been strengthened through universal suffrage and other legal protections, with the result that women can gain status and achieve success and material security without depending solely on a man. In sharp contrast, in Austen's England—under the system of entailment, largely restricted by legislation in 1925, an aristocratic woman could not inherit her family's landed property, and thus could only hope to maintain material security by marrying a first-born son of her social class. According to the developmentalist view of human nature, as modern readers we would struggle to grasp the stakes involved in the marriage and courtship rituals in Austen's novels. While we may still recognize the interest Austen's characters have in status and material security, the means of obtaining such things have so fundamentally changed, so the tension within Austen's fiction may fall flat for us as modern readers.

A prime example of the divide between the social reality of Austen's characters and that of the modern reader can be found in *Pride and Prejudice*. In this novel, the youngest Bennet daughter, Lydia, experiences a "chastity crisis" and puts her family at risk. Lydia elopes with Mr. Wickham while travelling with a friend, thus endangering her own reputation and that of her entire family. While a modern reader may consider the idea of elopement to be romantic – a sign of sincere love – in Austen's England, such an action is so far outside of the social norms for an aristocrat, that should Lydia and Wickham not marry, it would destroy her reputation and that of her family forever. Not only would Lydia be deemed unworthy of a good marriage, but the very status of her family would be diminished. As such, upon learning the news of Lydia's elopement with Wickham, Elizabeth is completely overcome by this "dreadful news" and "bursts into tears", concluding that Lydia is "lost forever" [2]. This poignantly points to the fact that once a woman's reputation gets tainted, her very identity is compromised; the potential loss of her chastity equals the loss of herself, to the extent that she is considered "lost" even by her own sister. To a modern reader, in a world where most women seriously date before marriage and where female chastity has slipped behind values of freedom and self-determination, the interpretation and consequences of Lydia's actions would appear to be wholly alien [3].

Elizabeth, confronted with the vulnerability of having her reputation smeared alongside Lydia's, comes to such grief that she sees her connection with Darcy irrevocably lost. Elizabeth realized how "everything must sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace." The deepest disgrace, however, is so "calculated" that it is just enough to strike her with the realization of her own affection for Mr. Darcy: "never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved [Darcy], when all love must be vain." How could such a change happen? It seems Austen arranges a series of fancy footwork to make the heroine so wretched under the spell of chastity. Even before the trip during which

Lydia elopes, the risk of her losing chastity has already prompted Elizabeth to stop her from travelling at all, condemning her to be "the most determined flirt that ever made herself or her family ridiculous", especially "[her] sisters will... often [be] involved in the disgrace." She argues that, were the "despicable" acts of Lydia to escalate, they should "lock her up for the rest of her life". Here, we see that females are not fully identified as autonomous individuals in Regency England, but rather as figures liable to punishment for breaching prevailing social norms—a social arrangement that vastly diverges from the values upheld by modern social institutions and communities. Therefore, if readers do not fully grasp the significance of "chastity" for women in Regency England, by extension, it might be hard for them to understand and relate to the urgency of such a situation.

Granted, even if Austen renders this social custom palpable and enables the significance of chastity to resonate with readers, people living in a changed society may still fail to understand why "saving the maiden" alone is enough to fall head over heels in love with him. Additionally, since relevance includes both relatability and applicability, it seems unreasonable that a story where one person's decision on marriage will cause the collapse of an entire family and the reversal of attitude toward a previously despised man would be a source of inspiration to its readers' lives. Overall, the novel would not only be irrelevant but also hardly appeal to contemporary readers.

Another aspect that seems highly out of touch with modern society is the way couples meet and the overly exaggerated urgency of marriage. This is evident when it comes to Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley's courtship. When Bingley arrives at Netherfield Park at the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Bennet immediately urges her husband to visit Bingley to make their interest apparent. It seems that for them, no prior knowledge of personality, habits, morality, or vices is necessary. The only knowledge they have of him is that "[Bingley] is a single man of... four or five thousand a year". From that, Mrs. Bennet could deduce it could be "a fine thing for [her] girls". The fundamental cause of this urgency lies in primogeniture and entailment, a phenomenon observable not only in the courtship of Jane and Bingley but also in numerous hasty marriages across Regency England. Thus, since modern readers are not governed by the institutions of primogeniture and entailment, it might be hard to fully empathize with the insecurity and anxiety of having "daughters" married away, who are righteously entitled to a fully developed character.

3 Austen's novels are relevant: the "innatist" view

The prime perfection of Austen is that she focuses on the seemingly minutiae of everyday living and societal courtships encompassing not just the day-to-day existence but also the nuanced pleasures and frustrations experienced by them. Wiser than her critics, who expressed dissatisfaction over her works' propensity to focus on rumors and "petty matters", Austen's characters impeccably highlight the diversity of "the human values"(Woolf) [4], how characters show up as "deviations" from standard moralities and bring readers unparalleled delight not only at her time, but also generations on.

For one, even if it is hard for us to understand courtship customs in Regency England, we can understand that mothers want to look out for their children in every aspect. The maternal instinct is to protect and assist her children in attempts to secure a life of well-being and possible happiness. The human nature of women to survive in a world where female rights are extremely limited also comes into play. The querulous Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to live well since, absent matrimony to a man of property, women of that time might end up homeless and helpless. For mothers of that world, forcing marriage on their daughters might, to some extent, be necessary for them. As readers, we can understand and relate to how a mother's care can make an anxious woman out of Mrs. Bennet. Readers at present might also come to imagine themselves and relate to the daughters who are foisted endless and sometimes unnecessary care. From the perspective of maternal nature, readers can understand why mothers like Mrs. Bennet are acting in a specific way. We would not simply dismiss her as a petty or vicious character; instead, we might try to empathize when we face unsolicited care from others

and appreciate where their care comes from.

Aside from connecting with a child or a mother, readers are also offered a consoling voice from the perspective of a common character: Charlotte. Charlotte agrees to marry Collins to procure a certain and secure future for herself—she can survive and have an estate to live in. In contrast with Elizabeth's disapproval, Austen endows this character with such psychological clairvoyance that allows readers to understand her psychology and her choices regarding a reality that's less than ideal. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte is not portrayed as a negative character or someone who only cares about money. As a plain daughter of a family even less comfortable than the Bennets, she cannot inherit any money or estate, and handsome men seem to prefer dancing with her beautiful friends to her. But she still needs to marry someone with an inheritance to live a life. When delineating Charlotte's own perception of her decision, Austen uses omniscient narration that penetrates Charlotte's sincere and realistic consideration:

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, it must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained, and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it (Austen, 87).

We can relate to Charlotte, especially because this narration makes us all feel what she feels when we must settle for something—not necessarily the best, but the best we can get hold of. Here, Austen's narration turns to a plain-spoken voice from Charlotte's perspective, who is not a heroine in the center but honest with herself. She fully understands the significance of her marriage, where her aim is just to secure what she needs for her life. But she is also insecure about the opinions of her friend Lizzy when she reveals that "the least agreeable circumstance in the business was the surprise it must occasion to Elizabeth Bennet, whose friendship she valued beyond that of any other person". Now, from Charlotte's narration, Lizzy is no longer the heroine of the book, but she is a friend—someone who Charlotte identifies with. Here, Charlotte's internal monologue is a light that illuminates the hidden insecurities of all the women of that era as well as us, readers in contemporary society, when we question ourselves: What if we are not that independent? What if I don't have an extraordinary appearance or personality like Elizabeth, and men just fall for me? What if my plan is just to settle and make do with something? How will my friend, who I connect with so strongly, see me now? This anxiety and fear brew in our stomachs when we (are forced to) realize that we cannot be like the heroines we admire, when we must do something that we know is not the best, or when we cave in to the realities of our conditions because we must. This insecure, slightly reluctant aspect of innate human nature truly resonates with contemporary readers as we, over the course of our lives, sometime or another, are forced to confront the limit of our powers.

Standing as undeniable proof for this connection beyond time, the various adaptations of Austen's works also speak to the continuing charm of her work. Adaptations such as *Pride and Prejudice Atlanta* (2019), *Bride and Prejudice: The Bollywood Musical* (2004), and *Aisha* (2010) all point to the connection that beats in the hearts of every reader. Even if the sociocultural conditions change, as the adaptations take on modern settings, the story will continue to see and touch viewers.

4 Conclusion

Like Woolf observes, if Austen lived to be comfortable with her success, what heights she would have climbed in the realm of literature (Woolf). However, as readers, we chew on the novels she has left, deeply reflecting upon ourselves and our human nature. This connection is what crystallizes and exists like gems for generations to excavate.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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About the author

Xiaochan Chen (born August 1979), female, Han Chinese; hometown: Hangzhou, Zhejiang; educational level: master's degree; research directions: English literature, second language acquisition.