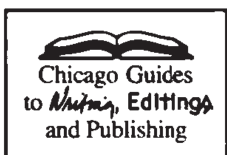
TELLING ABOUT SOCIETY



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HOWARD S. BECKER

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Jane Austen
The Novel as Social Analysis

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* opens with this well-known remark: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

Is it? Universally acknowledged? A truth? Really?

An exciting piece of news in the little English town of Meryton provokes Austen's vast generalization. People have just learned, as Mrs. Bennet excitedly reports to her not exactly like-minded husband, that the nearby estate of Netherfield Park has been let to Mr. Bingley, a wealthy and unmarried young gentleman.

Before we could agree with the generalization this news has provoked, we'd certainly want some definitions. Well, that's easy. We all know what a "single man" is: a man who isn't married, as Mr. Darcy, Bingley's similarly single friend, was not married—married in the formally legal way demonstrated by the possession of a marriage certificate that attested to the performance of an appropriate ceremony at an appropriate time and place and to the fact that the state had recognized this state of affairs and would therefore enforce its consequences and allow others to enforce its consequences. In other words, "married" in all its social and legal senses and significance. "A wife" would easily be connected to this definition, as the female party to such an arrangement.

Things might have been that easy in Jane Austen's England in 1813. But she doesn't let us think so for long, since she immediately introduces a great variety of marriages, not all of them as unproblematic as

that definition might lead us to think. For instance, young Elizabeth Bennet's own parents certainly are formally married but don't, as a couple, have many of the other attributes we think a married couple ought to have. They don't much understand or agree with each other, as their discussion of Bingley's arrival makes clear. When Mr. Bennet asks if Mr. Bingley is married or single, Mrs. Bennet replies:

> "Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune, four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!" [The Bennets have five daughters of marriageable age.]
>
> "How so? how can it affect them?"
>
> "My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."
>
> "Is that his design in settling here?"
>
> "Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."
>
> "I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party." [I will not give page references, since readers are likely to have any of a variety of editions, but will give chapter numbers instead. This exchange is found in chapter 1.]

Mrs. Bennet may not hear Mr. Bennet's sarcasm, but we do. It seems clear, or at least likely, that Mr. Bennet, in a time and place where custom, family, and legal organization were different, would long ago have left someone who irritated him as much as Mrs. Bennet does. The narrator describes them like this: "Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humor, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (chap. 1).

Which reminds us that even our definition of marriage has some

historical contingency to it. In Mr. Bennet's time and place, marriage was for life, at least for respectable people like him. It isn't so any more in the United States or Europe. At least no one can count on that, as the statistics on marriage and divorce show. And, more complicated, there are many more stages between singleness and marriedness than there used to be. In the world of *Pride and Prejudice,* there was a stage of being engaged, but otherwise you went from single to married with no intermediate stops at stations like "seeing each other" or "living together," which we now accept as standard possibilities.

What about the "good fortune" a single man might have? How much would that be? Austen lets us know that Bingley's fortune consists of "four or five thousand a year," or at least that is what Mrs. Bennet has heard and relays to her husband. We don't know what that amounts to today, in (as they say) constant dollars, but it sounds like a lot, and clearly it enables him to live very well. Better than Mr. Bennet, who has two thousand a year (two thousand pounds, we can suppose, though the referent of the expression isn't mentioned) and lives well enough, with all his daughters. But those daughters are in potential financial trouble since, eventually, the estate that produces that income will go to a distant male relation on whom "it had been entailed." In fact, "two thousand" is made to seem like a lot of money to us, not just "comfortable" but what we might consider "rich." This is just the beginning of Austen's nuanced and detailed analysis of class differences in the town, not just between rich and poor but also those within those larger groupings, so that even what might seem like an unimportant difference between Bingley's and Bennet's fortunes gets its full analytic weight.

And what does it mean to "be in want of a wife"? Not exactly what the words might seem to say. Mr. Bingley himself doesn't show a strong desire for a wife or give any sign that he moved to the area in order to find one, as Mr. Bennet has pointed out to his eager wife. No, it seems to mean that Mrs. Bennet thinks he needs a wife whether he thinks so or not, that it is his duty to find a wife and find her locally, and that this is the common view in the community, at least among the mothers of daughters of marriageable age. As Austen explains in the book's second sentence:

> However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

In two sentences, Austen has presented us with a well-constructed analysis of the marriage customs of a particular group of early-nineteenth-century English country gentry. (Richard McKeon describes her construction as a "narrated civility," which I take to be near to what I have in mind here [McKeon 1979, 522].) Since it appears at the very beginning of the book, we might think of this brief analysis as a hypothesis, as the "to be proved" that appears at the beginning of a mathematical proof, with the actual proof to follow. We're shortly also given some of the complications and warnings that might accompany such a hypothesis, implicitly or explicitly: that just because people are married we shouldn't think they are necessarily well matched or happy with the result, that's not what marriage is about, though many of the participants might wish it were so; that marriage in fact takes a great variety of forms depending on the circumstances of the parties involved; even that there are marriages that turn out not to be real ones, as Elizabeth's flighty younger sister Lydia finds out when she runs off with the soldier Wickham. Thus, finally, the book delivers on this early implicit promise to provide a more or less complete analysis of shared beliefs and practices about marriage among the well-to-do of that time and place, the motivations and ambitions these situations engender in people, and the kinds of marriages that result.

In what way, exactly, is Austen's hypothesis true? One answer to that could be what Austen says about it, that it is "universally acknowledged," meaning that everyone everywhere believes it. Now we have to recognize that Austen is not simply a reporter of fact. She's a novelist, and a good one, and one aspect of her skill is that she has created a narrator, a persona who tells the story, and who has some traits and skills of her own. Here we see the narrator skillfully deploying an ironic point of view, which makes this statement of fact about the marriage customs of the county sound like she might not completely believe it, at least not in the form in which it's asserted.

So we should specify exactly what Austen, the author, means us to believe, clear away the underbrush of detail about specific characters and the layers of irony about who believes what, and then decide what the hypothesis, which initially seemed so clear and unambiguous, "really means."

Without going into all the specifics of what Austen tells us about romance and marriage in this community—because her book doesn't present and demonstrate a single hypothesis but rather a complex web of connected observations—we might say that she has given us an account of its inhabitants' customs of courtship and marriage, as her characters enact them in a setting of law and custom that is heavily influenced by complex gradations of class and wealth. (To be compared, perhaps, with anthropological accounts of marriage customs in other kinds of societies.) These customs, we might further say, force women to marry in order to have any chance of a viable, happy life, as those things are assessed in that community by their parents, their peers, and themselves.

A variety of potential "marital careers" display themselves in the unfolding story. The career that most concerns readers is that of Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet's most intelligent and favorite daughter, who eventually does marry Bingley's friend Darcy, after the two overcome many misunderstandings and obstacles. But on the way to learning her eventual fate and how it comes about, we learn about many kinds of unhappy marriages. There is, first of all, Elizabeth's own parents' long-settled compromise. Neither makes the other very happy, but they have for many years accepted that they will make the best of it. Austen gives us a full description of this misalliance (chap. 42):

> Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished forever, and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. But Mr. Bennet was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which

> his own imprudence had brought on in any of those pleasures which too often console the unfortunate for their folly or their vice. He was fond of the country and of books; and from these tastes had arisen his principal enjoyments. To his wife he was very little otherwise indebted than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement. This is not the sort of happiness which a man would in general wish to owe to his wife; but where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such as are given.

We learn, too, what Elizabeth, their daughter, has learned about the situations of marriage as a result:

> Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. But she had never before felt so strongly the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents, talents which rightly used might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife.

Here's a more extended example of the detail of Austen's analysis of these marital situations and the calculations women make in accepting them. Her best friend, Charlotte Lucas, makes a compromise similar to that of Elizabeth's parents when she marries the unlikable clergyman Mr. Collins, the cousin on whom Mr. Bennet's estate is entailed: "Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society; the greatest part of his life having been spent under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father; and though he belonged to one of the universities, he had merely kept the necessary terms, without forming at it any useful acquaintance. . . . [He was] altogether a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility" (chap. 15).

Why would Charlotte marry such a man?

> [Her] whole family in short were properly overjoyed on the occasion. The younger girls formed hopes of *coming out* a year or two sooner than they might otherwise have done; and the boys were relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte's dying an old maid. Charlotte herself was tolerably composed. She had gained her point, and had time to consider of it. Her reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible or agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, 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. (chap. 22)

So she accepted living with this man, and the many small sacrifices that required, as Elizabeth sees when she visits her:

> The chief of the time between breakfast and dinner was now passed by [Mr. Collins] either at work in the garden, or in reading and writing, and looking out of the window in his own book room, which fronted the road. The room in which the ladies sat was backwards [at the back of the house, with no view out]. Elizabeth at first had rather wondered that Charlotte should not prefer the dining parlour for common use; it was a better sized room and had a pleasanter aspect; but she soon saw that her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr. Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment, had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement. (chap. 30)

Austen makes clear that the situation of women like Charlotte—their total economic dependence on men, fathers or husbands, and the small number of men who could meet the strict requirements for a suitable husband—did not leave a rational person like Charlotte many possibilities or choices.

There are quasi-marriages of other kinds, as we see in the miserable fate of Elizabeth's younger, willful sister Lydia, who runs off, without being married, with an army officer, George Wickham. In fact, she

says she doesn't care whether they are married or not, only that she knows they will be someday. The day comes more quickly than Wickham intends. He means to leave Lydia for the Continent, where he might find a richer woman to marry, one who could pay off his large gambling debts. But he does marry her, after all, even though Austen tells us it is clear he doesn't have much affection for her. Darcy tracks them down and forces the issue by proposing to pay all of Wickham's debts immediately if he marries Lydia. He realizes that he will not have a better offer, so they marry and go off to live in the North, where Lydia's infatuation eventually cools. They live, so far as we know, unhappily ever after, received by some of their relatives, rebuffed by others.

Some other couples provide models of a reasonably happy marriage, as for instance that of Elizabeth's Uncle and Aunt Gardiner (Gardiner is Mrs. Bennet's brother) and what we are given reason to think will come of the eventual marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy. "Mr. Gardner was a sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister as well by nature as by education. The Netherfield ladies would have had difficulty in believing that a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses, could have been so well bred and agreeable. Mrs. Gardiner, who was several years younger than Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Philips, was an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman, and a great favourite with all her nieces" (chap. 25). Throughout the book, the Gardiners are a great resource for the Bennet girls: a steady source of common sense, even wisdom; friends, as well as relations, who will listen to their troubles calmly, without making hasty moral judgments; ready to help in difficult situations, as Mr. Gardiner does when he assists Darcy in settling things with Wickham; and a constant model of a marriage between equals who love and respect one another.

Finally, we have some sense of the processes by which people arrive at one situation or another. The narrative is yet another way of presenting social facts as a series of steps (of the kind we saw graphically in Whyte's 1943 analysis of the way a political favor was granted in the Italian district of Boston). As we read the stories of the various couples' finally getting together, we see how contingent the process is, how many things can go wrong, how many misunderstandings can

prevent a union, how many disapproving relatives can intervene. It seems a wonder that any of the characters manage to marry, but in the end the main ones all have: Elizabeth and Darcy, Bingley and Jane, Charlotte and Collins, Lydia and Wickham. *Pride and Prejudice* is, we might say finally, an ethnography of the local situation of mating and marriage, something like the one an anthropologist or sociologist or demographically minded historian might have produced with sufficient time and a large enough research grant.

Let's take it, provisionally, that the truth being alleged is the truth of the lengthy description I've just made and that we can take the description to be summed up in, but not exhausted by, the book's first sentence about a rich man's want of a wife. Is this truth indeed universally acknowledged? Well, not universally, because Mr. Bennet's questions soon enough show that he doesn't acknowledge it: when Mrs. Bennet explains that it is her intention that Mr. Bingley marry one of her daughters he wants to know if that is Mr. Bingley's "design in settling here." Which, of course, it clearly isn't. But that isn't what she means. His deliberate misunderstanding indicates that he doesn't share the universally acknowledged view. Presumably others don't either. We might guess that Mr. Bingley doesn't, though he probably hasn't thought about it much; and, almost certainly, neither does Mr. Darcy, who, as we soon learn, is as well fixed and "in want of a wife" as Mr. Bingley but who makes it clear that he does not want a wife at all. These instances embody Austen's ironic indications that we shouldn't take her hypothesis literally.

If we can't accept the hypothesis because it is universally acknowledged, because everyone knows it's true, because to doubt it would put us in the position of the foolish dissenter in Bruno Latour's account of a scientific laboratory, the dissenter who won't believe what everyone else believes and bases their practice as scientists on—if we can't believe it for that reason, what value should we give it? Is there some other reason to believe it?

And we do want to think that it is true or accurate, that a society something like this one with its marriage customs as portrayed did exist in small-town England in the early nineteenth century. This isn't an analysis based on ideal types, and it isn't a parable that exaggerates

some features in order to make certain analytic possibilities apparent—it isn't the kind of analysis whose truth we just don't care about. But we do have reason to take Austen's analysis as a reasonably realistic account of a marriage system. Scientists, and intelligent people generally, take certain kinds of reasons into account in assessing factual statements about society. They will more likely accept an assertion if, for instance, it accords with the facts as they might independently ascertain them or with the facts as they have been ascertained by the person making the assertion, given that that person has exercised all the caution and care we expect an independent finder of fact to exercise (the kinds of precautions I summed up in discussing "reality aesthetics").

Readers of the novel would know or, at least in principle though perhaps not in fact, could know what those reasons were if we actually had any independently ascertainable facts to check the hypothesis against. But we don't have any facts like that. This isn't history—"Marriage Customs in English Country Towns in the Early Nineteenth Century, as Revealed in an Analysis of County Marriage Records," or something like that—and it isn't biography, where the marriages and the circumstances of the biographical subject and his or her relations would be laid out, based on the inspection of contemporary documents, both official records and such unofficial sources as letters, diaries, and newspaper accounts.

Pride and Prejudice is a novel, a fiction, so we can't make that sort of test, not just because the material isn't for some reason available but because no such material exists. Austen made the whole thing up: all the people and incidents, the marital careers and their outcomes. Which (remember John Hersey's worries) is all right for her to do, because the legend on a novelist's license says it's all made up. The more important question is whether she made up the larger truth these people and stories illustrate, the analytic story about marriage practices at this time, in this place.

A skeptical reader could certainly reasonably say that there's no obvious reason to believe any of this analytic story, since the facts that illustrate it were after all just made up. Austen could have made up anything, with just as much warrant, couldn't she? I don't think any

reader of the book, or not many, believes that. On the contrary, most readers think they have learned something about those matters, about a style of life in which women were put in that position of having to marry, having to marry someone, anyone rather than no one, on pain of living a terrible second-class life as a governess or spinster or something equally degrading and unpleasant. Serious readers of Austen do not usually, further, think that what they have learned is inferior to a well-done historical account. Different, but not inferior. Maybe even, in some ways, superior.

Superior in this way: you can know more about the day-to-day details of the process of getting married, more about the ups and downs of a relationship, more about the moments when it seemed impossible and then how something happened to make it possible again, more about the shifts in people's sometimes volatile emotions and the way their interpretations of the other person involved change, as a result of all sorts of transient and not so transient influences of friends, relatives, and "the community" and its standards as those appear in small, subtle details of daily interaction. You learn about what a sociologist might call the contingencies of a marital career.

Why do readers believe they have learned all this? What in the text gives them such assurance?

First of all, the stories and their details have verisimilitude. They accord with our experience of life, with our (conventional, of course) ideas about how people behave, how they would behave in various circumstances. The stories "make sense": the sequences of events, the causal chains, seem like the kind of thing that could happen, that does happen, the kind of linking of events that is plausible. And we understand the characters' motivations, why they might do the kinds of things they do in the book. All these are ways of saying the same thing: we apply our general knowledge of the world to the story told here and see if it measures up or if, on the other hand, it requires us to accept something we hitherto had not known or believed. That means that the author has to give us an explanation of how something we didn't think likely actually happened, and that explanation has to meet the same general test of measuring up to our experience. That's

a very conservative test, and much fiction makes sure to pass it by telling familiar stories that cater to our stereotypes and prejudices.

Other fiction, however, tells us things we think we know but manipulates our expectations so as to produce an outcome we had not anticipated, and that's when we think we have learned something we didn't know before. But, of course, that a story accords with what we already believe is not a very strong test of its truth. Something else is going on: a lot of reasoning that Austen herself doesn't do, not explicitly, anyway.

To arrive at the kind of conclusions they do arrive at, those readers have to do a lot of work: noting all the details, construing their meaning, relating them to one another and to materials contained in other books, putting them together informally into syllogisms, conclusions, and moral judgments. Austen does not provide neatly labeled conclusions to which she then attaches probative evidence. Instead, she tells a story. The story contains all sorts of factual details. An attentive reader absorbs those details and thinks about them, about how they are connected to each other. What is Elizabeth's situation? What will happen to her if she doesn't marry? Look at her friend Charlotte, married to the cloddish clergyman Collins. Wouldn't Charlotte be better off single? The reader performs an analysis, weighs evidence, assesses alternative understandings, and arrives at a conclusion. That takes work. From chapter to chapter, readers guess at what will happen now, who will pair up with whom, who will overcome this latest obstacle. It's never sure that the ending will be "happy." Readers look to the clues Austen gives them and assess likelihoods, develop expectations that may or not be fulfilled. When attentive readers put that kind of work into something, they are likely to believe the results of their own analysis; their own labor and reasoning attest to the result's validity.

When we discussed *Pride and Prejudice* in the seminar, we demonstrated in our own talk how critical readers do work like this. One skeptical participant, alert to the possibility of methodological faults that a trained social scientist could uncover in Austen's analysis, questioned whether there was sufficient factual basis for the book's generalizations. Had we been told enough, one way or the other, on this or

that point? In particular, did Austen, describing English marriage practices, give too rosy and optimistic a picture of married life among the gentry of the period? It might seem so because, after all their troubles, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy overcome many obstacles, finally get together, and appear headed for a perfectly happy future. Does that make the marriage system, after all, seem to give women decent futures, though so much in the book indicates that things were not so rosy? Can contemporary women readers find flaws in a system that would have been acceptable to women of the period?

Another participant pointed out that, on the contrary, Austen gives readers a wealth of comparative data on which they can base a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis. Specifically, the large number of unhappy marriages she pictures in great and compelling detail, discussed earlier: Elizabeth's parents; her younger sister, who gets involved with a cad, ruining her own life and disgracing the family; her friend Charlotte, married to a silly clergyman; and so on. Not to mention Austen's careful attention to the exquisitely calculated differences of wealth and social position as these affect the chances and results of marriage at many points along the class scale. In short, Austen *does* give us sufficient data to allow for a more complex analysis than the original criticism suggested. It isn't exaggerating to say that Austen not only provides the data but provides the analysis too, to a reader alert enough to grasp it.

A long and complicated novel like *Pride and Prejudice,* just like Walker Evans's photographs, contains and presents so much information about such a variety of cases that attentive readers can use the book as a source for many and varied hypotheses, beyond the ones the book itself proposes. It has sufficient material for the sort of comparative analysis that led Goffman to the idea of total institutions. That's what it means to say that such a book is rich in possibilities for sociological analysis and thinking.

So novels can have, in addition to their qualities as literary works, qualities as social analyses. In *Pride and Prejudice,* Austen has described a situation not totally unlike the one described in *Deep South:* a small community, divided by class, families, and cliques, engaged in complex dramas of social mobility. There are many differences, but

they are differences in detail (race is not an issue for Austen, nor does she spend any time on the economic and political underpinning of the activities she describes). *Deep South*'s analysis of Natchez resembles Austen's analysis of Meryton, though it supports its conclusions by adding up many instances of similar kinds of events while Austen uses specific events, crucial in the lives of their protagonists, to come to similar conclusions, or to lead us to them. Realistic novels of social life often offer an alternative to a similar kind of sociological analysis, one that gives more detail of the processes involved, and more access to the day-to-day thinking of the people involved. This is one reason that many sociologists have used novels as sources of sociological insight (as in Coser 1972).

Oh, yes. Austen does, after all, prove her hypotheses. At the end of the novel, we see that Mr. Bingley, the eligible bachelor who provoked her generalization about single men, really was, after all, in need of a wife, as was his friend Mr. Darcy, though neither of them was aware of his need. And by finding and marrying their wives, they show that they have been, in fact, the rightful property of two of the daughters of local families. QED.