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# Beyond the Words: Jane Austen and the Happiness Problem

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## Abstract

Happiness is an important theme in Jane Austen's novels. In this study, the author points to how social, economic, and cultural conditions of the nineteenth-century Britain worked together to create a complex phenomenon of happiness. Focusing on Jane Austen's works, this study analyzes how happiness is explored through the lenses of love, economic security, personal growth, and socially appropriate marriage. I argue that Jane Austen's novels construct an "ideologized discourse" on happiness, which is a narrative framework that naturalizes societal norms while masking their constructed nature through literary narration. This study concludes that the discourse in Jane Austen's works plays a part in shaping the collective British psyche and notions of Britishness by codifying a middle-class ideal of happiness related to moral virtue, economic prudence, and social integration.

## Keywords

Jane Austen's Novel, Happiness, Love, Economic Condition

## 1. Introduction

Happiness is a central theme in human existence. In this paper, "The Happiness Problem" refers to the tension between individual pursuit of happiness and the societal constraints imposed by class, gender, and economic realities in Jane Austen's Britain. John Stuart Mill argued that We know through observation that people desire their own happiness (Schefcz, https://iep.utm.edu/mill-eth/). Jane Austen is a foundational figure in the great tradition of British fiction. Her novels explore the theme of happiness. Her works focus on the multifaceted dimensions of happiness, revealing it not merely as an individual pursuit but as a complex phenomenon deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and economic conditions.

The quintessential British sensibility is vividly expressed in Austen's fiction. British poet W. H. Auden commented on the Englishness of Austen's novels: Byron in this world is shocking,

"...yet he cannot match the shock she (Austen) gives me;

Beside her, Joyce is as innocent as young grass. I feel truly uneasy, my mind unsettled,

Watching the English middle-class spinster
describe the power of money to attract love,
so plainly and soberly revealing
the economic foundations that sustain human society."
(Huang, 2023)

We find that Auden's remark on Austen's portrayal of the economic foundations of society aligns with this paper's argument: Austen's subversive power lies not in romantic idealism but in her unflinching linkage of happiness to material conditions—as seen in Elizabeth Bennet's pragmatic shift in *Pride and Prejudice*. In discussing the British literary tradition, Dr. F. R. Leavis praised Austen as the founder of the great tradition of the English novel, which constitutes the defining attribute of the greatness of the English novel (Leavis, trans. by Yuan Wei, 2009). American scholar Claudia L. Johnson observed that *Pride and Prejudice* granted our requests for happiness and fulfilled our desires with almost "brazen" audacity. However, the fulfillment of fantasy in the novel extended beyond personal pursuit for happiness—a poor and admirable woman securing a wealthy husband. These fantasies also carry political undertones. That is to say, *Pride and Prejudice* did not merely focus on the happiness of individual characters. Happiness itself carried specific social and political significance, which proceeded with caution in the novel (Johnson, trans. by Fu Yanhui, 2019). Similarly, in *The Austen Problem: Reflections on the Individual and the Collective in a Small Ivory Tower*, Huang Mei noted that Austen's novels pursued not only personal happiness but also collective well-being. Meanwhile, she asserted that, in a sense, the pursuit of Austen's private utopia, intertwined with the early nineteenth-century moral reform movement, paving the way for the later splendor of the Victorian British Empire (Huang, 2023). In fact, Austen's novelistic form actively engages in this ideological construction. By embedding happiness within plots that reward virtue with marriage and economic stability, her novels reinforce a hegemonic vision of happiness tied to bourgeois values. Therefore, Huang calls for the necessity for multidimensional studies on the happiness problem in Austen's novels. The purpose of this study is to illuminate the complexity of happiness in Austen's novels, to demonstrate how her plots reflect transitional British society's collective psyche, and to Invite reflection on contemporary parallels to Austen's "happiness problem".

## 2. The Origin and Development of the Concept of Happiness

In Western philosophy, the concept of happiness traces back to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics where he systematically defines happiness (Eudaimonia) in his

Nicomachean Ethics, proposing that happiness is the highest good. He argues that virtue constitutes the true good, and happiness is the fulfillment of virtuous activity—achieved through the practice of virtue. Aristotle emphasizes the central role of inner virtue in achieving happiness, establishing the ethical foundation for Western philosophical conceptions of well-being (Aristotle, trans. by Li Tao, 2024). In contrast to Aristotle's virtue-based, Epicurus adopted a hedonistic approach, asserting that happiness stems from the pursuit of mental tranquility. He posits happiness as the innate highest good, with the avoidance of pain being the key pathway to its attainment (Lillegard, trans. by Wang Li, 2018). Epicurus focuses on the importance of inner mental states in happiness.

In the Enlightenment era, the concept of happiness was expanded from individual ethics to the societal concerns. Jeremy Bentham, for instance, introduced the concept of happiness into the realms of public policy and moral philosophy. In his Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, Bentham proposes the principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (also known as the utilitarian principle), arguing that the purpose of legislation and morality is to maximize the overall pleasure of society (Bentham, trans. by Shi Yinhong, 2011). Bentham's conception of happiness profoundly influenced the formulation of social policies and the development of ethics.

John Stuart Mill is Bentham's successor. Mill introduced the word "utilitarian" into the English language at the age of sixteen. He practiced the utilitarian doctrine throughout his life. Furthermore, he believed that a "desire for perfection" and sympathy for fellow human beings were inherent in human nature. He also asserted that the "utilitarian doctrine held that happiness was desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end" (Schefcz, https://iep.utm.edu/mill-eth/). Notably, Mill refined utilitarianism by distinguishing between "higher pleasures" (intellect, imagination, moral sentiments) and "lower pleasures" (physical sensations). Thus, Mill's conception of happiness stresses the importance of the quality of happiness. Friedrich Nietzsche, a pioneer of modern Western philosophy, subverted traditional notions of happiness. His philosophy of the Übermensch (superman) asserts that happiness stem from the realization of personal will and self-transcendence, rather than external pleasures (Hu, 2018).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, happiness encompasses three primary connotations:

good fortune, success, and prosperity in life or specific events;

a state of mental well-being resulting from achieving success or some form of "good";

propriety, typically associated with appropriate speech and conduct (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

Austen's novels explore the nature of happiness from diverse perspectives. Huang Mei observed that Austen's works interrogate happiness as humanity's paramount pursuit, which invited us to evaluate the nature of happiness and the steadfastness of her characters pursuing the happiness of a life (Gong & Huang,

2019a). In Pride and Prejudice, Darcy's social obligations reflect Austen's view that happiness transcends individual desires, entwined with collective duties. Darcy's arrogance is misguided, yet he has valid reasons for seeking a match within his social circle. As a descendant of a long-established and wealthy family, he bears the obligation to uphold aristocratic traditions. Austen writes that marriage is really in related to two families rather than two individuals (Austen, 1996). Obviously, Austen states that the happiness of a life is never solely an individual matter, that the happiness of a life should consider collective responsibilities and obligations. We find that Austen's novels intricately depict the complex interplay between individual happiness and social norms. Through exploring characters' inner world, portraying social relationships, and presenting moral choices, Austen explores the multifaceted meanings of happiness and the possible paths to realize the happiness of a life.

## 3. Happiness in Austen's Novels

Jane Austen (1775-1817) lived in a society undergoing profound transformation. During this period, Britain experienced significant social, cultural, and economic upheaval, with old and new ideas clashing fiercely. Instability in social structures and values became evident across all levels of society. At the societal level, Britain was transitioning from a traditional feudal hierarchy to a more fluid industrial society. Emerging commerce gradually rose, challenging the absolute dominance of the traditional aristocracy and landed gentry. In his *Industry and Empire*, E. J. Hobsbawm noted that the early stages of the Industrial Revolution accelerated social stratification and mobility, with traditional hierarchies increasingly challenged by the emerging industrial capitalist class (Hobsbawm, 1999). At the economic level, the technological innovations and economic transformations of the Industrial Revolution's early phase introduced new modes of production and wealth distribution, which were accompanied by intensified social inequality. In Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848, Eric Hobsbawm argued that the economic growth brought by the Industrial Revolution starkly contrasted with the increasing social inequality and the plight of the working class (see Stammers & Glen, 2017). These transformations increased social mobility, gradually dismantling traditional hierarchies and value systems. The heightened uncertainty concerning individual destinies and social order is reflected in Austen's novels.

It is well-known that novels serve as mirrors reflecting societal landscapes. Austen's novels profoundly mirror the unformed society she inhabited, particularly focusing on the happiness problem. In short, through the depictions of marriage, family, social standing, and economic concerns, Austen's novels explore how individuals—especially women—confront the practical challenges and navigate potential choices to seek happiness of a life.

To analyze the complexity of happiness in Austen's novels, this paper categorizes it into four distinct yet often overlapping facets: love-based, economist-style, self-growth-based, and well-matched happiness. While these facets frequently in-

tertwine within the narratives, as characters like Elizabeth Bennet seek to balance romantic love with financial security and personal development, analyzing them separately make it clear to understand the constituent parts that form Austen's composite and idea vision of a happy life.

### 3.1. The Love-Based Happiness

The close relationship between love and happiness is a very important principle in Austen's novels. Austen explores, through her characters and plot, how marriage should be founded on love and mutual respect rather than solely on economic gain or social standing. In other words, regarding the happiness of a life, Austen's novels emphasize not merely financial concerns but also touches upon the romantic love people yearn for. Karen Newman analyzed Elizabeth's happy marriage in Pride and Prejudice. Newman's study noted that Austen's novels were so delightful because her heroines, though constrained by ideology, lead vibrant lives that redefine so-called rights… For instance, Austen defied Elizabeth's circumstances by granting her a happy marriage, thereby subverting the harsh realities of the marriage market revealed at the novel's outset. ... It could be argued that Austen shared a certain affinity with romanticism (Newman, 1998).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the "foolish, deluded" Mr. Collins is a clergyman who courts Elizabeth. He says to Elizabeth: "There is in everything a most remarkable resemblance of character and ideas between us. We seem to have been designed for each other" (Austen, 2005). Mr. Collins, a financially secure man who also inherits the Bennet estate, would undoubtedly have brought considerable benefits to the Bennet family. Yet Elizabeth Bennet rejects the arrogant Mr. Collins' proposal. Here we find that Elizabeth's choice reflects her commitment to love and self-dignity, rather than mere submission to financial circumstances. Meanwhile, Austen uses the unfolding relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth to stress the relationship between love and happiness. In Chapter 34, Mr. Darcy proposes to Elizabeth with an air of arrogance, receiving her unequivocal refusal: "I would feel gratitude, I have never desired your good opinion. You have been stowed most unwillingly" (Austen, 2005). In the following chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen demonstrates how Darcy and Elizabeth finally achieve mutual understanding and emotional harmony, culminating in a happy marriage based on love and respect by cautiously testing mutual intentions, and overcoming prejudice. In Chapter 59, Elizabeth accepts Darcy's renewed proposal. Elizabeth opens her heart to Jane:

Jane: "I do congratulate you-but are you certain? forgive the question-are you quite certain that you can be happy with him?"

Elizabeth: "There can be no doubt of that. It is settled between us already, that we are to be the happiest couple in the world" (Austen, 2005).

We find the similar idea that love is a prerequisite for marital happiness in Persuasion. Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, once separated due to others' persuasion, reunite years later. They re-examine their feelings, and ultimately over-

come obstacles to get married happily. During an encounter, Wentworth confesses to Anne that he loved her when they were separated for years. Claudia L. Johnson claimed that "Austen, through Elizabeth's choice, expresses a firm support for female autonomy and marriages based on love, which carries profound critical implications in the context of her time" (Johnson, 1988). As we have seen above in *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion* that Austen reveals the interrelationship between love and happiness of a life. Thus, the plots and dialogues underscore the paramount importance of genuine affection, mutual understanding, and steadfast commitment in achieving a happy marriage.

### 3.2. The Economist-Style Happiness

The close connections between economic condition and happy life in Pride and Prejudice is evident from the first sentence, which says, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (Austen, 2005). Here what is important is 'in possession of a good fortune.' In his exposition on the origins of British fiction, Michael Mckeon described the hierarchical characteristics of British society: "Birth equates to worth, and honor represents the unity of outward appearance and inner essence, which distinguishes the British aristocracy or nobility from the broad populace." Thus, in the seventeenth-and early eighteenth-century Britain, the inequality of status was glaringly obvious, with social disparity occupying the forefront of cultural consciousness (McKeon, trans. by Hu Zhenming, 2015). Jane Austen is the founder of the great tradition of British fiction. Her novels demonstrate the profound significance of economic concerns regarding happiness in life. In Persuasion, Austen vividly portrays Sir Walter Elliot's obsession with social standing: "Sir Walter Elliot was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest parents" (Austen, 2005). In Sir Walter's eyes, Elizabeth is very much like himself. Sir Walter also hopes that Elizabeth, his eldest daughter, would secure a marriage of equal social standing, bringing him honor and prestige. We find that a recurring theme in Austen's novels is the close connection between economic condition, social standing, and marital happiness—especially in the early nineteenth-century Britain, where marriage was the primary means for women to attain financial security and social status. Thompson wrote that Austen did not succumb to romantic illusions about love. Instead, she drew attention to the practical realities of marriage, revealing that marital relationships functioned as individual economic entities where emotional, moral, and financial dimensions were intertwined (Thompson, 1988). Allen Morse similarly emphasized that Austen wrote about marriage as it was almost the only option for women to live a happy life at that time. Her female protagonists meticulously investigated their prospective husbands' financial backgrounds. After a proper introduction, the female protagonists outmaneuvered rivals with grace, skillfully

limited parental interference, and carefully cultivated their relationship. By the end of the story, the female protagonists accepted marriage, transforming courtship into a solid marriage with preserving dignity and upholding integrity (Gong & Huang, 2019b).

Several Austen's love stories show the close connection between economic condition and happiness. Austen uses the dialogue to vividly portray the characters' personalities. For example, in Pride and Prejudice, when Elizabeth tells her mother that she and Mr. Darcy are engaged, Mrs. Bennet is too happy to utter a syllable, saying: "Good gracious! Lord bless me! Only think! dear me! Mr. Darcy! Who would have thought it! And is it really true? Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! How rich and how great you will be! What pin money, what jewels! What carriages you will have." Then she cried: "My dearest child,"… "I can think of nothing else, ten thousand a year, and very likely more!" (Austen, 2005). For Mrs. Bennet, the financial standing of her future son-in-law is the definitive measure of her daughter Elizabeth's marital happiness. Therefore Mrs. Bennet's remark is part of what *Pride and Prejudice* means.

In her novels, Austen shows extraordinary economic acumen. According to *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, in Austen's era, a household income of £500 a year represented the baseline for domestic contentment (Copeland & McMaster, 2011). Darcy's annual income exceeds £1000 placed him well above the assets of middle-class households. So when Mrs. Bennet hears the news that Darcy is to marry Elizabeth, she is overjoyed, which really underscores the pivotal role economic condition plays in the happiness of a life.

### 3.3. The Self-Growth-Based Happiness

Brigid Brophy stated that Jane Austen subscribed to the eighteenth-century faith in education. She even concurred with the eighteenth-century faith in solving political problems by educating monarchs (Brophy, 2023). Denis Donoghue provided a reference for Brigid Brophy's idea. He wrote that Education in Mansfield Park was such a crucial issue that we might expect to find it featured in practically all the situations involving change and progress (Donoghue, 2023). Besides Mansfield Park, we find that the intrinsic connection between characters' self-growth and their happiness is evident in her other novels. In Emma, Emma Woodhouse, a young, well-educated and independent-minded woman, in the novel's opening chapters, displays excessive self-confidence and a penchant for meddling in her friend's romantic affairs. She insists that Harriet Smith should marry the Reverend Elton, a clergyman of higher social standing, rather than the farmer Mr. Martin, whom Harriet loves. When Mr. Elton rejects Harriet, and proposes to Emma, Emma realizes that it is wrong for her to interfere in Harriet's romantic life. Here Austen also employs dialogues to depict Emma's personal growth. When Mr. Knightley informs Emma that Harriet Smith has married Robert Martin, she says: "I am perfectly satisfied, and I wish them every happiness." Meanwhile Mr. Knightley acknowledges Emma's growth: "You have undergone a substantial change

since we last discussed this matter." "I hope so—I was a fool," Then Emma replied (Austen, 2005). In the concluding pages, Emma understands that happiness stems from comprehending and respecting others' choices and feelings, rather than controlling and arranging their lives.

Like all Jane Austen's novels, Sense and Sensibility is a comedy that ends in happy marriages, which particularly affirms the connections between personal growth and happiness. We find that Miss Marianne in Sense and Sensibility is another character who ultimately gets married happily ever after through her personal growth. On one occasion, Marianne encounters dashing, but frivolous young gentleman Mr. Willoughby. She instantly falls deeply in love with him. Shortly thereafter, Willoughby abandons Marianne due to her family's bad financial circumstances. Heartbroken, Marianne falls ill seriously and nearly loses her life. Having experienced the emotional and physical trauma, Marianne reflects upon what happiness and true love mean, and decides to marry Colonel Brandon.

We find that characters in Austen's novels strive for self-growth through learning and cultivation. During this process, they might suffer setbacks and make mistakes, such as Miss Emma and Miss Marianne. Their experiences are not just trauma but part of their journey towards a renewed understanding of happiness. Therefore, Austen's characters, in the end, all find contentment and live happily, echoing Austen's ideas that women might pursue happiness through education and thinking independently.

### 3.4. The Well-Matched Happiness

In Dr Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissini*, a philosopher said to Prince Rasselas:

"The way to be happy is to live according to nature, in obedience to that universal and unalterable law with which every heart is originally impressed;" "That deviation from nature is deviation from happiness." The happiness of a life led according to nature means "To concur with the great and unchangeable scheme of universal felicity; to co-operate with the general disposition and tendency of the present system of things" (Johnson, trans. by Chen Xijun, 2012).

Dr Johnson's The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia has influenced many subsequent writers, including Austen. We find that one form of happiness in Austen's fictions is that of a life led according to nature. Here, "nature means the characters' dispositions, inherent qualities, or their living environment and circumstances. The characters in Austen's novels, both major and minor, pursue their respective forms of happiness with considerable interest. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Bennet's greatest aspiration is to secure suitable husbands for her five daughters. Although the novel opens with a highly ironic line that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife (Austen, 2005), it is a comedy: Elizabeth and Darcy, Jane and Bingley, Lydia and Wickham—three well-matched couples, find their happiness ever after. Particularly Lydia, blinded by beautiful appearance and passion, finally marries Wickham with Darcy's assis-

tance. Thus, Lydia and Wickham not only find their own happiness and restore Lydia's family honour, but also bring welfare to their household and society. As Zhang Honglian pointed out that Jane Austen conveyed to readers that marriage was not merely a personal matter, but also a social one. For example, Lydia's elopement sent shockwaves through the entire family and all their acquaintances, for they all knew that if this scandal were to become public, it would not only ruin Lydia's reputation but also bring shame upon her relatives—especially her elder sisters, who would find it nearly impossible to secure respectable marriages (Austen, trans. by Zhang Honglian, 1996). So the happy ending of the story rewards nearly everyone.

Similarly, Austen believed that well-matched marriages can bring lasting happiness. In *Emma*, Austen narrates the well-matched happy marriage of Emma and Knightley. Emma Woodhouse, who takes great delight in arranging marriages for others, knows the honest and sensible farmer Martin proposing to her friend Harriet. Emma persuades Harriet to reject Martin's proposal mainly due to his low social standing. After Martin proposes to Harriet, she asks Emma for advice. Emma declares: "Ought to refuse him! My dear Harriet, What do you mean? Are you in any doubt as to that? I thought—But I beg your pardon, perhaps I have been under a mistake" (Austen, 2005). But the novel's ending reveals that Emma's judgement and advice are mistaken. Harriet eventually marries Martin, a man of comparable social standing who was devoted to her and possessed sufficient means. They lived together happily. In Chapter55, Emma also acknowledges that Harriet's marriage to Martin makes her the luckiest person in the world:

"Emma fully acknowledged in him of the appearance of sense and worth which could bid fairest for her little friend. he had no doubt of Harriet's happiness with any good-tempered man; but with him, and in the house he offered, there would be the hope of more, of security, stability and improvement (p. 490). She would be respectable and happy; and Emma admitted her to be the luckiest creature in the world" (Austen, 2005).

Moreover, Booth regarded the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley as a match made in heaven, remarking that Emma marrying a wise, kind and amiable man was the best thing that could happen to the heroine (Booth, 1961).

Though the essence of that happiness differs for each, we find that the characters in Austen's novels yearn for the happiness of a life, attempted to attain it. Moreover different characters, in the end, achieve well-matched marriage led according to their respective realities, as Prince Rasselas of Abyssinia once remarks:

"Whatever be the general infelicity of man, one condition is more happy than another, and wisdom surely direct us to take the least evil in the choice of life" (Johnson, trans. by Chen Xijun, 2012).

Austen's characters often experience multiple types of happiness simultaneously. Elizabeth Bennet in Pride and Prejudice attempts to balance romantic love, financial security, and personal growth, for instance. Austen's depiction reveals happiness as a dynamic compromise between individual desires and societal constraints.

## 4. Conclusion

Jane Austen's novels depict the growth and choices of individuals, particularly women, in their pursuit of happiness in a complex, and transitional society, revealing the multifaceted nature of happiness and offering its essence. Through her narration, Austen transforms the materials of British rural life, including strict class hierarchies, inheritance laws, and so on, into an ideological blueprint for happiness that became the foundation of middle-class identity in Victorian era. Austen's specific contribution to a distinctly "British" identity lies in her successful literary fusion of seemingly contradictory values: her narratives champion individual feeling and moral integrity while simultaneously insisting on social responsibility, economic prudence, and integration into the established community order. This integration, embodied in the fates of heroines like Elizabeth Bennet, offered a compelling and enduring British mythology—the idea that true happiness and virtue are found not in radical rebellion or pure materialism, but in a balanced, moral right integration into the social fabric, an ideal that would profoundly resonate with the evolving British middle class.

Austen's novels have become an integral part of nineteenth-century British literature, not merely as social documents but as active shapers of Britishness, which also provide enduring inspiration and reflection on happiness for later generations, and bring readers the hope of pursuing happiness. In his The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia, Dr. Johnson has the prince saying: "We are long before we are convinced that happiness is never to be found, and each believes it possessed by others, to keep alive the hope of obtaining it for himself." After escaping the happy Valley, the grieving prince said: "I have here the world before me, I will review it at leisure: surely happiness is somewhere to be found" (Johnson, trans. by Chen Xijun, 2012). Huang Mei et al. have expressed an idea very close to the Prince of Abissinia's: "Though Austen herself chose to remain unmarried, she never accorded this possibility to her characters" (Gong & Haung, 2019a). We find that Austen demonstrates how happiness—though being multifaceted—could be pragmatically achieved within British institutions. Elizabeth Bennet's marriage to Darcy, for instance, reconciles personal desire with family responsibility and social duty, becoming a cultural touchstone for the British psyche. To a great extent, Austen endows her novels with the power to transform society by codifying a national mythology of happiness and offers the reader possible pathways to pursue happiness.

## Conflicts of Interest

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

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