

Marriage for Love or Comfort? A Look into the Character of Charlotte Lucas in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

"I'm 27 years old. I've no money and no prospects. I'm already a burden to my parents, and I'm frightened". This famous quote from the film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, while not in the novel, succinctly illustrates the dilemma that women faced in the days of Jane Austen. This fear is voiced by the character of Charlotte Lucas, a dear friend of the iconic Elizabeth Bennet. Among other reasons, Charlotte's character shows the harsh reality of marriage, wealth, and status of women in the 19th Century.

Marriage in the time of Jane Austen was not about love and romance; it was a business transaction based on the wealth of both parties involved. Since women could not inherit, if a family wanted their daughter to live a comfortable life, it was imperative that she marry well. Parents sought out eligible men who they thought could give their daughter that life. If they fell in love that was an added bonus. At the age of twenty-seven, Charlotte Lucas was nearing the age where she would no longer be a desirable wife to the men in her circle. Luckily for her, she had a very business like approach to marriage. On page 117, Austen writes, "...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." We can see here that Charlotte wasn't looking to be swept off her feet or to be in love. She wanted stability and the chance to live a comfortable life, "...however uncertain of giving happiness" (117).

Charlotte's character is contrasted directly by the character of Elizabeth Bennet. The relationship between the two women started off as close, intimate friends. However,

after Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins, that changes. Elizabeth, who had previously rejected Mr. Collins's proposal is taken back and hurt by Charlotte's news. The two women have very different views of marriage and Elizabeth acknowledges that. However, she hoped that her dear friend, "would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage," (120).

The purpose of Charlotte Lucas's character has been debated between scholars of Austen's works. According to "Charlotte and Elizabeth: Multiple Modernities in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" Charlotte marrying Mr. Collins "represents past norms whose modern irrelevance is made apparent through the progress of the novel toward a culmination in two affective, consensual unions," (Moe, 1076). Austen lived and wrote during a time where marriage was still a key for survival for women, while also the conversations of love and marrying for love were becoming more relevant. Jennifer Phegley writes in her book *Courtship and marriage in Victorian England* "The companionate marriage had become a common aspiration by the dawn of the 19th century," (2). This shift was seen the most publicly with the marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Queen Victoria was not required to submit to her husband and even though she tried to show her domesticity, it can be inferred that the two married for love, as seen in letters written to each other.

The concept of marrying for love really began with Queen Victoria and the Victorian Era which began close to twenty years after Jane Austen's death in 1817. We know that the idea had been around for a while, but at the time, women still needed to consider the reality of living in the 18th and 19th Centuries in England. For women like Charlotte Lucas, it really did not matter if she loved the man. Charlotte herself says, "I

am not romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home;’” (119). Her decision is in stark contrast to the other marriages in the novel, which may be Austen’s point in including it. Something that is consistent between Austen’s works is that she explores the way “her characters act or “perform” in tricky situations,” (Wainwright, 59). In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, readers are presented with two very different reactions to the concept of marrying for necessity or for love.

The character of Charlotte Lucas, while minor, plays an important role in story Austen tells in *Pride and Prejudice*. During a time where people talked of marrying for love but weren’t always able to depending on their situations, Austen illustrates the differences between the ideal and the sensible. The characters of Charlotte and Elizabeth serve as a sort of metaphor for the complexity of love and marriage that women in Austen’s time faced. While marrying for love was not unheard of, it wasn’t always what they got.

#### Works Cited

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