

Class Anxiety: A Marxist Analysis of Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice***Davina Putri Wiendien^{1✉}, Thohiriyah²**^{1,2} Faculty of Language and Art, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia**Article Info***Article History:*

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Keywords: class anxiety, Marxist literary criticism, *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet, social class**Abstract**

This study aimed to examine how socio-economic structures shape Mrs. Bennet's psychological disposition and social behavior in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The analysis drew on Marxist literary criticism as its primary framework, supported by Bourdieu's concept of habitus, to investigate how material conditions produce class anxiety as both a psychological and behavioral phenomenon. The results showed that Mrs. Bennet's behavior is not a matter of personal character but a direct response to the material conditions that govern her existence. Her nervous temperament, obsessive concern with her daughters' marriages, need for social recognition, and fear of downward mobility reflect the internalized pressures of a class position that is economically precarious and socially uncertain. These findings suggest that class anxiety, as experienced by Mrs. Bennet, is a product of structural inequality rather than individual failing, revealing how deeply material conditions shape the way individuals think, feel, and act in Austen's depiction of Regency-era England.

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INTRODUCTION

People's position in society is largely determined by their economic conditions, particularly their relationship to property and wealth. Social class is rooted in the division of society according to relationships to the means of production, creating conditions of dominance and subordination that extend beyond the economic sphere into culture and everyday life (Brown, 2006). These structural inequalities are not only experienced externally but are also internalized psychologically. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the internalized set of dispositions, values, and behaviors shaped by one's class position, class conditions become embedded in the way people perceive themselves and the world around them, producing a felt sense of one's place in the social order (MacLeavy, 2020). Within rigid social hierarchies, this internalization frequently manifests as class anxiety, a psychological

condition in which individuals experience persistent insecurity and pressure related to their social position. Status anxiety, broadly defined as the fear of failing to meet society's expectations regarding success and social standing (de Botton, 2004), is closely related to this concept, but class anxiety is more specifically rooted in the material conditions of class inequality, arising from structural constraints that limit individuals' access to economic security and upward mobility. Individuals in lower social class positions commonly experience heightened sensitivity to social exclusion, strong awareness of status differences, and persistent anxiety as direct psychological responses to structural inequality (Markus & Stephens, 2017). These responses manifest in identifiable behavioral indicators: fear of downward mobility, obsession with securing social stability through marriage or wealth, hypersensitivity to status markers, preoccupation with reputation, and the use of strategic social

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behavior to maintain or improve one's class position (de Botton, 2004; Markus & Stephens, 2017). These anxious behaviors are not simply personal failings but expressions of a habitus shaped by class conditions, in which the pressure to secure one's social position becomes internalized as a governing principle of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1984).

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) offers a vivid portrait of how rigid class structures shape personal relationships and individual behavior in Regency-era. In the world Austen depicts, a person's social position, determined largely by property and wealth, governs almost every aspect of life, from whom one may marry to how one is received in society. Within this system, characters are constantly aware of their social standing and the limitations attached to it, creating pressure to maintain or improve their position in society. Literary texts expose the ways social structures penetrate individual consciousness and behavior, making literature a significant site for examining how class-based pressures are lived and experienced (Eagleton, 2019). Class pressures are not merely structural but are embedded in culture and the social practices that literature represents, reproducing inequality across generations (Williams, 1977). The novel is therefore not simply a story about manners and marriage but a reflection of how class structures generate anxiety, shape identity, and determine the choices available to individuals, particularly women, who in Regency society had almost no economic agency independent of marriage.

Among the characters in the novel, Mrs. Bennet stands out as the clearest embodiment of class anxiety. Living under the threat of entailment, which would leave her daughters without financial security upon Mr. Bennet's death, she occupies a position of acute economic vulnerability that drives her behavior throughout the novel. Her constant obsession with finding wealthy husbands for her daughters reflects not only maternal concern but also deep anxiety over the family's uncertain future and declining social position. Austen's novels expose the way market forces shape feminine identities and marriage choices, showing how women's lives are closely connected to economic conditions and class expectations (Poovey, 1984). This is further

reflected in Charlotte Lucas's statement that "marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune," which illustrates the extent to which marriage functioned as an economic necessity rather than a personal choice for women of limited means in Regency society. Class anxiety intensifies when individuals experience conditions of economic insecurity and limited social mobility (Wallace & Junisbai, 2004) — precisely the conditions that define Mrs. Bennet's situation. Her excessive concern with marriage, reputation, and social recognition can therefore be understood as a direct manifestation of class anxiety, in which the material conditions of her class position shape both her psychological disposition and social behavior, making her character a significant site for Marxist literary analysis.

Several studies have examined social class in *Pride and Prejudice* from various perspectives. Tiwari (2018) analyzes how the class structure of Regency England made marriage a social and economic necessity for women, demonstrating that social status in the novel is closely tied to wealth and property. Simare Mare et al. (2025) investigate the influence of social norms and etiquette on characters' behavior and decisions, finding that class expectations and societal pressures shaped marriage choices during the Regency era. Chin-Yi (2013) examines gender and class oppression in the novel, arguing that economic necessity drives women's social behavior and that Mrs. Bennet's actions are ultimately a product of the material conditions imposed on women by the patriarchal class system. While these studies demonstrate that socioeconomic structures strongly influence the characters' lives, they primarily explain class as an external social condition or interpret Mrs. Bennet's behavior as a direct response to structural constraints. Limited attention has been given to the psychological process through which these objective material conditions become internalized into enduring dispositions that subsequently shape everyday behavior. Consequently, the relationship between material conditions, psychological disposition, and behavioral expression remains insufficiently explored.

To address this gap, this study employs Marxist literary criticism as its primary theoretical framework while incorporating Bourdieu's concept

of habitus as a complementary perspective. Marx's concept of historical materialism explains how material conditions, class relations, and ideology shape human consciousness within a particular historical context. As Marx (1859) states, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness," emphasizing that human thought and behavior are fundamentally shaped by material and economic conditions. Likewise, Marx and Engels (1848) argue that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," highlighting the central role of class relations in shaping social life. Within literary studies, literature belongs to the social superstructure and reflects the tensions and inequalities generated by the economic base (Brown, 2006). However, although Marxism effectively explains the structural origins of class inequality, it does not fully explain how these external conditions become internalized within individuals and subsequently guide their everyday perceptions and practices. To address this analytical limitation, this study incorporates Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which explains how objective social conditions are transformed into durable dispositions that generate meaningful social practices (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). Rather than replacing Marxism, Bourdieu extends its explanatory power by connecting structural conditions with individual psychological dispositions and behavioral expressions. Accordingly, this study examines Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety as a process consisting of three interconnected dimensions: the socioeconomic structures that produce material insecurity, the psychological dispositions formed through the internalization of those conditions, and the behavioral expressions that emerge from them. By integrating Marxist literary criticism with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, this study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating not only how class structures shape Mrs. Bennet's circumstances but also how they become embodied in her consciousness and reproduced through her everyday social behavior in *Pride and Prejudice*.

METHODS

This research applies a qualitative research method. It was chosen because it provides an in-depth understanding of Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety and how socio-economic structures shape her psychological disposition and social behavior in *Pride and Prejudice*. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 3) state, qualitative research is "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" and "consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible," making it well suited for examining how class structures and ideological pressures are represented through character behavior, dialogue, and narrative in literary texts. The primary data of this study is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, first published in 1813. The novel provides textual material that depicts Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety through her responses to economic insecurity, her preoccupation with marriage, and her social behavior within the rigid class hierarchy of Regency-era England. The collected data consists of dialogues, narration, and character interactions that reflect Mrs. Bennet's concerns with social position, marriage, and financial security. Secondary data are drawn from peer-reviewed scholarly works related to Marxist literary criticism, materialism, and class anxiety. The data were selected by carefully reading the novel repeatedly to identify and extract passages that reflect the five operational indicators of class anxiety: fear of downward mobility, obsession with marriage as economic strategy, hypersensitivity to wealth and social markers, preoccupation with reputation, and strategic social behavior aimed at maintaining or improving class position (de Botton, 2004; Markus & Stephens, 2017). This study employs Marxist literary criticism as the primary analytical framework. Marxist literary criticism is used to examine how economic structures, class relations, and dominant social ideologies are represented in the novel and how they influence the consciousness and behavior of characters. To further explain the psychological and behavioral manifestations of class anxiety, the analysis is supported by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus to contextualize the psychological and behavioral dimensions of class anxiety. The research was conducted following several steps: (1) close reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, (2) identification and extraction of textual excerpts related to Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety, (3) thematic

categorization of the excerpts based on research variables, and (4) interpretative analysis using Marxist literary criticism, focusing on the relationship between material conditions, social structures, ideology, and character behavior. The research findings are presented in the form of descriptive analysis to achieve the objective of analyze how socio-economic structures and dominant social ideologies shape Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety and how this anxiety is represented through her psychological disposition and social behavior in *Pride and Prejudice*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social and Economic Structures Causing Class Anxiety

Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety is a product of material conditions rather than personal disposition. In the context of *Pride and Prejudice*, those conditions include the legal mechanisms governing property inheritance, the structural exclusion of women from economic participation, and the ideological frameworks that determine how social actors understand and respond to their circumstances. The material factor that shapes Mrs. Bennet class anxiety is the class position of the Bennet family. In Marxist terms, class is determined by an individual's relationship to the ownership and control of wealth and property (Agabi & Ushie, 2025). The Bennet family belongs to the gentry, a class that hold respectability but economically vulnerable, dependent on the preservation of landed property rather than possessing any guaranteed claim to stability. The Bennet show this contradiction very clearly: their estate can be harmed by poor management or economic changes, and Longbourn is legally set to go to a male relative instead of any female family member. This means the property that supports their social position will pass to a man no matter how well the family manages it or how many daughters depend on it. In short, their social standing depends on material assets that the family's women, including Mrs. Bennet who cannot legally protect. Austen highlights this structural contradiction in the exchange between Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins, when she complains about,

"It is a grievous affair to my poor girls, you

must confess. There is no knowing how estates will go when once they come to be entailed" (Austen, 1813, p. 65).

"I never can be thankful, Mr. Bennet, for anything about the entail. How anyone could have the conscience to entail away an estate from one's own daughters, I cannot understand; and all for the sake of Mr. Collins too! Why should HE have it more than anybody else?" (Austen, 1813, p. 165)

These lines show that Mrs. Bennet's main concern is not the entail as an abstract legal rule but the material harms it produces for her family. Because inheritance determines access to property and wealth, the entail threatens the household's economic security and so shapes how she understands justice and the future. This observation aligns with Marx's statement that "*The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general*" (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859/1977, p. 20), Mrs. Bennet's consciousness is formed by the material structure around her. From a historical-materialist perspective, her anxiety follows logically from an economic arrangement that leaves women, including her daughters, legally excluded from ownership since she does not have a son. Women in Regency England could neither inherit entailed estates nor retain full control over property after marriage, leaving their economic security dependent on the male relatives to whom they were connected through birth or marriage (Tiwari, 2018; Hamadi, 2017; Alam Chowdhury & Sofi, 2024). Consequently, the family's future remains uncertain despite its current status. This vulnerability is intensified by the absence of substantial savings and the financial responsibility of providing for five unmarried daughters (Khan et al., 2023). This condition turns marriage from a personal aspiration into the only realistic route to material security and to maintain their class position. Austen's novels repeatedly show social advancement occurring through marriage rather than individual achievement, which is itsevidence of how unstable apparently secure gentry positions actually were (Prewitt Brown, 2004, pp. 69–89). Mrs. Bennet's preoccupation with advantageous marriages is therefore not merely a personal strategy but a response to the same structural logic that the entail system itself embodies: in a society where class

position is reproduced through property, those excluded from property must find other mechanisms of reproduction, and marriage is the one the dominant social order makes available to women. It aligns with Marx's statement of historical materialism that shifting economic relations reshape even the most intimate social institutions. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels argue that the rise of commercial capital "reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978, p. 223). It is shown in Austen's description of Mrs. Bennet at the novel's opening encodes this structural position directly.

"The business of her life was to get her daughters married," the narrator states, "and its solace was visiting and news" (Austen, 1813, p. 4).

"If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield," said Mrs. Bennet to her husband, "and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for." (Austen, 1813, p.10)

Mrs. Bennet's steady focus on marriage reveals the ideological shape of her social world. Marx and Engels argue in *The German Ideology* that "*The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas*" (1846), meaning values shaped by those who control economic resources come to seem natural even to those they disadvantage. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the ruling ideas include that a woman's main role is to secure a good marriage, that a man's value depends on his income and property, and that inheritance and class arrangements are the natural order rather than historical constructions. these ruling ideas present marriage as women's primary role, male worth as tied to property, and inheritance as natural. Eagleton's account of ideology in Marxist literary theory clarifies what is distinctive about this form of internalization. Ideology, Eagleton argues, is "the way people live out their roles in class society" (1976), meaning that it is not primarily a set of ideas held consciously but a mode of experience — a way of perceiving, valuing, and responding to the social world that feels natural rather than constructed. It follows that ideology "ties individuals to social roles and prevents a complete understanding of society" (Eagleton, 1976): the person living out an ideological role does not typically recognize it as such, which is why the dominant order is

reproduced not only through force or legal compulsion but through the ordinary perceptions and reactions of those it positions. Mrs. Bennet does not treat these as debatable ideas; she accepts them as simply how things are. As a result, she directs all her energy toward finding solutions within the system, identifying eligible men and positioning her daughters for visibility, instead of questioning whether the system itself is fair. This conditioning appears clearly in her reaction to news of Mr. Bingley's arrival.

"A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!" (Austen, 1813, p. 2).

Mrs. Bennet evaluates Mr. Bingley according to his income before considering his personal qualities because marriage functions as an economic institution within her social environment. Her priorities illustrate Marx's claim that "*it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness*" (Marx, 1859/1977, p. 21). Living within a system where women cannot inherit property, she perceives marriage primarily as the means of securing material survival. Chin-Yi (2013) links this pattern to material conditions created by the patriarchal class system; this situation contribute to the class anxiety that motivates her actions throughout the novel. Her actions, viewed through a Marxist lens, are not irrational but can be read as substantially shaped by the socioeconomic structures within which she exists. These structures, as Marx suggests, can shape not only what individuals do but who they become and how they come to perceive the world around them (Marx, 1859). The passage shows how deeply those conditions have been absorbed, Mrs. Bennet treats wealth as self-evidently decisive, responding instinctively as if the marriage market's values were natural and unquestionable.

The structural logic Mrs. Bennet embodies is not, however, confined to her alone; Austen dramatizes it across the novel's marriages as a whole. Marx and Engels's (1848) claim that the bourgeoisie 'has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation' identifies the systemic condition that *Pride and Prejudice* repeatedly illustrates: courtship in the novel is introduced through income and property before it

is introduced through character, and the marriages characters make reflect the material constraints of their situations as consistently as they reflect personal preference. Charlotte Lucas accepts Mr. Collins with full self-awareness that the match is founded on security rather than affection, observing that she is 'not romantic' and asks 'only a comfortable home' (Austen, 1813, p. 125). Lydia's elopement with Wickham demonstrates the risks of pursuing romantic preference outside economic rationality, and the narrative resolves their marriage through Darcy's secret financial intervention, confirming that money, not feeling, makes such unions socially functional. Even Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy, the novel's romantic ideal, is embedded in a framework of class difference and economic disparity that the plot repeatedly acknowledges, suggesting that personal choice in Regency England is never entirely independent of the material conditions that shape what choices are possible.

Having established this systemic pattern across marriages, the novel then sharpens the contrast within the Bennet household. The narrator observes that 'Mr. Bennet had very often wished that, instead of spending his whole income, he had laid by an annual sum for the better provision of his children, and of his wife, if she survived him. He now wished it more than ever' (Austen, 1813, p. 289). This late expression of regret is reflective detachment rather than immediate anxiety. Retaining legal control of Longbourn and a social identity not contingent on his daughters' marriages, Mr. Bennet can afford an ironic distance because the immediate material consequences of precarity fall principally on his wife and daughters. Marx's argument that social existence determines consciousness (1859) implies that his detachment and her urgency reflect differences in material position rather than mere personality; the anxiety concentrated in Mrs. Bennet is therefore partly an effect of the gendered distribution of economic risk that the Bennet household embodies.

B. The Psychological Disposition of Mrs. Bennet's Class Anxiety

The material conditions discussed in the previous section shape Mrs. Bennet not only through external constraints but also through the development of enduring psychological

dispositions. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this process can be understood through the concept of habitus, which Bourdieu (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1972) defines as "an acquired system of generative schemes... the product of a particular class of conditions of existence." Habitus explains how objective social conditions gradually become internalized until they influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to the world almost automatically. Consequently, Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety should not be understood as a temporary emotional reaction to financial uncertainty but as a durable psychological disposition produced through the long-term internalization of socioeconomic conditions. Austen introduces this process by describing Mrs. Bennet's family background:

"Mrs. Bennet's property consisted as yet of only four thousand pounds left her by her father. She had a brother settled in London in a respectable line of trade, and a sister married to a Mr. Phillips, who had been a clerk to their father and succeeded him in the business" (Austen, 1813, p. 18).

This description places Mrs. Bennet's early social experiences within the commercial middle class rather than the landed aristocracy. Before marrying Mr. Bennet, her daily environment was closely connected with trade, business, and practical financial concerns. According to Bourdieu (1977), these conditions of existence become embodied as durable dispositions that continue to shape an individual's perception even after objective circumstances have changed. Consequently, although marriage elevates Mrs. Bennet into the landed gentry, it does not erase the practical orientation toward money and economic security that had already become embedded in her habitus. Instead, her previous experiences continue to influence the way she understands social status and evaluates future security.

This persistence of habitus becomes more significant when considered alongside the social conditions of Regency England. Although marriage could provide upward mobility, class position remained vulnerable to inheritance laws and economic change rather than being permanently secured (Stone, 1967). Mrs. Bennet therefore occupies a contradictory social position. She has entered the gentry through marriage, yet the entail prevents her family from retaining the

property that sustains that status. As discussed in the previous section, the prospect of losing Longbourn means that her family's social position is never entirely secure. These continuing structural pressures reinforce the dispositions formed through her earlier experiences instead of replacing them. Rather than developing the confidence and emotional detachment commonly associated with the landed gentry, Mrs. Bennet continues to perceive social life through the possibility of economic loss and downward mobility. The internalization of these material conditions becomes evident in the narrator's observation that

"The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (Austen, 1813, p. 4).

Rather than merely describing Mrs. Bennet's daily activities, Austen presents marriage as the central organizing principle of her psychological world. In *Distinction* (1979), Bourdieu argues that "the habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices." In Mrs. Bennet's case, the objective necessity created by entailment and women's economic dependence is gradually transformed into a stable psychological disposition. Securing advantageous marriages no longer appears to her as one possible strategy among many but as the only rational means of protecting her family from future insecurity. What initially exists as an external socioeconomic constraint is therefore internalized into a habitual way of perceiving reality. This psychological disposition becomes even clearer when Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins's proposal. Mrs. Bennet immediately warns her daughter,

"But I tell you, Miss Lizzy, if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all, and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead. I shall not be able to keep you, and so I warn you" (Austen, 1813, p. 69).

Rather than responding to Elizabeth's personal happiness, Mrs. Bennet instinctively anticipates the economic consequences of remaining unmarried. Her reaction reveals that the possibility of financial insecurity has become psychologically immediate rather than merely hypothetical. Wallace and Junisbai (2004) argue that individuals who perceive their social position

as unstable are more likely to develop heightened awareness of status and stronger fears of downward mobility, while Moberg (2020) explains that anxiety functions as a response to perceived threats and uncertainty. Mrs. Bennet's repeated anticipation of poverty reflects this process of internalization. She experiences future economic insecurity as a constant psychological reality, causing her to evaluate present decisions primarily through the lens of potential financial risk. The depth of this internalization is further reflected in Mrs. Bennet's recurring descriptions of her own physical condition. She repeatedly complains:

"People who suffer as I do from nervous complaints can have no great inclination for talking. Nobody can tell what I suffer!" (Austen, 1813, p. 90).

"I am frightened out of my wits—and have such tremblings, such flutterings, all over me—such spasms in my side and pains in my head, and such beatings at heart, that I can get no rest by night nor by day" (Austen, 1813, p. 259).

These bodily symptoms suggest that her anxiety has become embodied through prolonged exposure to material insecurity. Her nervousness is therefore not simply an exaggerated personality trait but the psychological manifestation of objective socioeconomic pressures that have been internalized over time. An economic threat weakens people's sense of control and self-esteem, and leads them to take steps to recover those feelings (Markus & Stephens, 2017). As Austen thus portrays class anxiety as a condition experienced cognitively, emotionally, and physically, illustrating how external social structures become enduring psychological dispositions.

Having internalized economic insecurity as a stable psychological disposition, Mrs. Bennet no longer responds to social situations through detached or objective judgment. Instead, her habitus shapes what she notices, values, and considers emotionally significant. In *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu argues that habitus operates beneath conscious calculation, guiding individuals to perceive and respond to the social world according to dispositions acquired through previous social experiences. Consequently, Mrs. Bennet instinctively interprets people and events through their implications for economic security and class position rather than according to moral

or emotional considerations. Her psychological responses are therefore structured by habitus instead of being the product of deliberate choice. This psychological orientation becomes evident during Jane's engagement, when Mrs. Bennet openly celebrates the marriage in the presence of Mr. Darcy. Austen writes that:

"Mrs. Bennet spoke of the next marriage with a complacency which she did not endeavour to conceal... She spoke aloud, and Mr. Darcy listened with a disdainful composure... Mrs. Bennet saw that he was listening, but she only scolded Elizabeth for being so foolish as to mind him" (Austen, 1813, p. 279).

In this passage, rather than moderating her behavior to conform to aristocratic expectations, Mrs. Bennet continues speaking openly about marriage and its advantages without recognizing Darcy's disapproval as socially significant. Bourdieu explains in *The Logic of Practice* (1990) that when habitus encounters a social field different from the one in which it was formed, it may experience a mismatch between acquired dispositions and the expectations of that field. Mrs. Bennet's directness reflects dispositions developed within a social environment where practical discussions of marriage and financial security are considered natural. By contrast, Darcy belongs to a social field in which economic interests are expected to remain implicit beneath displays of refinement and restraint. Mrs. Bennet's inability to recognize this difference demonstrates that her habitus has become psychologically ingrained, shaping her perception of social situations without conscious reflection. Her response therefore reveals not simply a lack of etiquette but the persistence of dispositions produced through earlier social conditions.

The same psychological disposition also shapes Mrs. Bennet's emotional judgment following Lydia's elopement. After learning that Lydia and Wickham will marry, Austen notes,

"No sentiment of shame gave a damp to her triumph. 'This is delightful indeed!' she cried. 'She will be married! She will be married at sixteen!'... To hear of her daughter's happiness, and to feel that she had no longer any fear of her dying an old maid, was enough" (Austen, 1813, p. 307).

"She was more alive to the disgrace which her want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter's nuptials, than to any sense of shame at her eloping and living with Wickham a

fortnight before they took place" (Austen, 1813, p. 401).

These passages reveal that Mrs. Bennet does not evaluate the event primarily as a moral scandal but according to whether Lydia's marriage restores social legitimacy and economic security. Bourdieu's statement in *Distinction* (1979), "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" helps explain this response. Mrs. Bennet's priorities reveal the dispositions through which she understands the social world. Her immediate relief upon hearing of the marriage, together with her greater concern for the appearance of the wedding than for the elopement itself, indicates that her emotional responses have been organized around the preservation of class position rather than moral judgment. The legal recognition of the marriage removes the threat of social and economic vulnerability, allowing relief to replace shame despite the circumstances surrounding the union.

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety has become more than a persistent emotional state. Through habitus, material insecurity develops into a stable psychological orientation that regulates perception, judgment, and emotional evaluation. She instinctively interprets social events according to their consequences for status and financial security because these priorities have been deeply internalized through her lived experience. Austen therefore presents Mrs. Bennet's consciousness not as an expression of innate personality but as the psychological product of historically specific social and economic conditions. This internalized disposition ultimately provides the basis for the behavioral expressions of class anxiety discussed in the following section.

Behavior Manifestations of Class Anxiety

Once class anxiety has become an internalized psychological disposition, it begins to shape Mrs. Bennet's everyday social practices. From a Bourdieusian perspective, practices are not random individual actions but the outward expressions of habitus developed through particular social conditions (Bourdieu, 1977). Consequently, Mrs. Bennet consistently evaluates people according to their capacity to improve or threaten her family's social and economic security. Rather than judging individuals primarily by their

personal qualities, she instinctively measures their value through the material opportunities they represent. This pattern demonstrates how the economic concerns discussed in the previous sections are translated into everyday social behavior. Austen illustrates this tendency through Mrs. Bennet's changing attitude toward Mr. Darcy. After Darcy refuses to dance with Elizabeth at the Meryton assembly, Mrs. Bennet immediately condemns him, declaring,

"He is the most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing. So high and so conceited that there was no enduring him!" (Austen, 1813, p. 14).

However, once Darcy becomes engaged to Elizabeth, her judgment changes dramatically:

"Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have!" (Austen, 1813, p. 321).

Mrs. Bennet's opinion shifts not because Darcy's character has changed but because his wealth and social position now directly benefit her family. The prospect of Elizabeth marrying one of the wealthiest gentlemen in England immediately transforms Darcy from an objectionable man into a desirable son-in-law. This contrast suggests that Mrs. Bennet's evaluation of others is primarily shaped by their economic significance rather than by their moral qualities. Her judgment therefore reflects the influence of class anxiety, in which material security becomes the dominant criterion through which social relationships are understood. As Marx (1977) argues, consciousness is shaped by social existence rather than existing independently of material conditions. Mrs. Bennet's changing perception of Darcy reflects this process: her understanding of his worth is determined by the material possibilities he represents for the Bennet family. Rather than revealing personal inconsistency alone, her reaction demonstrates how economic insecurity shapes everyday social judgment. The same pattern appears in Mrs. Bennet's treatment of Mr. Bingley during his first visit to Longbourn,

"He was received by Mrs. Bennet with a degree of civility which made her two daughters ashamed, especially when contrasted with the cold and ceremonious politeness of her curtsy and address to his friend" (Austen, 1813, p. 45).

The contrast in Mrs. Bennet's treatment of the two gentlemen reflects the different

opportunities she associates with each of them. As a wealthy bachelor who shows interest in Jane, Bingley represents the possibility of financial security and social stability for her family, leading Mrs. Bennet to treat him with exceptional warmth. Darcy, by contrast, is initially perceived as offering no such advantage and therefore receives only formal politeness. Her behavior indicates that social interaction has become closely connected to economic calculation, as individuals are valued according to their perceived contribution to the family's future. From Bourdieu's perspective, such practices are generated by habitus rather than conscious calculation (Bourdieu, 1977). Mrs. Bennet's preferential treatment of Bingley is therefore not simply a deliberate strategy but a practical expression of dispositions formed through long-term exposure to material insecurity. Her behavior illustrates how habitus translates psychological concerns into routine social practices that appear natural to the individual.

Another significant behavioral expression of Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety is her persistent effort to arrange advantageous marriages for her daughters. Her constant involvement in courtship therefore represents a practical strategy to protect the Bennet family from the possibility of downward social mobility. This behavior is particularly evident when Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins's proposal;

"She talked to Elizabeth again and again; coaxed and threatened her by turns. She endeavoured to secure Jane in her interest" (Austen, 1813, p. 108).

This scene demonstrates that Mrs. Bennet refuses to treat Elizabeth's marriage as a private decision. Instead, she repeatedly attempts to influence, persuade, and even emotionally pressure her daughter because she views the proposal primarily in terms of its economic consequences. Although Mr. Collins is neither intelligent nor personally attractive, he is the heir to Longbourn, making the marriage a practical solution to the family's uncertain future. From a Marxist perspective, this behavior illustrates how material conditions shape everyday social practice. Since habitus generates practices that correspond to an individual's lived conditions (Bourdieu, 1977), her repeated attempts to direct her daughters' marriages are not the result of deliberate calculation alone but the practical expression of

dispositions that have been formed through prolonged economic insecurity. Mrs. Bennet's persistent involvement in her daughters' marriages demonstrates that class anxiety is expressed not only through fearful thoughts but also through strategic social action.

A further behavioral expression of Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety is her excessive emotional expression in everyday social interactions. Throughout the novel, Austen portrays Mrs. Bennet as speaking impulsively, reacting intensely to uncertain situations, and expressing her concerns without restraint,

"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" (Austen, 1813, p. 4).

Austen's description presents Mrs. Bennet as someone whose emotional responses are closely connected to the changing circumstances surrounding her family. Her frequent references to nervousness, together with her continual preoccupation with marriage and social news, suggest that anxiety has become embedded in her daily patterns of communication. Rather than remaining a private emotional experience, it is repeatedly expressed through conversation and emotional reactions that dominate her interactions with others. This behavioral pattern becomes particularly visible during formal social occasions. When Mr. Bingley visits Longbourn,

"He was received by Mrs. Bennet with a degree of civility which made her two daughters ashamed, especially when contrasted with the cold and ceremonious politeness of her curtsy and address to his friend" (Austen, 1813, p. 45).

Similarly, Darcy later explains to Elizabeth that,

"The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself..." (Austen, 1813, p. 204).

These observations indicate that Mrs. Bennet frequently fails to regulate her speech and emotional expression according to the expectations of polite society. Her daughters' embarrassment and Darcy's criticism arise because her reactions are perceived as excessive and lacking social restraint. As Khan et al. (2024) notes that

behavior is shaped less by rational deliberation than by individuals' impulses and vulnerabilities. From a Bourdieusian perspective, such behavior reflects the operation of habitus in everyday practice. Individuals act according to dispositions that have become natural through repeated experience rather than through constant conscious calculation (Bourdieu, 1977). Mrs. Bennet's emotional expressiveness therefore represents not simply poor manners but the practical expression of dispositions formed under conditions of prolonged economic insecurity.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how material conditions shape Mrs. Bennet's class anxiety in *Pride and Prejudice*. The findings indicate that Mrs. Bennet's behavior is not merely a reflection of individual temperament, but a response to the economic insecurity produced by rigid class hierarchy, patriarchal inheritance, and women's dependence on marriage for social survival. Specifically, the entail system, limited property rights, and social expectations surrounding marriage intensify her fear of downward mobility and reinforce her obsessive concern with her daughters' futures. These structural pressures are internalized in Mrs. Bennet's consciousness, appearing as nervousness, emotional excess, and strategic social behavior. Consequently, her anxiety emerges as both a psychological response and a social product of unequal class relations.

This study combines Marxist literary criticism with Bourdieu's concept of habitus to show how external structures are reflected in internal dispositions and everyday conduct. Mrs. Bennet's characterization therefore reveals that psychological distress in the novel is inseparable from the material conditions that shape women's lives. Where previous studies on the novel have largely described class and gender inequality as external social realities affecting women in general, this study's contribution is to show class anxiety specifically as an internalized psychological consequence of those material conditions in a single character — the point at which structure stops being merely a backdrop and becomes a lived, embodied disposition. Future studies may

extend this analysis by comparing Mrs. Bennet with other Austen characters or by applying additional frameworks such as feminist criticism or psychoanalysis to further explore the relationship between social structure and psychological experience.

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