

Why Aren't Things Better Than This?
Class Relations Within the Top 1 Percent
In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Daniel Shaviro, NYU Law School

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Jane Austen??

First of 18 studies (7 done so far) for a book in progress re. literature & high-end inequality.

3 studies per section, 6 sections, England & France in the Age of Revolutions -> modern U.S. (or world).

Mainly great novels (but also Ayn Rand). Films/plays: *The Wolf of Wall Street*, plus possibly *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Death of a Salesman*.

Current working title: *The Road to Ayn Randism: Literary Perspectives on the Rise, Fall, and Rise of High-End Inequality*.

This embodies the main “pitch” but may need further tinkering (this is an empirical question).

Why this project, part 1

Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*, discusses Balzac & Austen, but leaves conceptual money on the table.

Bankman & Shaviro (2014) has fun with this.

I then gradually became persuaded that a project about literature & high-end inequality might prove to be fun, both for me & for readers.

Two huge challenges: figuring out how to write particular chapters, & developing an overall narrative trajectory.

The “Hegel problem” (grasping the parts vs. the whole).

Why this project, part 2

Personal / family / upbringing backstory. But also some basic choices / tradeoffs / synergies in our biz:

- Writing for yourself / writing for others,
- Covering familiar ground / trying new things,
- Staying fresh & interested over an (ahem) long trajectory,
- Due self-confidence / due self-criticism.

From why to how

No “hard social science” method for picking texts – the rule is that they have to interest me in a way that relates to the theme.

It became clear that each chapter needed a distinct through-line.

This can be frustrating & hard – music vs. syllogisms; quilting.

Importance of status issues, & of relations *within* the top 1% or 10%.

Also: meritocracy; old wealth vs. new wealth; business vs. intellectual elites; 2 Gilded Ages sandwiched around a Great Easing?

“Ayn Randism”: beyond the mere meritocratic celebration of success to toxic grandiosity; she’s more a symbol of this than its cause.

Reading *Pride and Prejudice*

Need to peel away the varnish first!

“Downton Abbey problem”: it’s not quaint or swoonily nostalgic. Film /TV versions = “dumping a pint of corn syrup onto a platter of crisp crackers & medium-sharp cheese.”

“Over-Darcification problem”: Darcy keeps his shirt on, isn’t Heathcliff, much less Christian Grey. And the true prize isn’t winning him – it’s Elizabeth’s comprehensive social triumph.

A story about tense dignitary conflict between the great & the not quite so great, in which the “mere stateliness of money & rank” loses out to the claims of personal merit.

3 competing ranking metrics

(1) Birth/family vs. (2) wealth vs. (3) personal merit.

We can see that wealth is a potential disruptor. It matters more than anyone is willing to admit (as per hypocrisy in the marriage market).

And the point isn't that one should ignore it – or that anyone really does or could in this highly competitive & personally entrepreneurial society.

Mrs. Bennet brings to mind “Kinsley gaffes,” which occur when one “tells ... some obvious truth he isn't supposed to say.”

But in *Pride & Prejudice* birth vs. wealth is the dispute that isn't, as they're always closely aligned.

Elizabeth Bennet

Unique among Austen heroines. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, a full-blown realistic character (distinctive personal style, shown warts & all) who's also the resolute sole champion of an embattled cause.

We find it “perfectly natural” that, when battling Lady Catherine, she speaks with “an authority & phrasing truly worthy of Dr. Johnson.”

Against money & rank, she stands up “not for egalitarianism ... but for the meritocratic reign of intelligence, character, verbal grace, authenticity, and wit.”

The book's fairytale aspect – also unique in Austen – might be (& has been) given either a radical or a conservative spin.

Austen's not saying!

The upshot

Lady Catherine is exposed & discomfited; Darcy is “properly humbled” & must “obtain ... forgiveness.”

It's good for the established order (& very English, a la “gentleman” concept) that it can accept inputs of invigorating fresh blood.

But if the intelligent, tasteful, & well-mannered are to be celebrated, are those lacking these graces to be despised & mocked?

Consider Mr. Bennet's attitudes - & those of the unsparing narrator.

Left for the future are a personal merit standard's possible implications for those whom it leaves behind.

Other chapters I've written so far

3. A Rising Tide Rocks All Boats: The Threat of Rising Prosperity in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*

4. The Arriviste as Morally Compromised Cat's Paw: Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* and *La Maison Nucingen*

PART 2: ENGLAND FROM THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY THROUGH THE START OF WORLD WAR I

5. Art, Heart, and "Schmart" in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

6. Not To Blame? Plutocrats, Capitalism, and Foreigners in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*

7. Unconnected: Rentier Intellectuals in E.M. Forster's *Howards End*

PART 3: AMERICA: POST-CIVIL WAR THROUGH WORLD WAR I

8. Anti-Success Manual? Mark Twain's & Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age*.

Up next: (9) Dreiser, *The Financier* / *The Titan*; (10) Wharton, *The House of Mirth*.

Then: PART 4: BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

Probably (11) Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*; (12) Wodehouse, *Thank You, Jeeves* / *Right Ho, Jeeves* / *Code of the Woosters*; (13) Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*.