

Marriage and Social Status Complication in Jane Austen's *Emma* Compared to Millennials' Perspectives

Putu Desi Anggerina Hikmaharyanti¹, I Gusti Agung Sri Rwa Jayantini²

^{1,2}Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar

e-mail: ¹putudesi812@unmas.ac.id

Abstracts: Marriage and social status always are intertwined in human life. Both are reflected on Jane Austen's setting of the novel *Emma* when Victorian era had strong belief on marriage with the same social class which was dominantly shown in upper class people. The problem found in the novel is how social status influences people to decide with whom they will marry. In line with that situation, millennial generation (born in 1981-1996) also has nearly similar point of views related to marriage and social status in their life discussed in this study. By analyzing the data qualitatively, this study raised the specific conditions about marriage and social status experienced by the novel characters and millennial generations based on a research survey. Three couples in the novel experienced their marriage stunted by different social class between lower and upper class. Meanwhile, after conducting a survey to the millennial correspondents, most of them agreed that marriage is important and 33.3 % correspondents have no concern to social status. About 58.3% correspondents thought that marrying someone with the same social status is happier. Moreover, 66.7% voted that social status influences someone to decide with whom they will marry.

Keywords: *marriage, social status, complication, millennial*

INTRODUCTION

Literature gives pleasure. It has a certain magic that transports us from the real world to a seemingly more remote and enjoyable place. People can experience this quality without thinking about it. However, literature also poses intellectual challenges that do demand thought. For most readers, grappling with these challenges enhances the pleasure of literature. By studying literature, people see more of it to appreciate. And people often learn that, far from being remote from life, good literature pleases by reflecting and giving order to life and by redefining their own place in the real world.

Definitions of the word literature tend to be circular. It is the statement of Klarer (2004) stated literature is referred to as the entirety of written expression, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. Moreover, Marcus and Sollor (2009) emphasized that literary means not only what is written but what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form. Literature introduces people to new worlds of experience. People learn about books and literature; they enjoy the comedies and the tragedies of poems, stories, and plays; and people may even grow and evolve through the literary journey with books. Based on the statement, literary genres can be divided into prose (short story and novel), drama or play and poetry. Prose, in this case novel is a medium used by people to entertain and to share ideas or experiences in life. Among the forms of imaginative literature in languages, the novel has long been the favorite of both writers and readers. For more than two hundred years, only the lyric poem has rivaled the novel in attracting outstanding practitioners. The novel also has far outdistanced the popularity of other literary forms.

Some authors try to make their novel emotional. Their novels are awash in sentiment; they want people to feel deeply and sometimes to do something about the situations that evoke the feelings, as in the case of reform fiction such as *Emma's* Jane Austen. Marriage and social status in *Emma's* Jane Austen is very interesting to discuss. It is a fabulous novel written by Jane Austen. In the very first sentence she introduces the title character as "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich." Emma, however, is also rather spoiled; she greatly overestimates her own matchmaking abilities; and she is blind to the dangers of meddling in other people's lives and is often mistaken about the meanings of others' actions. She also notices her matchmaking through social status. Besides the character, this study also emphasized how marriage decisions have interference with social status in the Victorian era.

Along with marriage and social status compilation discussed in this study, millennial perspectives are chosen as the secondary data to support as well as compare the marriage and social status situation between Victorian and Millennial era. According to McDonnell (2018), marriage was at the center of everyday lives for the Victorians and its influence extended to all corners of life and was the basis on which Victorian society was established. Meanwhile, millennials across the board seem to have a desire to break the divorce-riddled history of many of their families of origin and marry only once, maintaining a healthy marriage for life (Perron, 2020). From both statements, it seems that Victorian and Millennial people have the same concept of marriage. Here, marriage is the essential factor of life continuity, for Victorian people, marriage is the core of their daily activity because they think that living dependably with spouse is necessary. In line with Victorian era, millennials also have agreed that marriage is important and try to build marriage life goals. Nevertheless, some studies proved that millennials tend to not married due to some reasons. Over one-third of those interviewed perceived career advancement to be more attainable as a single individual. Eighty-two percent thought marriage had no positive effect on social status. Only 37 percent believed that marriage enhanced financial security, and only 28 percent thought it led to a fulfilling sex life. When asked about pursuing happiness, 67 percent of millennials reportedly perceived marriage to not be a factor (Wang & Taylor, 2011). Also there are some studies investigated that nowadays a majority of millennials are not currently married, marking a significant change from past generations. Only 44% of millennials were married in 2019, compared with 53% of Gen Xers, 61% of Boomers and 81% of Silents at a comparable age (Barroso, et al, 2020). Moreover, millennials are far more likely to be living with a partner or to be single than their parents at their age, in other words, and their generation's shift away from marriage may be less a matter of choice and more the result of economic factors that have made the institution less approachable (Picchi, 2019). From these points of views, there is an evolution of marriage desire in millennials' perspective due to economic factors and they think marriage has no significant relation to their social status. Victorians were worried about their social standing by leveling their source of income. In the Victorian period, there are three classes: upper class, middle class, and lower class, and these classes are generally characterized by conduct, speech, dress, education, and ideals. Meanwhile, social status in the millennial period is essentially the same as it was in the Victorian era, with only minor differences in certain perspectives. Most sociologists follow Max Weber's definition of social class, which is defined as a big group of individuals who rank similarly in terms of money, power, and status. Millennials judge their social status depending on how many possessions they have, how influential someone is in society, and how respectable her/his achievements are.

This study investigated the marriage and social status perspective in Victorian era reflected in Jane Austen's novel entitled *Emma* versus Millennials' perspectives collected by the survey distribution. Victorian marriage and social status are represented by three couples in the novel characters such as marriage of Mr. Weston and Miss Churchill, marriage of Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor, and marriage of Harriet and Martin. Meanwhile, the Millennials' marriage and social status perspectives are shared by 12 people born in 1981-1996.

METHOD

The data studied textually here were collected and selected from the novel as the source of data. It was commenced from reading a novel, doing research in the library and browsing in the internet, reviewing the relevant studies to govern the conceptual models, and then using the conceptual models to find the data in the novel. In this study, the data could be collected and selected according to the need of the study later to be analyzed as supporting evidence, but they were not corrupted in order to suit the purpose. The primary data were all the words, phrase, clauses, and further discourse that contain marriage and social status complication in the novel entitled *Emma* by Jane Austen and published by Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England. Meanwhile, the secondary data were the survey result distributed via Google form to engage the millennial perspectives towards marriage and social status. After all data collected, they were analyzed by elaborating descriptively how social status plays important role in both Victorian and Millennial era specifically for the people's decision of marrying someone.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Emma revolves around a series of marriages, both recent and anticipated, and in each case, the match reinforces the participant's social standing. In Austen's day, one's social position was defined by a mix of family history, reputation, and wealth—marriage was one of the primary methods to enhance one's social rank. This form of social progression was especially important for women, who were denied the opportunity to enhance their status via hard labor or personal success.

However, the story indicates that marrying too much above one's station causes trouble. Mr. Weston's first marriage to Miss Churchill was theoretically a smart decision for him because she came from a wealthy and well-connected family (Mr. Weston is a craftsman), but the relationship's disparity created misery for both. Just before the story begins, he marries Mrs. Weston, and this second marriage is better since their socioeconomic positions are more equal—Mrs. Weston is a governess, and therefore extremely fortunate to be freed from her need to work by her marriage. The other characters dismiss Emma's attempt to pair Harriet with Mr. Elton as improper. Because Harriet's parents are unknown, Emma feels she may be of noble blood and pushes her to reject what turns out to be a more suitable marriage with Robert Martin. When Emma learns that Harriet is the daughter of a tradesman, she acknowledges that Mr. Martin is a better match for her friend.

Other characters suffer as a result of the marriage-social-status connection. Frank Churchill must keep his engagement to orphan Jane Fairfax a secret for fear of his rich aunt's disapproval. Jane is compelled to contemplate becoming a governess in the lack of a suitable match. Miss Bates, who is single, faces increasing hardship since she lacks a spouse to care for her and her mother. Finally, the match between Emma and Mr. Knightley is seen favorably not just because they are temperamentally compatible, but also because they are socially compatible.

Marriage of Mr. Weston and Miss Churchill

Mr. Weston is a native of Highbury. He marries Miss Churchill who comes from a wealthy and well-connected family. Miss Churchill has a higher class than Mr. Weston. Miss Churchill falls in love with Mr. Weston, so she accepts Mr. Weston's proposal.

“Captain Weston was a general favorite; and when the chances of his military life had introduced him to Miss Churchill, of a great Yorkshire family, and Miss Churchill fell in love with him,” (Emma: 46)

Unfortunately, the inequality of the relationship causes hardship for both Mr. Weston and Miss Churchill. The marriage was overshadowed by the disapproval of Mrs. Weston's brother and sister-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Churchill. When Mrs. Weston dies after three years of marriage, Mr. Weston leaves impoverished by the expectations of his first wife, spends the next twenty years of his life rebuilding his fortune. He eventually purchases Randalls, the small estate where he lives with the second Mrs. Weston.

“Captain Weston, who had been considered, especially by the Churchills, as making such an amazing match, was proved to have much the worst of the bargain; for when his wife died after a three years' marriage, he was rather a poorer man than at first, and with a child to maintain.” (Emma: 47)

Marriage of Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor

Mr. Weston quits from the militia and engages in trade. He still has a small house in Highbury, where most of his leisure days are spent; and between useful occupation and the pleasures of society. Then, he marries in the second time with Miss Taylor. This second marriage is happier because their social statuses are more equal. Miss Taylor is a governess, and thus very fortunate to be rescued from her need to work by her marriage.

“He had never been an unhappy man; his own temper had secured him from that, even in his first marriage; but his second must show him how delightful a well-judging and truly amiable woman could be,” (Emma: 47).

Marriage of Harriet and Martin

At first, Harriet's parentage is unknown. When she is still a baby, she is found by Mrs. Goddard at school. But finally, her parentage becomes known. She proves to be the daughter of rich enough tradesman. While, Martin is a farmer who works on Mr. Knightley's farm. Harriet falls in love with Martin, but she refuses Martin's proposal to marry with him because of Emma's suggestion. However, finally Harriet gets married with Martin happily.

“Before the end of September, Emma attended Harriet to church, and saw her hand bestowed on Robert Martin with so complete satisfaction. . . .” (Emma: 463).

Marriage and Social Status on Millennials' Perspectives

In modern era, marriage and social status seem neglected by modern people unlike in Victorian era which marriage and social status determine people's dignity and destiny. Open minded concept in modern era, in fact, contrasts with the survey result on this study. The survey was distributed via Google form and the correspondents just answered yes or no for 6 questions asked. The first question is whether marriage important for them and 100% said yes. Next is about whether they care of social status, 66.7% correspondents responded no. Whether they are happy of marrying same social status person and 58.3% correspondents answered yes. The last question is whether social status still influences the way people decide with whom they will marry, 66.7% people answered yes.

From those viewpoints, marriage and social status still become human life consideration even though now people live in liberal era where no boundaries to choose someone you live with. The survey proved that people still consider social status as the parameter of marriage life achievement and the shadow of Victorian era traits become the motivation of social status becoming the marriage qualification.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In summary, marriage and social status complication in Jane Austen's *Emma* are experienced by three couples who love each other but they were challenged by the big gap of social status, upper class and lower class. The first couple is Mr. Weston who married Miss Churchill, a wealthy young lady and well-connected family. Miss Churchill is richer than Mr. Weston. Their marriage is not accepted by Mrs. Weston's brother and sister-in-law because they are different in social status. The second couple is Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor. It is the second time marriage of Mr. Weston. This second marriage is happier because their social statuses are more equal. The third couple is Harriet and Martin. At the first, Harriet refused Martin's proposal because she proved to be the daughter of rich enough tradesman, while, Martin is a farmer who works on Mr. Knightley's farm. But finally they got married and lived happily. Through these couples story, it is clear that social status influenced Victorian people's marriage especially when they decided with whom they would marry, whether they are from noble family or not. From the story, it is also concluded that those people who are not lucky enough with their social status feeling insecure because they cannot marry someone they love. Furthermore, the survey result showed that most of correspondents agreed that marriage is important and 33.3 % correspondents have no concern to social status. About 58.3% correspondents thought that marrying someone with the same social status is happier, nearly the same as Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor who also experienced happy marriage because their status are equal. Moreover, 66.7% voted that social status influences someone to decide with whom they will marry.

REFERENCES

- Austen, Jane. (1966). *Emma*. England: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Barroso, Amanda, et al. (2020). *As Millennials Near 40, They're Approaching Family Life Differently Than Previous Generations*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020>.
- Marcus, Greil and Sollors, Werner (eds.). (2009). *A New Literary History of America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McDonnell, Cheryl Ann. (2018). *Marriage in Victorian England*. (Theses Project, Bridgewater State University). Retrieved from https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1420&context=honors_proj.
- Klarer, M. (2004). *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Perron, Jacqueline. (2020). The Perspectives of Men Ages 24 to 40 on Marriage: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Advanced Generalist Social Work Practice*. Retrieved from https://springfield.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/SC_Graduate_Social_Work_Journal_2020_Article6.pdf.
- Picchi, Aimee. (2019). *How marriage became a status symbol for millennials*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-marriage-became-a-status-symbol-for-millennials/>.
- Wang, W., & Taylor, P. (2011). *For Millennials, Parenthood Trumps Marriage*. Pew Research Center, Social & Demographic Trends.