

Beyond Pemberley: The Unseen Labor Enabling the “Polite” World

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Abstract

This paper argues that the polished, genteel world of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is sustained by the invisible labour of servants. Through close textual analysis and historical contextualisation, the essay examines how figures like Mrs. Hill and anonymous domestics enable the leisure and refinement of the landed gentry. Drawing on Marxist theories of value and alienation, postcolonial perspectives on domestic governance, and insights from servant studies, the analysis reveals that the ideology of “politeness” operates by naturalising exploitation as paternalistic care, thereby obscuring the economic dependency that maintains elite life. The novel’s romantic plot follows a social pattern that silences the labouring classes, reducing servants to functional instruments and relegating them to the narrative margins. Ultimately, the paper contends that Austen’s realism lies not in challenging class hierarchy but in meticulously documenting how it works. By uncovering the material foundations, this study deepens our appreciation of Austen’s complexity, revealing that the “magic” of her romance carries the sober cost of invisibility.

Keywords

Pride and Prejudice; Class; Labor; Jane Austen

1. Introduction

The shimmer of candlelight, the swirl of gowns, the harmonious strains of music, and the intricate dance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy render the ballroom at Netherfield a spectacle of refined elegance, just as the majestic view of Pemberley embodies cultivated natural beauty and ordered grandeur. In these iconic scenes of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrative focus rests firmly on the wit, manners, and emotional journeys of the protagonists, presenting a world that appears self-contained. But this glittering facade of politeness and leisure raises a question: upon whose labour is this entire world built? Who lit the candles that illuminated the Netherfield ball, prepared the feast and cleared its remnants, sculpted Pemberley’s landscape into a testament of taste, or drove the carriages that enabled the novel’s pivotal “accidental” encounters? This essay contends that

Austen reveals a world of indispensable but effaced labour, in which the gentry's politeness and their leisure for conversation, self-improvement, and courtship are exposed as luxury commodities produced by the unseen work of a servant class. Employing a framework that combines Marxist analysis of value and class structure with insights from domestic history and servant studies, this paper excavates the novel's silent margins to demonstrate how the narrative's focus on the central romance both depends upon and naturalises the systematic invisibility of the labour that enables it, challenging the reader to see beyond the drawing-room to the kitchen, the stable, and the tenant farm, and to understand the true cost of a world built on decorum.

2. The Necessary Silence

While the narrative gaze of *Pride and Prejudice* remains firmly fixed on the emotional and social machinations of the gentry, the world it depicts would grind to a halt without the silent, efficient operation of a servant class.

The most prominent named servant in the novel is the Bennets' housekeeper, Mrs. Hill. Her significance lies in her paradoxical visibility. She is integral to the family's functioning but was deprived of the possibility of revealing her inner world, and also lacked individuality and subjectivity. When Mr. Gardiner sent a letter to Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Hill finds Jane and Elizabeth and takes on the responsibility to convey message. Here, she is a channel of critical information, her presence instrumentalized for the family's needs. Most tellingly, upon hearing of Lydia's engagement, Mrs. Bennet immediately recovered from her hysterical state. Eager to "put on things in a moment" and go find Mr. Bennet, the first thing she did was said "Ring the bell, Kitty, for Hill". (394) This relationship encapsulates that the gentry's emotional and physical well-being is predicated on the labor of servants, even as that labor is rendered invisible in the social sphere. Mrs. Hill has a name and a real role, but she has no voice. She manages the household's crises but still remains a spectral figure in its social narrative.

Far more common than named servants are the anonymous, functional appearances. Austen consistently deploys servants as grammatical subjects defined by their tasks, such as "a servant" opens the door at Netherfield; "the coachman" is ordered to fetch the carriage; "a messenger" brings the letters that irrevocably alter the plot, most notably Darcy's explanatory letter and Mr. Gardiner's letter. This linguistic pattern is deeply ideological. These individuals are not characters but "human instruments", narrative cogs whose only purpose is to facilitate the movement and communication of the principal actors. Their existence is reduced to a verb, they "open"; they "fetch"; they "deliver". This narrative strategy mirrors the social reality that they are "functional class", essential for the plot's progression but denied personality. Their anonymity underscores their interchangeability and any servant could perform the same tasks. This effacement allows the reader to remain absorbed in the

psychological drama of the main characters without being troubled by the plight and suffering of the servants.

The grandeur of Pemberley, Mr. Darcy's estate, serves as the novel's most potent environmental testament to unseen labor. Elizabeth's visit is a turning point, and her awe is meticulously documented. She admires the "natural beauty" of the woods, the "size and style" of the house, and the "good taste" of its furnishings. Crucially, her admiration for the estate's aesthetic and order is unknowingly an admiration for the managed labor that produces it. The pristine landscapes were not created by nature alone but by the unseen toil of gardeners and groundskeepers; the impeccable interior is maintained by a small army of housemaids, butlers, and housekeepers; the very wealth that allows for such display is generated by the rent-paying labor of tenant farmers on Darcy's vast estates. Elizabeth's thought, "She felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might to be something!", is not merely a romantic fantasy but an economic one. (316) She intuitively recognizes that Pemberley represents a world of managed capital and labor, a system so perfectly ordered that it renders the labor itself, and its potential for exploitation, invisible, leaving only the pleasing effect of "good taste."

In conclusion, through the paradoxical visibility of Mrs. Hill, the functional anonymity of door-openers and messengers, and the silent testimony of Pemberley's grandeur, Austen constructs a world that is utterly dependent on a class of people it strives to keep in the narrative shadows. This systematic effacement is not an oversight but a narrative replication of a social fact that the politeness of the gentry requires the invisible subordination of the laboring body.

3. The Economics of Politeness

Of all the carefully maintained fictions in Austen's world, the most elegant was that good manners simply materialized. The polished conversation, the impromptu ball, the leisurely walk to Meryton, each gesture of gentility was in truth a product of calculation, purchase, and unseen hands. This chapter follows the money, and the labour it bought, to the economic bedrock of politeness itself.

The Bennet family's estimated £2000 per annum, derived from the Longbourn estate, places them on the lower rungs of the landed gentry, a position of respectability fraught with anxiety. As scholars have established, a substantial portion of a genteel family's income was necessarily devoted to maintaining a household staff; the employment of servants was a non-negotiable expense for families like the Bennets, fundamental to the performance of their social status. (Davidoff and Hall, 12) Supporting seven women in expectations of gentility, requiring appropriate clothing, food, and leisure, on the remaining was a tight balancing act. This budget suggests Mrs. Bennet's panic that the entailment threatens not just their home but their entire economic model. Textual evidence suggests there is a staff of four or five to maintain the family: Mrs. Hill is specifically named as the housekeeper; the presence of a cook

is implied by the meals served; at least two housemaids would be necessary to maintain Longbourn; and a man-servant, whether a footman or a gardener, is required for outdoor duties such as driving the carriage. Their labor in cooking, cleaning, brewing, baking, and preserving transformed raw income into a genteel lifestyle. Without them, the Bennet daughters would be consumed by domestic drudgery, rendering them incapable of the “accomplishments” that made them marriageable on the market. Thus, their claim to “politeness” was directly purchased through the waged labor of others.

In stark contrast, Mr. Darcy’s £10,000 per annum signifies not just wealth but immense economic and managerial power. This income did not magically appear, it was the product of a vast, interconnected economic system. As a major landowner, Darcy’s wealth primarily flowed from rents paid by tenant farmers working his land. He was, in essence, the CEO of a sprawling corporation comprised of agricultural production, resource extraction, and financial investments. Mrs. Reynolds calls him “the best landlord, and the best master”. (321) This declaration, though ostensibly benevolent, perfectly encapsulates the paternalistic ideology of the landlord class, framing economic dependency as a form of benevolent, communal leadership. This “care” was a double-edged sword while it could mean investment in better tools or housing, it often also involved enforcing efficient, and sometimes ruthless, agricultural practices to maximize rental yield. Every aspect of Pemberley’s grandeur, from the palatial house to the art on its walls, was funded by the surplus value extracted from the labor of his tenants and workers. Elizabeth’s admiration for his “liberality” is actually an admiration for his successful management of this extractive system.

According to the household manual of the Victorian era, a family with an annual income of over 1000 pounds can afford four female servants, plus a coachman and a stable boy, which can support one or two horses and a carriage, so they no longer need to on public transportation when going out; a family with an annual income of over 5000 pounds can afford 11 female servants and 13 male servants: housekeeper, cook, lady’s maid, nursemaid, two housemaids, laundry-maid, stillroom-maid, nurserymaid, kitchen-maid, stullion, butler, valet, house steward, two grooms, an assistant groom, two footmen, three gardeners, a laborer.(Mitchell, 32-33) In short, the more family income, the more servants can be employed, and the more detailed the classification of the servants’ functions. And the story background of *Pride and Prejudice* took place a few before the Victorian period, the situation would not be much different.

According to the above content and the details in the book, a modest establishment like Longbourn would require 3-5 live-in servants to function. Netherfield, being a large hunting lodge rented by a man of new money like Bingley (£4,000-£5,000 per annum), might employ 15-25 servants. Pemberley, however, was a different world. A great house of its implied size and wealth would easily support a staff of at least 50

servants.

Their lives were ones of relentless toil, with 12-18 working hours a day being common, and they existed in a state of total visibility to their employers and invisibility to the historical record. The servant's wages are a mixture of board and cash. According to the statistical data of 1861, the cash annual income of servants in around London is approximately as follows: steward, 40-80 pounds; valet, 25-50 pounds; butler, 25-50 pounds; cook, 20-40 pounds; gardener, 20-40 pounds; footman, 20-40 pounds; groom, 15-30 pounds; assistant groom, 6-12 pounds, etc.; housekeeper, 20-4 pounds; lady's maid, 12-25 pounds; housemaid, 9-14 pounds; kitchen-maid, 9-14; scullery-maid, 5-9 pounds.(Mitchell, 55) It is a pittance compared to the value they generated. They slept in cramped attics or basements, their privacy and autonomy sacrificed to maintain the seamless comfort of the family upstairs.

The workforce was rigidly segmented by gender, mirroring and reinforcing the patriarchal hierarchy of the larger society. Female labor was fixed "inside" the house: cooking, cleaning, sewing, child-rearing, and nursing. This "reproductive labor" was essential yet devalued, seen as a natural extension of female duty rather than skilled work. Male labor operated primarily "outside": grooms managed the transportation of the estate, gardeners cultivated the symbolic landscape of power, and tenant farmers produced the raw capital. Men could hold positions of limited authority within the household hierarchy, such as butler or steward, overseeing both male and female staff. This gendered division was a microcosm of Regency society that women were confined to the private, "non-economic" sphere, while men controlled the public realms of agriculture, finance, and governance. The smooth operation of this divided system was fundamental to upholding the social order that the novel takes as its subject.

In conclusion, it reveals that the world of *Pride and Prejudice* was not a passive backdrop but a dynamic, economically determined system. The Bennets' anxieties and the Darcys' power are direct products of their specific positions within this system of land, rent, and labor. The "politeness" of the world in the book is a superstructure built upon a base of agricultural extraction and domestic servitude. Having established both the textual and historical evidence for this invisible economy, the argument now turns to the theoretical frameworks that best explain how and why this system was so effectively naturalized and narratively erased.

4. The Ideology of Politeness

The meticulous textual and historical evidence presented so far demands a theoretical framework capable of explaining not merely "that" this labor was effaced, but "how" and "why" such effacement was structurally necessary and ideologically sustained. This chapter argues that the "polite" society of *Pride and Prejudice* is not a natural given but a carefully constructed ideology.

The opposition between the administrative authorities that dominate social economy and production relations and the managed people constitutes the principal contradiction in capitalist society. The employment relationship between masters and servants, as a special type of labor-capital relationship in capitalist society, is established on the basis of private living spaces and this is precisely one of the sites where class antagonism becomes fragmented and scattered, as argued by Ernesto Laclau.⁽⁶³⁾ Edward Palmer Thompson pointed out in *The Making of the English Working Class* that class experience is mainly determined by production relations.⁽⁹⁾ The master-servant relationship is a miniature form of social class relationship existing within families; it is a class relationship characterized by both opposition, exclusion, and interdependence.

A Marxist analysis pierces the heart of the genteel illusion. The “leisure” enjoyed by the Bennet sisters and Mr. Darcy is not an innate right but the material embodiment of appropriated surplus value. Marx’s theory of alienation finds a perfect microcosm in the Regency country house. The labor of the servant, be it cooking a meal or tending a garden, is alienated; its product is immediately consumed by another class, which claims the benefits as its own. The time saved through this exploitation is then converted into the cultural capital of the elite. Elizabeth’s walks and reading, Darcy’s studied decorum, and the Bennet girls’ musical “accomplishments” are all luxuries purchased with the time of others.

Darcy’s much-admired “dignity” and “good taste” can be reinterpreted not as personal virtues but as the superstructural gleam of a great economic base. His ability to be liberal and generous and to be “the best master” is predicated on his command of vast material resources extracted from his estate. His personality is, in a Marxist reading, a product of his class position. His initial pride is the unreflective posture of one who has never had to question his right to consume the labor of others. Elizabeth’s rejection of his first proposal is, in this way, rejection of the economic arrogance that underpins his social pride. Their eventual union signals not just a meeting of minds but a harmonization of a more humane, less alienating management style with personal virtue.

While mindful of its metaphorical application, a postcolonial perspective offers a powerful perspective for understanding the power within the great estate. Pemberley can be productively analyzed as a “domestic colony”. “Domestic Colony” refers to the application of the logic, power structures, and methods of control characteristic of colonialism to a specific group and their land within a or region. It implies that the pattern of colonial rule is not only seen between England and India or Africa, but also within the manors of the England. Here, Darcy is the “colonial governor”, the steward his chief administrator, and the estate itself, land, resources, and people, are the territory to be managed, improved, and disciplined.

The famed beauty of Pemberley’s grounds is not wild nature but “improved” landscape, a physical manifestation of control over both the environment and the

laborers who shaped it. This mirrors the colonial project of ordering “savage” lands into productive, aesthetic European patterns. The servants and tenants are the “native” population, their lives and labor directed towards the enrichment and comfort of the metropolitan power (the landowning family). Their culture, desires, and autonomy are subordinated to the needs of the colonizer. Crucially, this system generates its own ideology. Darcy’s role as a “good master” is the paternalistic ideal of the benevolent colonizer, justifying his authority through a rhetoric of care and responsibility rather than brute exploitation. This framework explains why the labor is so invisible. It is for the colonizer to enjoy the fantasy of a perfectly ordered world, the violent or coercive work of ordering must be erased from view.

The “servant narrative” refers to the depiction of the servant class in literary works. Servant narratives research is a new field of study that emerged in the 20th century. Servants drive the story forward through language and physical behavior, shaping more profound and richer character images, and highlighting the reality of suppression and oppression. Servant narratives research has significant implications for the reading of individual texts the study of novel narratives, and the entire field of literary and cultural studies. (Liu, 2) Through the representation of servants’ lives, these descriptive texts exhibit a strong sense of class consciousness. Servants, as an underclass in the social structure, are the closest to the upper classes in terms of proximity and frequency of contact, while also showing the sharpest contrast with them. Images of servants thus frequently appear in many classic literary works, serving as foils and annotations to the celebrity protagonists. In the context of traditional discursive hierarchy, the servant class acts as an appendage to the upper classes, occupying a marginal position in literary works and being in a state of discursive silence. Nevertheless, servant characters often play an irreplaceable role in enriching the content of works, highlighting the main characters, intensifying plot conflicts, enhancing aesthetic value, emphasizing thematic ideas, and deepening critical consciousness.

The field of Servant Studies provides the most nuanced vocabulary for analyzing the human texture of this dependency, particularly the paradoxical position of servants like Mrs. Hill. They were “inside” the household in the most intimate ways. They knew its secrets, nursed its illnesses, and heard its private quarrels. But they were permanently “outside” its social sphere, denied the status of family or equal. They were physical insiders and social outsiders. The servant was both a mirror and a screen. As a mirror, they reflected the family’s status, a large, well-dressed staff signified wealth and power. As a screen, they absorbed the material realities of life, protecting the family from any taint of vulgar labor.

Can a servant speak? The answer is no. A servant is incapable of articulating their own thoughts and they can only be articulated by others. As Pierre Macherey posited: “what is important in the work is what it does not say” and that “this silence gives it its life”. (97)

The “politeness” that is the central subject of Austen’s novel is revealed to be the final, polished product of this intricate architecture. It is an ideology built on alienated labor, maintained through colonial-style management, and rationalized through paternalistic fiction. The novel’s narrative silence on labor is thus not an omission but an active participant in upholding this ideology, directing the reader’s gaze towards the refined outcomes of the system and away from the exploitative processes that created them.

5. Conclusion

This essay has shown that the elegant world of politeness and romance in *Pride and Prejudice* is fundamentally rooted in the invisible labor of servants and tenants. The Bennet sisters’ marriage pursuits, the leisurely gatherings at Netherfield, and Pemberley’s grandeur are not mere backdrops but products of exploited labor. Austen’s narrative, by consigning the working class to the margins replicates the social logic of the gentry’s world, directing focus to the protagonists’ emotional journeys while hiding the system’s exploitative core.

Austen’s stance is one of clear-eyed realism. She neither radicalizes against the class system nor indulges in its illusions, but meticulously documents how it operates. Even Elizabeth and Darcy’s celebrated union, a triumph over personal prejudice, leaves unchallenged the vertical class divide between gentry and laborers. This analysis does not diminish the novel’s brilliance but deepens appreciation of its complexity. The “magic” of Austen’s romance carries the sober cost of the laboring class’s systematic invisibility.

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