

Relationships among Characters in *Pride and Prejudice* from Social Exchange Theory Perspective

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Abstract: The social exchange theory provides a theoretical framework for the study of character relationships, helping us understand the exchange of interests, power dynamics, reciprocal relationships, and the development of behavior and relationships in interpersonal relationships. Through the application of the social exchange theory, we can explore more deeply the nature and meaning of character relationships, and the impact of these relationships on individuals and society. *Pride and Prejudice* is a classic novel by the British writer, Jane Austen. It tells mainly the love story between Elizabeth Bennett and Fitzwilliam Darcy. Character relationships are of great significance in literary works. They are not only the driving force of stories and carriers of emotional expression, but also demonstrate the diversity and complexity of society, culture and humanity. By delving into relationships among characters, we are able to better understand and explain the interactions between individuals, the emotional connections, and the motivations and meanings behind them. Therefore, the theoretical perspective of social exchange theory will be used to theoretically explain the relationship between characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, and propose relief methods and combing, in order to better understand the relationship between characters in the work.

1. Introduction

Social exchange theory is a theory in sociology that holds that people consider their own interests and costs when making exchanges, and compare interests to determine whether to exchange. At the same time, the exchange parties will also consider factors such as the degree of mutual trust and the frequency of exchange to establish a good exchange relationship. It explores the interrelationship between social status, wealth, and marriage. In this thesis, the social exchange theory is used to interpret characters' behavior and plot development in *Pride and Prejudice*. Social exchange theory helps us understand the behavior and plot development of characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, and provokes us to think about the concept and value of marriage in the contemporary society.

Jane Austen is a famous British novelist and is considered as one of the most important writers in the history of English literature and one of the important figures in world literature. Jane Austen's work depicts life and marriage in the middle-class society, and is known for her nuanced observations and humorous depictions. Her works are often presented from a female perspective, providing an in-depth analysis of the class system, marriage and family values of the society at that time. Jane Austen's works have been widely translated into many languages and have been adapted into films, TV series and other forms many times, which have a far-reaching impact. Her works of fiction became an important reference for literary creation during the Victorian era and later, and had a profound impact on the development of British society and culture.

2. Literature review

2.1. A review of the theory of social exchange

In the study of marital conflict from the perspective of social exchange theory, Guo Yuting held that according to the theory of social exchange, people are rational and the interaction between

people follows the principle of reciprocity (Guo, 2013). In most cases, people will always choose the one that pays the least price to obtain the maximum profit and the best result. The same is true of husband and wife relationships, most people always want to exchange the least investment for the maximum return, at least in exchange for the same return. If the more resources can be exchanged between husband and wife, the greater the remuneration will be, so its intrinsic attraction will be greater, and the relationship between husband and wife will be relatively stable. On the contrary, if one of the parties has fewer resources to exchange and the other party does not get the expected rewards, the mutual attraction between husband and wife will be reduced, and contradictions or even contradictions will be intensified between the husband and the wife. This will affect the relationship and marriage stability of husband and wife, and eventually leading to conflict and even marriage disintegration.[1]

In the analysis of the influencing factors of divorce from the perspective of social exchange theory, scholar Gou Xueling explained that divorce lies in the interaction between the intrinsic attractiveness of marriage, the alternative attraction of marriage and the cost of divorce, which is the result of the combined effect of internal and external factors (Gou, 2008). The relationship between mutual attraction between husband and wife and marriage substitute attraction is, in a sense, a trade-off relationship. And for the cost of divorce, it is related to the macro-social background of society, and it is difficult for us to influence. When the resources available for exchange between husband and wife are abundant and can meet each other's needs, then mutual attraction is strong, and the stability of marriage is stronger. Conversely, the likelihood of divorce increases.

2.2 A Review of austin's works

Peng Jin, in the article Looking at the Family Relations of Women in Jane Austen's Novels from the "Social Exchange Theory", takes the theory of social exchange as the guide to analyze Austen's three novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Mansfield Manor*. The aim is to reveal the nature of women's relations in their main works and enrich the artistic exploration of Austen's works. She uses the theory of social exchange to deeply analyze the exchange of women's family relationships in Austen's three novels, including the exchange of marriage relationship, the exchange of parent-child relationship, the exchange of sister relationship, the exchange of aunt and niece, the exchange of cousin relationship and the exchange of friendship, thereby enriching the profound interpretation of the work. The research significance of this paper is reflected in two aspects: social exchange theory can be appropriately applied to literary criticism, although it has its own advantages and disadvantages. By reading literary works in combination with social exchange theory, readers will think more rationally and intelligently about harmonious relationships, which is conducive to distilling experiences and lessons with practical significance. Successful relationship exchange requires correctly analyzing and positioning the needs of the other party, and balancing the "giving" and "return" in the exchange process while trying to meet the other party's social expectations (Peng, 2017).[2]

3. Theoretical Bases of the Theory of Social Exchange

3.1 Origin and Definition of the Social Exchange Theory

The theory of social exchange stems from the work of sociologist George Homans. Hummel proposed this theory in the 50s of the 20th century, arguing that social behavior is based on the exchange process of calculating the individual's interests and expected returns (Ahmad, et al., 2023). He argued that social behavior is based on the calculation of costs and benefits, and that people will choose behaviors in order to maximize benefits. Humel's theory of social exchange was developed on the basis of behaviorist psychology, which held that people's behavior was based on the relationship between stimulus and response. His theory emphasizes the interaction and interdependence between people, which is maintained through exchange.[3]

In social exchange theory, exchange is defined as one person giving something to another person with the expectation of being reciprocated. This exchange is based on the self-interest of both

parties, and the exchange succeeds when everyone gets what they want. Social exchange theory emphasizes people's interaction and cooperation in social interactions, and these interactions and cooperation are based on mutually beneficial exchange relationships.

The importance of the social exchange theory is reflected in the fact that it has a certain guiding role in the interpretation and prediction of social behavior. An understanding of social organization and social structure contributes to the identification and analysis of social problems. It has certain application value for marketing, employee management and other aspects of enterprises. It also has a certain reference role for the research and practice of social work and social policy. In short, social exchange theory is an important sociological theory, which provides a useful perspective for us to understand and analyze social behavior, and also provides certain reference and guidance for research and practice in related fields.[4]

3.2 Theoretical framework and core assumptions of the social exchange theory

Social exchange theory is a theory that explains how people interact and exchange in social relationships. Its core assumption is that human behavior consists of an economic principle of profit maximization (Saglam, et al., 2022). In social exchange theory, people engage in social interactions because they believe they will bring greater benefits and rewards, rather than for moral or emotional reasons.

The theoretical framework of social exchange theory includes the following elements:

Exchange: Social exchange theory holds that social interaction is an act of exchange. People exchange various resources in interaction, such as material resources, knowledge, emotions, time, and services. The exchange of these resources relies on interdependence and reciprocity.

Social norms: Social exchange theory holds that social interactions are subject to social norms and constraints. These norms include the principles of reciprocity, fairness, trust and commitment, among others. These norms facilitate the occurrence and maintenance of interactions, and can also be used to explain why interactions sometimes fail.

Profit maximization: Social exchange theory states that people's behavior in social interaction base itself on a principle of profit maximization. People try to maximize their own interests in exchange, while also taking into account the interests of others (Wang, 2016). If the exchange brings greater benefits, then people will be more inclined to participate in the exchange.

Exchange relations: Social exchange theory holds that exchange depends on interpersonal relationships. Exchange relationships are based on interdependence and reciprocity, and when people need each other's resources, they take steps to meet each other's needs, thus establishing and maintaining exchange relationships.

In conclusion, social exchange theory is a theory that explains human interaction and exchange behavior. Its core assumption is that human behavior is closely related with the principle of profit maximization, and that exchange is based on interdependence and reciprocity. This theoretical framework can be used to explain various social interactions, such as friendship, marriage, work, business, and political interactions.[5]

4. Love relationships in pride and prejudice from the social exchange theory

4.1 Relationships in Austin's Works

Known for her detailed and realistic character relationships, Jane Austen's work shows the complexities of the social circle and the marriage market by depicting interactions and emotional entanglements between characters.

Austen's novels usually revolve around the protagonist's love relationships. These relationships cover a variety of types, including romantic love, crushes, marital considerations, and potential spouses at social dance parties. Love relationships are often influenced by interweaving of the social status, family expectations, personal willings, and feelings (Chang, 2017). For example, the complex love story of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The family plays an important role in Austin's novel. A character's relationships with parents,

siblings, and relatives influence their personality, marital choices, and behavior. Austin often portrays friendships and rivalries between siblings, parental expectations, and the impact of marital arrangements on the fate of characters (Liang, et al., 2019). For example, the relationship between the Dashwood sisters and their family in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Austin's novel delves into the characters' interrelationships in social circles. These relationships span aspects such as social dance parties, family visits, and neighborhood interactions, depicting the impact of social norms and etiquette on interpersonal interactions. Social relationships often involve complex issues such as face, hypocrisy, and rumor spreading. For example, the social interaction between the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and the spread of gossip.[6]

There are also antagonistic relationships in Austin's work, which show contradictions and conflicts between the characters. Hostile relationships can arise as a result of differences in personality, perception, or social status. This relationship is often manifested through verbal bickering, ridicule, and confrontation.

In Austin's novels, adversarial relationships may exist in in-laws, friendships, or social circles. Hostile situations between characters often lead to misunderstandings, prejudices, and antagonisms. However, Austin also often shows the absurdity of human beings in humor and irony when describing these relationships. Austin reveals the complexity of the human character by showing the conflict and antagonism in the relationships between the characters, as well as the mutual influence and growth between the characters (Tan, 2017). She skillfully uses these conflicts to advance the storyline and offer deep reflections on human nature, social norms, and personal values. This characterization makes Austin's work more real, vivid and engaging.

4.2 Conflicts in Austin's works

In Austin's work, the conflicts between the characters are varied. The difference in social status is one of the conflicts common in Austin's work. The hierarchical system of society at the time caused people's social status to be usually determined by origin, wealth, and the family background (Auste, 2005). Therefore, conflicts of social status often occur between characters of different social classes, especially in romantic relationships. On the one hand, people in the upper classes may be reluctant to marry people of lower status because they fear that it will lower their social status. On the other hand, people of lower status may face opposition and obstruction from their families and society. This conflict often leads to tangles, pain, and struggle between the characters. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's love affair with Darcy is hampered by differences in the social status. Elizabeth came from a middle-class family, while Darcy was an upper-class aristocrat. This difference in social status led Elizabeth to initially prejudice Darcy, and Darcy had concerns about the social status of the Bennet family. This conflict leads to misunderstandings and disagreements between each other, and eventually these obstacles need to be overcome to come together.

In general, the conflicts between the characters in Austin's works involve multiple aspects such as social status, personality concepts, and family background. These conflicts both drive the storyline and show the complexity and growth of the characters (Wang, 2021). By overcoming these conflicts, the characters can achieve self-knowledge, change prejudices, and pursue true love, while also conveying Austin's deep thinking about human nature, social norms, and family values.

4.3 Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship from social exchange theory

There is no doubt that Elizabeth and Darcy are the couple that the author describes intensely, and it is also the main thread that runs through the novel. Darcy is the embodiment of arrogance, and Elizabeth is full of prejudice against him. Elizabeth is the second daughter of the Bennet family, she is not the pretty, but she is the smartest. Her greatest charm lies in her independence of thought and non-humility, and these two characteristics are interrelated, and it is precisely because of her independent thinking that she does not feel inferior (Liu & Zhang, 2022). Darcy came from a famous aristocracy, handsome and golden, and his good family background inevitably made him a little arrogant.

The union of Elizabeth and Darcy is the most ideal and perfect love in the author's heart. The two are of equal character, with material foundations, hot emotions, and deep exchange of ideas. The

reason why the love of these two people is talked about is because of their unique personality charm. On the one hand, Mr. Darcy's appreciation and recognition of women's independent thinking ability, on the other hand, he can face up to and reflect on his shortcomings and have the courage to correct them. And Elizabeth has her own set of values, and in the face of high nobles, she evaluates a person based on her observation and understanding of the nature of this person. Her independence of mind and her unassuming attitude led her to utter the eloquent words: "He is a gentleman, I am a gentleman's daughter, and we are the right door. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy can be analyzed in detail through the theory of social exchange. The theory of social exchange holds that people seek to maximize their own interests in communication, and maintain and develop relationships by exchanging resources with each other. At first, Elizabeth was prejudiced against Darcy, who she considered arrogant and arrogant, and Darcy was prejudiced against Elizabeth's social status. However, as they came into contact and got to know each other, they gradually began to exchange resources, changing each other's perception of each other.

First, Elizabeth offered her intelligence, humor, and charisma as resources. She caught Darcy's attention with her clever words and witty responses. Elizabeth's intellect makes her Darcy's soul mate, and the two stimulate each other, exchange ideas and build deep connections in conversation. Elizabeth's personality traits attracted Darcy and made him interested in her.

Second, Darcy offered his social status, wealth, and family background as resources. He came from a wealthy family with a noble status and vast wealth. Although he initially showed an arrogant and arrogant side, over time he began to show true inner qualities. Darcy showed Elizabeth his true nature by explaining and correcting misunderstandings, proving himself to be someone worthy of her trust and love.

Another key factor in the exchange of resources is interdependence. In the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy, they rely on each other's resources to meet their own needs. Elizabeth hopes to elevate her social status through her relationship with Darcy, and Darcy needs Elizabeth's wisdom and personality to satisfy her emotional needs. Through this complementarity and dependence, their relationship develops and deepens.

In addition, the theory of social exchange emphasizes the balance between cost and return. Both Elizabeth and Darcy experienced cost and return considerations. Elizabeth needs to overcome prejudice against Darcy and change herself. When Elizabeth begins to reevaluate Darcy, she discovers that he not only possesses wealth and status, but also shows a gentle, sincere and caring side. These positive traits became Elizabeth's decision to build a deeper relationship with Darcy in return. She came to recognize Darcy as a trusted and dependable person with a resource to meet her emotional and social needs.

For Darcy, he must overcome past arrogance and excessive conceit about social status. He came to realize that a relationship with Elizabeth would not only meet his emotional needs, but would also help him change himself and become a better person (Xie, 2016). Therefore, he is willing to put in the effort and change himself in order to reap Elizabeth's rewards.

The relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy undergoes many challenges and trials throughout the novel. Their resource exchange and interdependence helped them overcome social barriers and challenges of personal growth. By providing each other with resources and meeting needs, they develop a deeper emotional connection and gradually develop a true love.

Ultimately, Elizabeth and Darcy achieve mutual happiness and satisfaction through resource exchange and interdependence. Their relationship is not just based on an exchange of material and social status, but also on mutual understanding, support, and shared emotions. This process presents the core principles of resource exchange and mutual satisfaction of needs in social exchange theory, as well as the growth and development of love and relationships.

4.4 Jane and Bingley's relationship from social exchange theory

Jane and Bingley are both people with a generous temperament, they are gentle and kind, they are not afraid of the opinions of the family, and the two have similar temperaments, so they are easy

to attract each other. This kind of marriage based on love, and without the trouble of money, life after marriage is naturally extremely happy. Jane and Bingley are a combination of beauty and wealth, which can be described as a model of Lang's "wealth" and "beauty", such love is enviable, but it rarely exists in real life. Jane represents a small group of people in this society: with their good character and appearance, they can cross classes, embrace wealth, and enjoy love that never expires.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the love relationship between Jane and Bingley can be analyzed through the theory of social exchange. First, the theory of social exchange holds that exchange in interpersonal relationships is based on the balance of costs and benefits. In the emotional exchange between Jane and Bingley, the exchange of emotional resources is the main factor (Zhou, 2016). Jane is the second daughter of the Bennet family, and Bingley is a friend of the Darcy family, and there is a certain gap in social status between the two. Jane is a beautiful, intelligent, kind and endearing girl, while Bingley is a rich, gentle gentleman.

In the novel, Jane develops a deep affection for Bingley, and Bingley is also impressed by Jane's beauty and character. The exchange of emotional resources plays an important role in their relationship. Bingley takes the initiative to pursue Jane and expresses his deep affection for her. Jane responds positively to Bingley's pursuit, and through emotional communication and interaction, they establish an exchange of emotional resources.

However, there are some difficulties and challenges in their relationship, one of which is the opposition of the Bingley family. Bingley's sister, Darcy, was prejudiced against Jane, believing that her low social status did not match Bingley's identity. This causes Bingley to come under pressure from the family, and he begins to distance himself from Jane, leaving Jane confused and sad.

From the perspective of social exchange, this can be explained by Bingley's hesitation that Jane's social status and economic resources could not meet his expectations. Bingley's consideration of the exchange of financial resources and the pressure of the family became obstacles between him and Jane's exchange of emotional resources. However, as the plot develops, Bingley gradually realizes the true worth of Jane and his deep affection for her. He understood that the exchange of emotional resources and real emotional connections was more important than the exchange of economic resources. In the end, he overcomes his pride and prejudice, expresses his love to Jane, and comes together with her.

Therefore, from the perspective of social exchange theory, it can be seen that the exchange of emotional resources in the love relationship between Jane and Bingley plays a key role. The exchange of emotional resources between Jane and Bingley is not only reflected in the intimacy and emotional connection between them, but also in mutual understanding, support and care. Jane's beauty, intelligence and kindness attract Bingley, and Bingley's gentleness and sincerity also deeply attract Jane.

In addition, the love relationship between Jane and Bingley also involves the exchange of economic resources. Although the novel does not explicitly depict the exchange of economic resources between them, it can be speculated that Bingley, as a wealthy gentleman, may have been one of the factors of attraction for Jane. However, in their relationship, the exchange of emotional resources plays a dominant role, and they pay more attention to each other's emotional connection and mutual understanding.

Jane and Bingley's love relationship overcomes the barriers of class and social status through the exchange of emotional resources and a genuine emotional connection with each other. Bingley eventually realizes Jane's true worth and is willing to spend the rest of her life with her, transcending family pressures and financial resources.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the love relationship between Jane and Bingley demonstrates some of the core concepts of social exchange. The exchange of emotional resources and economic resources complement each other in their relationship, and the exchange of emotional resources is the basis for their deep emotional connection, and the exchange of economic resources may play a role. However, in the end, their love relationship is based on the exchange of emotional resources and the real emotional connection to each other, transcending the limitations of financial resources and

bringing them happy and stable marriage relationships.

5. Conclusion

This paper uses the theory of social exchange to conduct an in-depth analysis of the relationship between characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. The study finds that the exchange of economic resources plays an important role in the relationship between characters. The exchange of economic resources in the marriage relationship includes consideration of property, social status and family background, which affects the choices and interactions between characters. There is an interrelationship between social status and economic resources, and people tend to choose partners with their own social status to ensure economic interests and social status stability. The exchange of economic resources between parents and children is embodied in the expectation of parents to provide financial support and inheritance rights for their children in exchange for filial piety and respect from their children.

In addition, the exchange of emotional resources also has an important impact on the relationship between characters. The exchange of emotional resources in a love relationship satisfies each other's emotional needs by expressing love, listening, and supporting. The exchange of emotional resources in friendship relationships is reflected in mutual support, understanding and sharing. The exchange of emotional resources in family relationships includes emotional support, love and mutual aid between relatives. The exchange of these emotional resources promotes the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.

In summary, the exchange of economic resources and emotional resources plays an important role in the relationship between characters, establishing and maintaining relationships through reciprocal exchange and satisfying each other's economic and emotional needs. By delving into the relationships between characters in novels, we can not only better understand the motivations and behaviors of characters, but also gain a deeper understanding of the application and significance of social exchange theory in literary works.

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