



Streaming Austen: The Evergreen Relevance of Pride and Prejudice in a Digital Age

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Abstract

As the world commemorates the 250th birth anniversary of Jane Austen this year, the film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* has once again begun captivating audiences on the big screens. In a world driven by a constant demand for something new and exciting, where attention is the most coveted prize of all, it is no small feat for a film released 20 years ago to generate the level of enthusiasm that *Pride and Prejudice* still does. But this is the legacy of Austen. The paper aims to reflect on the cultural impact of her magnum opus and study how it reinvents itself for the newer generations especially in the digital age. The paper seeks to explore how the digital culture today, such as streaming platforms (Netflix), online communities (Booktok), meme culture and moodboards on social media platforms have kept the embers of Austen's most popular work burning bright in novel and unique ways that are both accessible and adaptable to the modern times. Through an understanding of adaptation theory, digital humanities and usage of universal tropes, the paper shows how Austen's themes are reimagined and recontextualised in the modern digital landscape. Invariably, the paper attempts to answer why Austen's work continues to thrive and remain memorable in the collective consciousness of pop culture two centuries later.

Keywords: Jane Austen, adaptation, digital age, pop culture

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen remains one of the most influential authors in the history of the literary world. Her enduring legacy is not limited to academic syllabi and lecture halls anymore, it has found new avenues of expression and

reinterpretation while still honouring Austen's original and authentic ideas. As the tide of social media and the digital age engulfs our world; Austen's works have not only stayed afloat but have also remained culturally relevant and memorable to contemporary audiences. This paper examines how Austen's most popular

work, *Pride and Prejudice* has been able to stand the test of time and adapt to the digitally mediated world of today.

Early Screen Adaptations

Austen's work found its early text to screen adaptation in the 1995 miniseries version by BBC. The 2005 Joe Wright adaptation starring Keira Knightley (becoming the youngest academy award nominee) remains the most commercially and critically successful iteration to date. However, it's the experimental adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* that truly reflect the scope of its evergreen relevance. Take for instance, the weird mashup called *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* showcasing a zombie infested England or *Bride and Prejudice*, Bollywood's take on the classic reimaged in an Indian setting. There is something very universal about the story for it to be able to mould itself across genres and geographies. This is one of the reasons for Austen's popularity, her rare ability to craft timeless stories. While the first one seems like a great way to get the attention of the younger generation by incorporating apocalyptic monsters, the second one showcases how malleable the source material is to be able to fit into the Indian sensibilities. Furthermore, there have been several modern retellings, both in print and subsequently on screen which have taken the essence of the original story and reinterpreted them in ways that mirror the zeitgeist of the time they released in. The most memorable one being *Bridget Jones's Diary* wherein Bridget feels akin to Elizabeth Bennett. The novel, inspired from *Pride and Prejudice*, draws heavily from the plot and characters, adapting them to a contemporary setting. A more recent example can be *The Materialists* by Celine Song which uses the framework and core themes of *Pride and Prejudice* to tell a story that is specifically and uniquely about the challenges and anxieties of dating in the 21st century.

Adaptation Through Mediums

When a piece of work moves across mediums, adaptation becomes a necessity, because no two mediums can replicate similar results, there will always be changes made to better suit the new medium. Adaptation is thus just not about transferring content from one form to another, it involves transformation. The real charm of *Pride and Prejudice* is in how easily the main story adapts to the screen. The process becomes simpler and easier to adapt. For example, the dialogue has the ability to be directly lifted into the screenplay and the character traits of both Elizabeth and Mr Darcy have a timeless universality to them. But more than their personal traits, it's the nature of the story and Austen's ability to skillfully dissect how people perform identity through class, courtship, marriage and conversation and how frequently they misjudge one another in the process. The tropes employed by Austen have as much social relevance and significance today as they did back then. The emotionally expressive and authentic heroine, the overthinking mother who cares for what the society says, the quiet and sensible sibling, the ambitious social climber, the misunderstood but pure of heart hero- all these ideas live and breathe in people we see and meet and interact with, albeit more digitally now than ever before.

Newer Forms of Iteration

In the modern era, the cult of *Pride and Prejudice* has seen newer forms of resurgence due to newer forms of consumption of the canon. Shonda Rhimes' *Bridgerton* is a perfect modern reminder of *Pride and Prejudice* and while it is not directly inspired from the same, it owes much of its ideation and aesthetics to Austen's legacy. One of the markers of digital shifts can be seen in the transition from a Hollywood big screen film release to a serialised narrative style with episodes being released on streaming platforms like Netflix. It is not only an indication of how the generation prefers to consume content now but also marks a shift

from mere reproduction of the original book and instead opting for a fresher take on the same, allowing for reinvention while still honouring the past. It also allows for the material to breathe more, increasing the scope of subplots and more profound character development. One of the biggest positives that have emanated from this new era is to be more inclusive of marginalised and neglected demographics like people of color (POC) and the queer community. By giving them representation in a beloved classic piece of Literature, it helps the audience to recontextualise the past, often reminding them of how such voices have always existed and been a part of our collective society. The modern retellings also allow for an expansion in the scope of cultural conversations. Themes and ideas of feminism, accountability, power dynamics, etc are explored more profoundly. It is a step in course correction and in memory formation. *Bridgerton* not only excels in having a diverse cast to play the regency era characters but it also supplements its nod to the modern era through clever tools like anachronistic instrumental needle drops featuring orchestral renditions of current pop songs, thus further solidifying its place in the pop culture space online. Some well known examples include- *wildest dreams* by Taylor Swift, *Sign of the times* by Harry Styles, *Material girl* by Madonna, *thank u, next* by Ariana Grande, etc. The easiest way to make a lasting connection for the current generation is to tie something to their favourite cultural moments and handpicked music like this definitely goes a long way in eliciting interest and intrigue in people to delve deeper into the history of it all which is what ultimately makes *Pride and Prejudice* memorable canon defying time.

Digital Readership and Fan Cultures

The advent of social media has allowed for micro trend cycles to come and go, especially in the area of fashion. But this is another area where *Pride and Prejudice* has not only lived on but thrived well. Tiktok and Instagram have popularised niche aesthetics and crafted

personas, one that connects to and takes inspiration from *Pride and Prejudice* being “regencycore”. It becomes even more prominent since the Regency era, with its soft color palettes and flowy breathable dresses and gowns have also been co-opted by similar aesthetic trends like cottagecore and coquette girl. The concept of Get Ready With Me (GRWM) videos, outfit compilations, thrift store hauls, DIY tutorials- all are the current ways in which Austen’s work finds a place. Curated moodboards on Pinterest and scene or vibe specific playlists on Spotify also serve as ways in which the younger generation express their own identities while also relating to the characters they see and read about. Today’s generation has a hyperfixation with wanting to curate their identities and with *Pride and Prejudice*, it is easy to categorise the book into sentiments and aesthetics- a folksy indie playlist or one with classical music may be their way to pay homage to the book or the film, as can be outfit boards on Pinterest under the dark academia aesthetic or even creating a reading scene against the backdrop of a rainy day just to view the film. Such is the power of allusion of *Pride and Prejudice*. And it spills into meme culture just as easily too, be it Mr Darcy’s hand flex scene from the film or memes on Mr Collins and Mrs Bennett or even Mr Darcy’s brooding nature fitting into the archetype of the contemporary “black cat energy” love interests.

Beyond its interactions with pop culture, another area where *Pride and Prejudice* has embedded itself is the world of fanfiction where loyal fans of the book/film come up with their own iterations, reimagining certain scenes, characters, the what ifs, sometimes even changing the settings (called AU’s or alternate universes) ranging from University AU to office AU or gender swap AU or even a sci-fi AU. Each setting offers the same love story, albeit told in newer ways. The sheer volume and variety of *Pride and Prejudice* on platforms like Archive of our own (AO3) and Wattpad is a testament to its forever appeal. These digital communities are one of the biggest reasons why Austen’s work

has stood the test of time. In what Henry Jenkins calls “textual poaching”, this participatory culture is how fans reclaim the text in their own ways that authentically reflect their own desires, identities and politics. It is not merely celebrating Austen’s work and her legacy, it is also a way to be an active part of her story, to find personal meanings in it. This also paves the way for Austen to be this evergreen entity in the literary landscape, not as a static force but an organically flexible one, with the power to move and adapt with time.

Conclusion

It is truly remarkable how a story can stay alive in the hearts of millions of people across generations, and have the rare capacity to not feel dated but feel extremely relevant across time and age. In the age of social media and microtrends, *Pride and Prejudice* remains a part of the collective cultural consciousness through its ability to live on through constant reinvention and movement across all kinds of mediums- whether it’s through niche memes, playlists, moodboards, TikTok edits or digital fanfics. Austen has created a work that has not only stood the test of time but has continued to gain fresh meaning and significance with each passing decade. This kind of adaptability, combined with Austen’s astute social commentary and enduring wit, ensures that this beloved piece of Literature will continue to garner new readers and audiences while retaining the old ones, breathing new life into itself with each reinterpretation. Ultimately, *Pride and Prejudice* is more than just a classic, it is a living, evolving cultural artifact that promises to thrive for many more generations to come.

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