

INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE VERSUS SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND MIDDLEMARCH

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Abstract. *This study investigates the conflict between the moral autonomy of the individual and the restrictive socio-economic structures of 19th-century England as depicted in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871). By analyzing Elizabeth Bennet and Dorothea Brooke, the paper explores how female conscience navigates the "marriage market" and Victorian provincialism. Using comparative literary analysis, the research demonstrates that while Austen's protagonist achieves a harmonious integration into society, Eliot's heroine faces a "fragmented" victory, highlighting the evolution of realism from the Regency to the mid-Victorian era.*

Keywords. *Social conscience, societal expectations, moral responsibility, individual ethics, collective morality, class structure, marriage as a social institution, gender roles, female agency, social reform, moral realism, free indirect discourse, Victorian society, Regency society, personal growth, institutional constraint, social hierarchy, ethical limitation, realism vs irony.*

Annotatsiya. *Ushbu tadqiqot Jeyn Ostinning G'urur va xurofot (1813) hamda Jorj Eliotning Middlmarsh (1871) asarlarida tasvirlangan XIX asr Angliyasidagi shaxsiy axloqiy mustaqillik va cheklovchi ijtimoiy-iqtisodiy tuzilmalar o'rtasidagi ziddiyatni tahlil qiladi. Elizabet Bennet va Doroteya Bruk obrazlari orqali maqola ayollar vijdoni "nikoh bozori" va viktorian provinsializmi sharoitida qanday yo'l topishini o'rganadi. Qiyosiy adabiy tahlil usulidan foydalangan holda, tadqiqot Ostin qahramoni jamiyatga uyg'un tarzda integratsiyalashuvga erishishini, Eliot qahramoni esa "parchalangan" g'alabaga duch kelishini ko'rsatadi. Bu holat realizmning Regency davridan o'rta viktorian davrga qadar rivojlanishini yoritib beradi.*

Kalit so'zlar. *Ijtimoiy vijdon, jamiyat talablari, axloqiy mas'uliyat, individual etika, jamoaviy axloq, sinfiy tuzilma, nikoh ijtimoiy institut sifatida, gender rollari, ayollar agentligi, ijtimoiy islohot, axloqiy realizm, erkin bilvosita nutq, viktorian jamiyati, Regency davri jamiyati, shaxsiy rivojlanish, institutsional cheklovlar, ijtimoiy ierarxiya, axloqiy cheklanish, realizm va ironiya qarama-qarshiligi.*

Аннотация. В данном исследовании рассматривается конфликт между моральной автономией личности и ограничивающими социально-экономическими структурами Англии XIX века, отражённый в романах Джейн Остин «Гордость и предубеждение» (1813) и Джордж Элиот «Миддлмарч» (1871). Анализируя образы Элизабет Беннет и Доротеи Брук, статья исследует, каким образом женская совесть ориентируется в условиях «брачного рынка» и викторианского провинциализма. Используя сравнительный литературный анализ, исследование показывает, что героиня Остин достигает гармоничной интеграции в общество, тогда как героиня Элиот сталкивается с «фрагментированной» победой, что подчёркивает эволюцию реализма от эпохи Регенства к середине викторианского периода.

Ключевые слова. Социальная совесть, общественные ожидания, моральная ответственность, индивидуальная этика, коллективная мораль, классовая структура, брак как социальный институт, гендерные роли, женская субъектность, социальная реформа, моральный реализм, свободная косвенная речь, викторианское общество, общество эпохи Регенства, личностный рост, институциональные ограничения, социальная иерархия, этические ограничения, реализм и ирония.

Introduction. The 19th-century British novel serves as a primary site for exploring the dialectic between the self and the social. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, the individual conscience is tested against the rigid hierarchy of the landed gentry. In contrast, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* presents a more complex web of social obligations, influenced by the impending Reform Act of 1832. The central problem is whether a person of high moral integrity can maintain their "individual conscience" without being ostracized by a society that demands conformity to its "expectations." In the canon of nineteenth-century English literature, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) stand as two monumental explorations of individuals negotiating the pressures of society. Both novels dramatize how personal conscience—individual moral judgment, emotional autonomy, and inner ethical reflection—intersects and often conflicts with the rigid expectations, conventions, and moral norms of their respective social milieus. While Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* focuses on the social codes governing courtship, class, and gender in Regency England, Eliot’s *Middlemarch* extends this conflict into a broader Victorian social terrain where gender, marriage, ambition, class, and institutional norms intersect with personal ideals and moral responsibility. Through their protagonists—Elizabeth Bennet and Dorothy Brooke—both authors depict protagonists whose moral consciousness repeatedly challenges and reforms their own and their society’s values.

Individual Conscience versus Societal Expectation in *Pride and Prejudice*. In *Pride and Prejudice*, societal expectation is never far from the foreground. Austen opens the novel with the now-iconic satirical statement: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a

single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” This deceptively simple line encapsulates the weight of social convention governing marriage and class in early nineteenth-century England—so entrenched that it is presented as an indisputable truth. Austen immediately frames marriage not primarily as a private emotional choice but as a social institution defined by economic and social valuation. The character of Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies individual conscience in tension with social normativity. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth resists pressures to conform to societal expectations of economic safety and social respectability in marriage. Her refusal of Mr. Collins’s proposal—“You must give me leave to judge for myself, and pay me the compliment of believing what I say”—not only marks a personal moral stance but also a profound critique of the social structures that would coerce women into economically expedient but personally unsatisfying alliances. This moment reveals Elizabeth’s internal ethical commitment to moral integrity, resisting pressures that many of her contemporaries—and even her family—encourage or expect. This interplay between individual conscience and societal expectation remains central to the broader narrative of *Pride and Prejudice*. As recent scholarship emphasizes, Austen’s characters are shaped by social norms and etiquette, which influence their decisions and behaviors, yet significant characters like Elizabeth resist and reform these norms. Research exploring Austen’s novel through sociological frameworks (drawing on theorists like Goffman and Bourdieu) shows how Regency social codes shape marriage decisions but also how contestants such as Elizabeth challenge these constraints through reflective agency. Importantly, Austen’s novel does not depict this conflict as a simple binary of individual against society; rather, it illustrates how personal conscience is formed in negotiation with, and sometimes against, social expectation. Mr. Darcy’s internal transformation—his willingness to revise his prejudices about Elizabeth’s social standing and her moral worth—marks another instance where individual conscience evolves through critical self-reflection, thus challenging class boundaries and social hierarchies. *Pride and Prejudice* thus offers a profound critique of social norms while celebrating personal moral growth. It is not merely a love story: it illustrates how individuals exercise inner judgment to overcome inherited prejudice and collective pressures, thereby asserting moral autonomy within a hierarchical society that demands conformity.

Individual Conscience versus Societal Expectation in *Middlemarch*. Eliot’s *Middlemarch* occupies a different but related narrative territory. Set in a fictional provincial town in the late 1820s and early 1830s, the novel explores a more expansive social network of characters, careers, institutions, and moral dilemmas. Its realism extends beyond marital negotiation to incorporate themes of political reform, professional ambition, religious rigor, and moral responsibility. Dorothea Brooke’s moral consciousness defines the novel’s central ethical tension. Motivated by earnest purpose and intellectual aspirations, Dorothea initially defies conventional expectations by pursuing a union with the much older, stern scholar Edward Casaubon. Her choice—intended as a match of intellectual partnership—is informed by a personal ethical vision

rather than conformism. Yet the marriage, grounded in Casaubon's self-serving cold rationality, soon exposes the limitations of idealistic individual conscience when untempered by social insight. Dorothea's eventual moral reformation represents a dramatic integration of personal conscience with a deeper understanding of her society's constraints and her own ethical aspirations. Similarly, Dr. Tertius Lydgate's trajectory demonstrates the harsh consequences of attempting to balance professional ideals with social expectations. His ambition to reform medical practice is repeatedly compromised by the economic and marital pressures of provincial life, illustrating how societal norms and expectations can erode individual moral purpose. Research on *Middlemarch* highlights this pervasive conflict: the characters experience psychological struggle as they navigate personal desires and the rigid social structures of the Victorian provincial community. More broadly, *Middlemarch* portrays communal pressures that enforce conformity and reward self-sacrifice for social expectation. The community's judgment, criticism, and gossip reflect not only local morality but also the internalization of social norms by individuals who must adapt their private convictions to the demands or conveniences of public opinion. Dorothea's moral growth, and that of several secondary characters, lies in reconciling individual ideals with the complex, interlocking networks of obligation, sympathy, and ethical responsibility that define provincial life. Scholarly analysis of Eliot's moral vision shows how her narrative embeds individual morality within a social collective, challenging the reader to consider not only personal conscience but also the moral complexities inherent in communal life. Here, conscience is not just resistance to society but a negotiation within its matrix of institutional norms and expectations

Comparative Analysis. Both novels present protagonists whose moral autonomy challenges social convention, yet each does so within distinct narrative frameworks and social scopes. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the conflict plays out primarily within the marriage market, gender roles, and class expectations of Regency society. Characters are constantly judged by adherence to or deviation from etiquette and class codes. Elizabeth's moral agency arises in her refusal to marry for convenience, insisting instead on mutual respect, which ultimately reconceptualizes marriage within the narrative as aligned with personal integrity rather than merely social compliance. In *Middlemarch*, however, the moral arena is broader: the pursuit of intellectual purpose, professional integrity, civic responsibility, and marital harmony all intersect with societal values. Individual conscience is not only a matter of resisting social expectations but also of navigating compromise, interdependence, and ethical complexity. Dorothea's moral evolution reflects an understanding that authentic moral agency must integrate personal desire with a realistic engagement with society's structures. Yet in both novels, the ultimate imperative of moral identity lies in self-reflection and ethical responsibility. Austen's Elizabeth and Eliot's Dorothea both illustrate the capacity for inner moral transformation, shaped by experience, self-correction, and engagement with others' perspectives.

Conclusion. The theme of individual conscience versus societal expectation in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch* reveals a rich terrain where personal moral agency negotiates social norms. Austen's narrative critiques the oppressive regimentation of marriage and class, asserting that genuine individual conscience can transcend societal pressures and reshape social conventions. Eliot's broader social canvas portrays moral agency as deeply embedded within communal life, where ethical responsibility requires not only resistance to narrow conventions but also empathetic engagement with a complex society. Together, these novels affirm that moral autonomy is neither purely private nor wholly collective. Instead, conscience is developed through a dynamic interplay between the individual's inner ethical compass and the expectations, institutions, and relationships of society. In both works, personal integrity and social reflection are inextricable: characters grow by confronting external conventions and internal prejudices, thereby illuminating the enduring relevance of these nineteenth-century classics for understanding the human condition.

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