

EXTENDED ESSAY

English B

(Category 3)

**The women's world versus the men's one, shown in Jane Austin's novel
Pride and Prejudice.**

How do the social status and mentality of both genders in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen influence their perception of the world and their life decisions?

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Abstract

The main purpose of this essay is to analyze to what extent and in what ways the worlds of two genders back in the XIX century differed, considering all fields of social and private life. This investigation will be based on the analysis of the novel *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and additional sources such as gender studies books or relevant websites for supporting evidence.

In order to address my question: **How do the social status and mentality of both genders in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen influence their perception of the world and their life decisions?** I will examine and depict the specific view of both gender's worlds presented by Austen in comparison to the traditional one from the XIX century England. Taking into account such issues as gender's role in the society, their typical mentality, the perception of the world and their life decisions enables precise evaluation of significant aspects that contribute to the comprehensive conception of two different worlds determined by genders. The thread of gender's social, behavioural and mental division occurs throughout the entire novel, which reflects on their life. The vicissitudes of main characters' lives such as Elizabeth's or Mr. Darcy's as well as the fate of supporting figures may serve as a perfect example of the existence of "separate spheres" of sexes and its further impact. It also allows to assess the relevance of this idea to the convention of the epoch.

The conclusion of my essay is that the social status and mentality of both genders influence their lives in all aspects, determine their perception of the world, limit their potential life decisions. Austen emphasizes those essential psychological and sociological concerns in an intriguing plot, quite forward-beyond the time frame, provoking the discussion of imparity and the distant worlds of genders.

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Introduction

Jane Austen's literature is known not only for being particularly engrossing but also as uniquely characteristic of British society in the XIX century. Her novels present an entertaining view on historical, psychological and sociological issues captured into an interesting plot, full of absurdities, irony and versatile characters. That is why, I am fully convinced that one of Jane Austen's most appreciated novels- *Pride and Prejudice* would perfectly illustrate the topic that I will explore in my extended essay, which is the women's world versus the men's one. My work will be focused in particular on the full, thorough answer to the research question, as stated : **How do the social status and mentality of both genders in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen influence their perception of the world and their life decisions?**

I strongly believe that the topic of my choice is worth studying, because my work will not only outline the role and social rank of both genders in the XIX century England but it will also contain universal knowledge about mental differences between genders and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, my essay will be enriched by the unique insight into the life of XIX century English family portrayed in the novel. *Pride and Prejudice* is a sharp and witty comedy of manners played out in the early XIX century English society, a world where social status, respectability and wealth were more important than personal happiness. This novel clearly indicates the specificity of both gender's worlds in those times of men's powerful dominance and women's limitations and efforts made for their family's sake. And such is particularly the case of the Bennets, a family of five daughters whose father's estate is entailed to a distant relative, for upon Mr. Bennett's death they will lose home, land, income. The arrival of two wealthy and highly-placed gentlemen give Bennet daughters an opportunity not only to increase their social status and financial security by marriage, but also love and future happiness (LeFaye 178-203).

Pride and Prejudice perfectly serves as a model of social distinctions in the XIX century. Most of the characters come from so called rural elite (also known as "middle-class aristocracy" or "pseudo gentry"), except the protagonist- Mr. Darcy who is a member of traditional gentry. Austen is more interested in the social group, in which people who live on

the margins of gentry proper, but whose connections, education or role in the community gave them the right to “mix in the best society of the neighbourhood”(Austen Leigh 26).

Before I proceed to the main subject of my work, I shall add some background information about the stereotypical view on the women and men role in the society in the XIX century. In those times, the situation of men who were pleased with all rights and privileges, was completely different than the women’s one, which nowadays is often compared to the legal slavery. In the XIX century there was only one acceptable family model: the father was the head of the family, his wife and children respected and obeyed him (Lambert). The husband owned everything that belonged to his wife previously and the rights to her personally and women had no independent means of subsistence. Women’s education was very poor in comparison to men and their sole purpose was to marry and reproduce (Wojtczak). A woman who remained single would attract social disapproval and pity. What is more, looking after the household and the family was an only way for life, because all professions were closed for women.

In my essay I will try to prove that the social status and mentality of both genders influence their lives in all aspects, determine their perception of the world, limit their potential life decisions. In my opinion the best way to achieve this is a comparative analysis in which I will focus on similarities and differences between both genders in fields such as their role in the society, their typical mentality in the XIX century, their perception of the world and reasons for their life decisions in order to come to stated conclusions and defend my thesis.

Gender role in the society

Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* much earlier than any feministic movements were created and women started demanding their rights, privileges and equality towards men. The opening lines of the novel are: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (1), which immediately suggests to us that gender role in the society is a very important aspect of the book and that the writer attaches great significance to the generally acceptable views. These words are used intentionally in order to turn our attention to the fact that the plot is presented from the perspective of people with ordinary mentality, who are the members of rural middle class at that time, such as Mrs. Bennet. This quotation may also serve as an example of a desirable

model of a proper man in the XIX century according to which one should have an independent income sufficient to provide a potential family with descent household and well living. In those times it is entirely men's duty to take care of household finances.

Of course, the next step to decent living for a respected, wealthy man is to find himself a wife. This rule concerns also women, who are supposed to get married as soon as possible after reaching age of maturity. Being married is not so much a matter of choice or inner need, but more coercion and social obligation so happiness or love are in fact of little importance (Fortin), which perfectly illustrates the quotation :

Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life (Austen 16).

In *Pride and Prejudice* women use marriage to get what they want – raising their status in the society, but they also often have to sacrifice their feelings and desires. Men's situation in this aspect is no better. Social pressure of creating families results in a huge number of young gentlemen deciding to marry any well-behaved women of a similar social rank even not having feelings for her. This kind of an ordinary, straightforward man is represented in the novel by Mr. Collins who comes to Loughbourn with the intention of getting married to one of the Bennet daughters. The reason for this decision is clearly practical, since he is supposed to inherit all Bennet's possessions. Considering his quite high social status, influential connections, descent profession as a clergyman, his own property and sufficient income he is thought to be a convenient future husband for one of Bennets daughter, so he is completely sure about receiving a positive response when he proposes to Elizabeth. Obviously, he is shocked when Elizabeth rejects him, but a while later he finds a woman (Charlotte) who has a similarly practical attitude toward marriage and who believes that love or respect is not necessary for it. Being an intelligent woman Charlotte is neither particularly pretty nor rich, though. In addition, she is twenty seven years old and still unmarried so she is determined to use any opportunity to get a husband, because otherwise she could be in danger of social humiliation, which is spinsterhood (Mooman). For a woman over 30 years old it is extremely shameful to be unmarried, nevertheless being in a relationship without marriage is a way greater dishonour. If a woman lives with a man to whom she is not married, she will disgrace

the whole family and be expelled from the social life, marked with the shame of living in sin (Nedoma 8-11). The issue of marriage not as an act of love but as a social obligation is also indicated in *Pride and Prejudice* by the thread of Lydia's elopement. When she runs away with Mr. Wickham, the whole family is thrilled and intimidated by the dishonour she could bring. Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner at all costs try to get out of this situation keeping the good name of the family and force Wickham to marry Lydia.

Both genders also share some unspoken rules concerning the socially acceptable behaviour and interpersonal relationships. For example adoring the chosen bride-to-be is in the duty of a man whereas a woman should not show too much affection and hide her feelings. However, "(...) if a woman is partial to a man, and does not endeavour to conceal it, he must find it out" (Austen 15). All adult people from respected families regardless of genders should be active in community life. Within socially higher layer people are demanded to follow strictly determined rules and possess general knowledge and "the improvement of mind by extensive reading" (Austen 29). They have to have the ability of polite conversation with respect towards an interlocutor even if he or she is of a lower social rank. Of course, there are some activities reserved only for men such as hunting or fishing (Shoemaker 277) and the others are meant for women only such as "painting tables, covering screens and netting purses" (Austen 28). Nevertheless, many of them are performed by both men and women such as reading, playing cards, dancing on balls, going to the theatres. Musical evenings when people gather around a piano or just spend time on conversations are also very popular (Lambert). However, the most significant inequality between genders concerns education. Middle class boys usually go to grammar schools where they can gain basic knowledge from all fields and get comprehensive education. Girls on the other hand, go to private schools where they are taught 'accomplishments' such as music and sewing (Wojtczak). That is why, they usually do not possess any knowledge from crucial fields such as science, grammar and consequently they are regarded as less intelligent. Instead they are thought skills which can guarantee them gaining a husband in the future. From the general view, to be considered by men as attractive:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved (Austen 29).

In this way women are deprived of many life opportunities and forced to live in the framework created in distant times.

The typical mentality of both genders

As it was mentioned in the previous chapter most of the plot represents the mentality of ordinary XIX century member of rural elite. In *Pride and Prejudice* we can observe two sorts of characters depending on mentality of genders. The first kind are small-minded and traditional men and women who tend to think stereotypically such as Mrs. Bennet or Mr. Collins whereas the second one is represented by people who think in an original, rebellious, independent way such as Mr. Bennet or Elizabeth.

Mrs. Bennet is a simple, uneducated woman whose entire life is limited to domesticity and raising children. She is the type of a woman who uncritically accepts ready-made patterns of attitudes and values, adheres to universally acceptable principles and tradition. She is not self-aware and is not used to having deeper reflections, not even her own views. She cares about her children but nonetheless she is simply obsessed with getting her daughters married beneficially for the family regardless of their feelings or future life. Her main entertainment is to gossip with her neighbours and butting in local people's lives. This character represents a general image of a middle-class woman in XIX century who remains within the private domestic sphere of the home concerning herself with trifling matters while a man occupies the public sphere of politics, business, and law (Marsh). Mrs. Bennet also lacks tact and her inappropriate behaviour often brings shame on the whole family for example by giving too much information during conversation. Besides the shallowness, lack of knowledge, garrulousness and importunity of Mrs. Bennet, Jane Austen draws our attention to other specific feminine features. For example, snobbish Mr. Bingley's sisters do not have any respect for local, socially inferior people, they despise them and make fun of their lack of refinement, not even considering that they have never had an opportunity to learn it. In this way Austen indicates their haughtiness which we can repeatedly observe as a typical feminine feature throughout the book, even Mrs. Bennet boasted to her neighbours about her daughter's marriage with Mr. Bingley. Furthermore, *Pride and Prejudice* frequently deals with women's jealousy. For example, one of Mr. Bingley's sister who feels affection for Mr. Darcy envies his attention towards Elizabeth so she tries to humiliate her. Moreover, Austen reveals that "Women fancy admiration means more than it does" (Austen 105), so they in general are

thought to be vain, presuming and they constantly ask for attention. This kind of women is represented in the book by two younger Bennet sisters (Lydia and Kitty) for whom the greatest joy and basically the main purpose in life was flirting with the officers of the militia. They are described as “careless, silly, ignorant and idle” (163). What is also emphasized in the novel is that women are usually volatile and driven by emotions, especially when it comes to love: “A lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment” (19). Men’s decisions, on the other hand are usually based on reason, well-thought out and conclusive.

As regards mentality of men, Austen devotes much less attention to it. On the example of Mr. Bennet we can conclude that an average man at that time is less engaged in social life and definitely less interested in some local news, events or neighbours’ lives. Men are thought to be less talkative, rather reserved, detached. Of course, it is inappropriate for men to talk about their feelings, the most common topics of conversations are business, politics, books. As it was mentioned before men usually make rational, well-thought out decisions, so most of them chose a future wife and get married only from practical reasons. So does Mr. Bennet, “he had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her” (Austen 180), so he soon loses respect for Mrs. Bennet and starts to regret his decision. Mr. Bennet nonetheless is an amiable character in spite of his sarcastic, cynical sense of humour. He is an intelligent, reasonable man who always thinks thoughtfully before speaking and acting. Reading books in his study pleases him even more than mocking less intelligent people or irritating his wife.

Mrs. Bennet: Have you no consideration for my poor nerves?

Mr. Bennet: You mistake me, my dear. I have the utmost respect for your nerves.

They've been my constant companion these twenty years at least

(Austen 2).

He is not engaged in family interests, he loves his daughters, but favours Elizabeth for her strong character and intellect over her two younger sisters.

Jane Austen expresses also unconventional view on the genders role in family. Generally in the XIX century in England families have a particular structure: the father is the head of the family and makes all the important decisions whereas wife and children have to

respect him and obey his rules (Wayne 2-19). *Pride and Prejudice* however, designates quite a different situation. Seemingly the person managing the Bennet family is Mr. Bennet, his wife consults her decisions with him and asks his permission in significant matters such as their daughters' trips. However, in fact in most cases it is Mrs. Bennet who makes a decision and persuades her husband or efficiently manipulates him so as everything would go as she wished it to. Her being a very determined person with a strong personality causes that the whole family has to adjust to her needs. Mrs. Bennet is dominant in their relationship, which is noticeable during her conversation with her husband, her statements are longer, more emotional and effusive whereas he is confining himself to brief humorous comments.

Gender perception of the world

This chapter's main focus will be the second type of characters, according to the division of characters emphasized in the previous one. Besides the typical representatives of rural elite in the XIX century England, in *Pride and Prejudice* there are original, distinctive characters with unique personalities such as Elizabeth or Mr. Darcy. By introducing unconventional for those times characters of the second type, Jane Austen exposes the irony and absurd of narrow-mindedness and ridicules the emptiness of the first type characters. Both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are rebellious, they refuse to subordinate the ridiculous social pressure about marriage. They simply decide to reject their social duties and their feelings take priority, which creates a contrast toward the traditional image of XIX century men and women (Looser 20-45).

Elizabeth is a complete opposite of a stereotypical ordinary XIX century woman such as Charlotte. She is much more self-assured and definitely too proud and independent to marry a man only for material reasons. Love and personal happiness constitute a greater value for her than financial security or social standing. She is intelligent, brave and self aware so she does not bend to the will of her mother and turns down two advantageous proposals. Only when she realizes that her aversion for Mr. Darcy is based on her prejudices and misunderstandings does she discover her affection towards him. Eventually, she accepts the proposal, although their differences in social rank would make their wedding look inappropriate, even

scandalous. This decision indicates that Elizabeth's life priorities are based on emotions since she does not consider wealth or public opinion as life values. However, this kind of attitude is not frequent back then (Johnson 73-94).

Mr. Darcy also goes beyond the image of proper XIX century men. As a very wealthy gentleman of a high social rank he violates the generally acceptable rule by proposing to Elizabeth even though she is a definitely inappropriate candidate considering her inferior social rank, impoverishment and her family's shameful behaviour. His aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh who is a highly-placed member of gentry categorically forbids him to marry Elizabeth and persuades him to get engaged to her own daughter. Nevertheless, he decides not to subordinate to his aunt's will and the generally acceptable norms by proposing to Elizabeth. Expressing clearly and directly his deep feelings towards Elizabeth in his letters is also an unconventional behaviour for a XIX century man, those letters are even called "a window to a men's heart" (LeFaye 178-204). Following feelings and desires instead of reason or logic proves that love is his priority. All mentioned factors characterize Mr. Darcy as a perfect gentleman although he is an opposite to the stereotypical model of men at that time.

Conclusion

I strongly believe that in my essay I proved that the roles of both genders and their specific features play a very significant role in the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. Not only does this novel bring up the issues of gender mentality and interpersonal relations but it also depicts an unconventional image of middle and upper class society in XIX century England. Those aspects strictly relate to the development of the action included in the book. Therefore, all characters' actions and decisions as well as their perception of the world are influenced by outspokenly established social norms of behaviour of both genders, their role in society and their mentality of that age. Austen in her novels deals with conventions of the epoch by juxtaposing ironic, average characters leading a stereotypical pattern of lifestyle along with the contrasting, original ones. Some of the characters break with tight constrictions of etiquette and choose an independent, rebellious path of life. Those exceptions reveal a

different perspective and by making opposing choices confirm my thesis and account for the answer to my research question.

First of all, the model of family and roles of men and women presented in the novel do not reflect its common view at that time. In *Pride and Prejudice* we can observe the outline of future feministic watchwords, ideas, demands of future feministic movements. Austen breaks with a stereotypical model of family in which the strongest position belongs to a man and reveals women's dominance by the content of dialogues. The general roles of gender in family are classical for those time, though. Still it is an obligation of a man to provide for his family and woman to take care of the household and raise progeny. One can claim that Austen in her novels defends the idea that sexes are 'equal but different' because they share rights and responsibilities, law and custom. Nevertheless, in *Pride and Prejudice* the division of the separate spheres of each gender is distinct even though it is not an accurate reflection of their traditional image specific for those time (Marsh).

Secondly, the definite role of both men and women in the society as well as in family is based on their typical mentality and social rank. Prescribed by the properties social privileges and duties along with generally acceptable behavior clearly correlate with both the mentality of genders and social rank. Those factors have a huge influence on the way particular individuals perceive the world and consequently which life decisions they make. Women as their lifestyle comes down to the domesticity have limited opportunities and potential choices. They are considered as simple, uneducated, sometimes even crude. As a matter of fact in most cases women are not courageous, self-assured or ambitious enough to stand up for love, or to oppose to widely accepted principles. They are rather ashamed, overwhelmed by lack of education and men's power. Men, on the other hand, who are thought to be more level-headed, and prudent occupy such fields as business or politics so their perspectives are far wider. Their education is not restricted, they have more freedom in choosing professions. Yet, both genders have equally strict boundaries of behaviour in a company or appropriate leisure time activities. The social rank also plays a crucial role in making potential decisions by characters. It is not acceptable to integrate different social ranks due to the fact that representatives of lower social rank are not wealthy enough or do not have significant connections. Intermarrying of distinct social classes meets with disapproval of families and generally the society.

To support my statements I applied them to particular examples of characters from *Pride and Prejudice* analyzing reasons for their decisions. The novel deals with two types of characters representing completely different practical attitudes. The first type are people for whom social conventions are inviolable and sacred, therefore they obey them uncritically, such as Charlotte or Mr. Collins. However, the novel also discloses a completely different point of view, implementing the practical attitude of people who reject practical matters of marriage and violate socially acceptable principles in order to gain personal happiness, e.g. Elizabeth or Mr. Darcy.

Taking everything into account, I am inclined to believe that all the arguments and examples presented in my essay draw the conclusion that the social status and mentality of both genders influence their lives in all aspects, determine their perception of the world and limit their potential life decisions. My work proved that Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* depicts irreverently the specificity of the epoch in the matter of human relationships and roles of both genders captured in an interesting, witty plot. All thesis stated in my essay are based on not only analysis of the book's plot but they also concern psychological and sociological aspects giving characteristics of both genders.

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