
UNIT 3 MAIN THEMES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*-2

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to look at the ways in which the contemporary realities of women's lives and their position in society inform the treatment of these aspects in the text.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin with these extracts from a poem called *The Unsex'd Females* written by Richard Polwhele in 1798:

See Wollestonecraft, whom no decorum checks,
Arise, the intrepid champion of her sex;
O'er humbled man assert the sovereign claim,
And slight the timid blush of virgin fame

...Soon shall the sex disdain the illusive sway,
And wield the sceptre in yon blaze of day;
Ere long, each little artifice discard,
No more by weakness winning fond regard;
Nor eyes, that sparkle from their blushes, roll,
Nor catch the languors of the sick'ning soul;
Nor the quick flutter, nor the coy reserve,
But nobly boast the firm gymnastic nerve;
No more affect with Delicacy's fan
To hide emotion from congenial man;
To the bold heights where glory beams, aspire,
Blend mental energy with Passion's fire;
Surpass their rivals in the powers of mind,
And vindicate the Rights of Womankind."

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, a number of women, both individually and in groups, began to express dissatisfaction with the current state of women's education and the restricted role they were allotted in intellectual and political life. Among the best-known of these is Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1797) is an early revolutionary feminist work. Wollstonecraft asks in particular for women's education to move away from the aim of training women to be pleasing to men, and to prepare them instead for a more equal participation in revolution, though she does also hold that women ought to be prepared for their role in companionate marriage, which she advocated. The response this text generated includes strong praise as well as outrage, both often quite indistinct.

The poem quoted above seems to me to embody perfectly such ambiguity of response (at least that is the effect, whatever Polwhele's intention). Though it offers a diatribe against the proposed changes that threaten to do away with 'femininity', the very things that Wollstonecraft objected to are reproduced in language such as "the languors of the sick'ning soul" which can well be read as if it were upholding the objection.

3.2 WOMEN

3.2.1 Social Position

The position of women changed considerably during the Enlightenment, and, notwithstanding the concern with individual liberty and social welfare, not necessarily for the better. The economic developments that were behind the rise of capitalism also resulted in laws that restricted women's rights to own property and to run business concerns, thus forcing many women out of business – it has been pointed out by Richard Hooker that while women owned and administered about two-thirds of the businesses in London in 1600, the corresponding proportion in 1800 was less than ten percent. This is partly explained when we consider that pre-industrial Europe had the family economy (the economy of the individual household) as its main unit. Women contributed substantially to these economies, providing both agricultural labour and artisanal skills, and often subordinating housework (though this remained the woman's preserve) to this participation, but they could not occupy an equivalent position in the new urban and market economies.

3.2.2 Education and 'Accomplishments'

Sheridan, in his play *The Rivals* which appeared in 1775 (the year of Jane Austen's birth) satirizes the debate over women's education, by having Mrs. Malaprop, one of the funniest characters in the play, protest to Sir Anthony Absolute:

"Observe me, Sir Anthony – I would by no means wish a daughter of mine to be a progeny of learning; I don't think so much learning becomes a young woman; for instance – I would never let her meddle with Greek, or Hebrew, or Algebra, or Simony, or Fluxions, or Paradoxes, or such inflammatory branches of learning – neither would it be necessary for her to handle any of your mathematical, astronomical, diabolical instruments; – But, Sir Anthony, I would send her, at nine years old, to a boarding school, in order to learn a little ingenuity and artifice. Then, Sir, she should have a supercilious knowledge in accounts; – and as she grew up, I would have her instructed in geometry, that she might know something of the contagious countries; – but above all, Sir Anthony, she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell, and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise that she might reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying – This, Sir Anthony, is what I would have a woman know; – and I don't think there is a superstitious article in it."

Now look at another conversation, this time from *Persuasion*. Anne Elliot and Captain Harville are arguing over whether men or women are more constant in love. Captain Harville says "I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy ... but you will say, these were all written by men." to which Anne replies, "Perhaps I shall ... Yes. Yes, if you please, no references to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything."

Both speeches serve, in very different ways, to give us a clear picture of the contemporary condition of women's education, and of the results of its inadequacy. The absence of any system of state-supported education (though there were local charity schools) in Jane Austen's time was crucial in the denying of education to many women, since the 'Grammar schools' which existed to teach upper-class boys did not admit girls. The only alternatives were private boarding schools of the kind that Jane Austen herself attended, and the education imparted here was generally acknowledged to be of a not particularly high order. Most girls were simply taught at home by masters or governesses, and were not allowed into either the 'public schools' like Eton or the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. This meant in effect that women were barred from any knowledge of the classical languages (Greek and Latin) and usually also of history, political thought, philosophy, in short of most branches of learning. Instead they were taught accomplishments such as needlework, drawing, singing and playing the piano, which were considered attractive abilities that might come in useful in securing a husband. Not necessarily pursued with either talent or application, and not even always of much practical use—consider Lady Bertram's never-ending and utterly purposeless "carpet-work" in *Mansfield Park*—these skills are brought up repeatedly in Jane Austen's novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, there are a number of scenes where women have to display their accomplishments in a social situation. Mary since she lacks beauty, is forced to rely on her musical abilities in order to be noticed in society, and she is described as "always impatient for display". There is a conversation on the subject of women's accomplishments at Netherfield where Bingley expresses surprise at the number of skills young ladies are expected (and do) possess. These skills are detailed, and they include painting tables, covering 'screens', netting purses, singing, dancing, drawing, and an acquaintance with "the modern languages", and Darcy adds to this list by saying that a woman ought to also be well-read. Later on Lady Catherine interrogates Elizabeth about her accomplishments, lectures her on how to improve her piano-playing, and makes the extremely dubious assertion that "If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply."

3.3 MONEY AND PROPERTY

3.3.1 Income

Most women had no independent means of income and were completely dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands. Professions were closed to women, as was politics and this provides an interesting context for Elizabeth's remark about Lady Catherine – "... though this great lady was not in the commission of the peace for the county, she was a most active magistrate in her own parish". It is an ironic remark since it was actually impossible for a woman to be a magistrate or a justice of the peace. One of the very few occupations (and almost the only respectable one) open to women was to be a governess, but in fact the occupation brought poor pay, an often miserable social condition, and not much respect. The only real way for a woman to get money, if she had not inherited it, was to marry for it. Jane Austen herself, though she earned enough from her novels to become economically independent during her

later years, knew from personal experience how restrictive it was to be dependent, even on loved ones. Unmarried women also had to live with their families, and for her to leave her family or guardians without approval, even if it is in order to marry (as Lydia does), was considered a radical step.

3.3.2 Settlements

A 'settlement', which is considered very important if not absolutely necessary in relation to marriage, is a legal document intended to ensure that the property which a woman brings to marriage will ultimately belong to her, and after her, to her children. In a system which grants the husband more or less complete control over such property, such a safeguard functions to at least prevent too blatant an appropriation of this property, even though the wife may not have personal control over it during her marriage. The settlement is usually part of a pre-marital financial agreement that takes place either between the couple themselves, or between their families, and it may also guarantee a certain amount of money to be inherited by the children of the marriage, for example the five thousand pounds which are "settled by marriage articles on Mrs. Bennet and the children" and out of which Mr. Bennet has to give Lydia her share as part of the marital agreement settled upon with Wickham. The importance of the settlement not only in negotiating the terms of a marriage, but also (as in Lydia's case) in bringing it about at all, is used here for two purposes. First, it serves to highlight the economic base of most marriages. Secondly, and in this context, more importantly, it functions as an index to character, through revealing motives of greed. Wickham's refusal to marry Lydia without a settlement that promises him some financial and professional gain, calls into doubt any feelings he might be supposed to have for her.

3.3.3 Entails and Inheritance

An entail is a more complicated legal device, used to prevent a landed property from being broken up, or from descending in a female line. John Hopfner locates the importance of entails during Jane Austen's time, in the fact that ownership of land is in this period more than just a possession, it is also the only steady source of income that ensures for many families the leisure and opportunity for education or for entry into politics. In addition, the ownership of land decisively confers or determines social position, making a family part of the aristocracy or the gentry. It thus becomes essential to ensure that a landed estate stays safe from subdivision or sale, so a system of primogeniture is evolved. However, if the head of the family dies without sons, and the estate is inherited equally by all the daughters, this leads inevitably to subdivision, and if it is inherited by a single daughter, it becomes part of the estate of her husband's family, neither possibility being a particularly desirable one. Primogeniture is therefore extended to the entire male line and not just to the sons of the holder of the estate, which is what entitles Mr. Collins (a cousin of the Bennet sisters) to eventually inherit the Bennet estate. Behind Mrs. Bennet's constantly expressed dissatisfaction at, and incomprehension of, this state of affairs, is not just greed, but a very real fear of what will happen to her and her daughters (particularly if they remain unmarried) in the event of Mr. Bennet's death.

3.4 MARRIAGE

"Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony." (Jane Austen, letter of March 13, 1816.)

Marriage was usually the only means of social mobility for women, very few of whom could marry without a dowry or some kind of settlement. Most middle class women had to save enough money for their own dowries. In theory a woman could own property and even marry without her father's consent once she had reached the

age of twenty-one, but in practise this remained impossible for all except the exceptionally rich women like Emma who had the freedom to live their lives exactly as they liked. Still, one reason marriage was not to be entered into lightly was that it was almost always for life – divorce was possible **only** in the event that the sexual infidelity of the wife could be proved, and even here the husband had to get permission from Parliament to sue for divorce. The trial was between the husband and the wife's alleged lover, and the woman herself had no say in the matter. There was provision for the possibility of legal separation (neither party could remarry in this case) on the grounds of cruelty, but the husband was usually granted exclusive custody of the children in such cases, and could prevent the wife from seeing them – a sufficient deterrent to most women who might have thought of using the provision.

The pressure to marry that young women constantly faced from parents and relatives is treated comically in *Pride and Prejudice* because it comes mainly from Mrs. Bennet. But *Mansfield Park* provides a more serious illustration of it when Sir Thomas tries to persuade Fanny to marry Henry Crawford against her will. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet express two different ways of looking at the marriage of their children – while Mrs. Bennet is unequivocally happy at Elizabeth's finding a rich husband, Mr. Bennet's concern is that she marry someone she can respect, and he asks anxiously whether Darcy's money will make her happy, not knowing of course that she is marrying for love.

Take another look at the opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice*, already considered in another context. Sharmila Bhatt (in Trivedi, 1996) a critic, points out that they contain the idea that marriage involves a commodification not just of women but also of men.

Since any property a woman might possess before her marriage automatically became her husband's, heiresses were in danger of being married for their money alone by 'fortune-hunters', of whom Wickham is an obvious example — he tries to make Georgiana Darcy elope with him in order to get to her fortune. At the same time, how seriously are we to take Elizabeth's assertion that the slight of the grounds at Pemberley went some way in helping her to change her mind about Darcy? I do not think very seriously, and yet it might well be a factor, however small. Jane Austen does take the view that while greed and materialism are to be despised, even sensible people must devote some serious thought to the issue of money in marriage and it is rather foolish to ignore it completely since not only did one marry for life (divorce was next to impossible) but there was no social security outside it for most women. Though this does not excuse Charlotte Lucas' decision to marry Mr. Collins "from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment" (nothing in the novel really excuses marriage without love) it does make it appear more understandable. Charlotte is after all doing no more than choosing the option that suits her best interests from among a number of fairly disagreeable prospects.

There have been made connections between the rise of the novel and that of the modern nuclear family in the 17th and 18th centuries. Both reach their height during the 19th century though actually the nuclear family has its origins as early as the 15th century. Later in the 19th century, the Victorians saw the family as a refuge and shelter from the outside world, and this shelter as most of all dependent on the woman (in her role as wife or daughter) who is the ideal of domestic femininity – the 'angel in the house'. Common enough in Dickens, something of this view is also present in the character of Fanny who becomes the repository of domestic happiness in *Mansfield Park*, but this particular role is not present for the women in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The text seems to hold mixed views about marriage, seeing it as a culmination of woman's development but also as a diminishment. Though the words identified in Jane Austen's work with the right marriage (a companionate one) are 'affection' and 'esteem', even where these were present in life, things were often different. The

reality of marriage for most women in this period also meant repeated childbirth with the attendant physical discomfort, followed by years spent in child-rearing.

The use of marriage as one of the two most common conventional endings in fiction (the other is death) provides a sense of closure, and makes it possible to bring together the themes and depiction of private and public life. But the use of this device can be seen as an adherence to, and perpetuation of the myth of marriage as the most central and desired aim of a woman's life. Jane Austen seems to conform to this outwardly, but her misgivings on the subject are evident. What is undeniable is her stress on *equality* in marriage, at least for the heroine, though the presence of other mismatched couples make it clear that this ideal isn't always met.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

A consideration of the social and economic realities of women's lives in Jane Austen's time is useful in understanding how far they enter the text of *Pride and Prejudice*. Women were extremely dependent on marriage, and their education aimed at preparing them for this role alone by teaching them skills considered to make them more attractive to men. They were also supposed to cultivate, to the same end, an affected delicacy and helplessness, qualities regarded as 'feminine' and the loss of which was feared by many in the wake of books and movements that sought to change the state of things. Among the most influential of such books was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which appeared toward the end of the century.

3.6 GLOSSARY

Contemporary	Of (or at) the same time in history
Unequivocally	Without any ambiguity.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Identify the chief features of Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*
2. Does the theme of gender injustice become a part of Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage, and if so, in what way?

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

- Atkinson, Paul *Fitness, Feminism and Schooling in The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Moral World.*
Ed. Delamont, Sara & Logna Duffin 1978.
- Cohen, Paula Marantz *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel.* Ann Arbor:
University of Michigan Press, 1991.
- Trivedi, Harish (Ed.). *Jane Austen: An Anthology of Recent Criticism.* Delhi:
Pencraft International, 1996.