

Jane austen's "pride and prejudice" and mike leigh's "abigail's party" essay samp...



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## **Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" and Mike Leigh's "Abigail's Party" Essay Sample**

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* are both critical studies of their societies. The characters of Beverly and Mrs. Bennet are tools used to demonstrate what is wrong with society. Beverly's pitiable class aspiring attitudes are tantalising to the point in which her behaviour enrages the audience, she illustrates how formidable this new capitalist society appears in aspiring to wealth. Mrs. Bennet's behaviour is more subtle, her main occupation is for arranging her five daughters to marry well rather than improve her own social status.

At the time that *Abigail's Party* and *Pride and Prejudice* were written, society was under great change particularly in the 1970s. Britain was embracing a world of consumerism and capitalism. *Abigail's Party* is set in the 1970s and was written in 1977. In 1963 the Equal Pay Act was passed followed by the Equal Opportunities Act in 1972. These laws had a large impact on society: they were particularly significant to the breaking down of traditional class and gender barriers, with wealth and consumerism becoming dominating factors. This change resulted in Margaret Thatcher's government of 1979 which brought drastic changes to society introducing privatisation which led inevitably to a divided capitalist society (Beverly was a prime example of the people at this time who wanted to shrug off their class roots and aspire to greater wealth).

During most of Austen's life, Britain was at war with revolutionary France, and at home England was seeing the massive upheaval of the developing

industrial revolution upon the traditional agricultural economic way of life.

None of this is portrayed however in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Austen's rural middle class society feared the newly acquired wealth of the developing industrial cities, which similarly produce consumerism and new found materialism.

Mike Leigh presents the character of Beverly as essentially materialistic and boastful neither of which are admirable qualities, but in some respects it is reflection of this new society. This is presented to us in Act 1 when Tony and Angela have just arrived, "This is the suite I was telling you about" (LEIGH, 1977, 12). This shows that she has already bragged to Angela and Tony before they had even entered her home. Leigh shows her as desirous of moving into a higher social class and she is shown as being centred on money. The 1970's was the peak of the Women's liberation movement which enabled women to have equal rights and opportunities to men in working conditions. Beverly is not an example of this it is clear that she maintains the role as housewife whilst her husband appears to work extremely hard.

Leigh's characterisation of Beverly is grotesque, she is an extraordinary character in the play; she is dominant over all the other characters. It appears here that Leigh's purpose for the character Beverly is that he wants us to be horrified by her and therefore this wealth and class aspiring society. Leigh presents her to us as director; she initiates the majority of the conversations and pushes them in which direction she wishes. When others do attempt to start a conversation they are struck down by Beverly's overpowering tone. Beverly is also a puppeteer in the play and the other characters are on her strings. Beverly does not even attempt to hide the fact

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that she wishes to be at the centre of every conversation and situation, her domineering exterior overshadows both her husbands and her guests and she doesn't want to conceal this. She uses the other characters as tools to appear even more supreme.

Jane Austen's is more subtle in her presentation of Mrs. Bennet. Austen introduces Mrs. Bennet light-heartedly initially; this is apparent from Mr. Bennet's reaction to Mrs. Bennet's behaviour: 'You want to tell me I have no objection to hearing it'. Mr. Bennet's reaction to Mrs. Bennet is comical, however we later learn that Mr. Bennet uses humour not just as a defense to his wife's character but also to limit discussion with his wife on such topics such as the girls' future husbands. Mrs. Bennet's interests in the higher classes is to find partners for her daughters, she is concerned with her family's social status but this was the norm at the time, it was 'the business of her life to get her daughters married' (Cecil D., *A portrait of Jane Austen* 1978).

The novel allows narrative comment of its demonstration of nineteenth-century domesticity. Mrs. Bennet's situation has serious overtones in that if her daughters do not marry well, they will not only be homeless after the death of their father but will have little money or social standing. Jane Austen presents this situation satirically but it is a critical study of the society in which they lived. During the 19th century, women were of small importance and status in society; the only success available to them was to marry well and secure a comfortable life unless a woman came from extreme wealth;

Georgiana Darcy for example "Mr Wickham's chief object was

unquestionably my sister's fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds". The <https://assignbuster.com/jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice-and-mike-leighs-abigail-party-essay-sample/>

position of women is a prevalent theme in Jane Austen's work both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, with the underlining truth that, unless women marry well they were liable to incur poverty and social mockery. Feminist critiques of *Pride and Prejudice* would argue that Mrs. Bennet's character is so vulgar because Austen wanted to show her as victim of the position of women at the time; that without a male sibling girls were left with nothing if they didn't marry.

Initially Austen's presentation of Mrs. Bennet is quite manipulative with regard to her actual effect. Our impression of her is she is a comical character, a silly woman who is a figure of ridicule. As Austen introduces her firstly as a light-hearted character, her vulgarity unlike Beverly's is disguised, and instead built up and developed throughout the novel. This is emphasised when she hears of Mr Bingley's arrival in the area and becomes set on him marrying one of his daughters: " My dear Mr. Bennet" replied his wife. " How can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them".

Austen characterises Mrs. Bennet immediately here by showing her obsession with marriage and it is through this profound obsession that Mrs. Bennet's character becomes vulgar and grotesque, but also a victim as the effects of her society. Mrs. Bennet differs from Beverly quite significantly here her interests in the affluent and higher social classes are to improve her daughter's social status and supposed welfare, this could appear incomparable to Beverly as Beverly is childless, however similarly to Mrs. Bennet Beverly's behaviour to others is cold; she lacks a great deal of empathy to her guests and her husband. Beverly is more blatant with her <https://assignbuster.com/jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice-and-mike-leighs-abigails-party-essay-sample/>

behaviour towards others she talks herself up and puts others down and criticises them, this is shown in the play through her hassling comments to Sue about Abigail (her fifteen year old daughter) are inappropriate and are clearly used to agitate and trouble Sue.

Leigh's characterisation of Beverly is dramatic. Beverly crude desire to better everyone is distinct. Beverly has no shame in her behaviour, which is shocking, as this desire is a characteristic most people wish to keep concealed. The relationship Leigh presents between Beverly and her husband is in conflict because Beverly's desires to better everyone. Beverly routinely belittles him and ridicules his interests and passions. Although Laurence appears to be a successful estate agent, through Beverly's constant demeaning, we watch him crumble and his character's strength deteriorate until the final tragic climax of the play. Leigh appears to want his audience to witness this distressing breakdown of an intelligent man because of the actions of another character. Laurence's attempts to hold conversation with Susan, in whom he sees a kindred spirit, unlike Beverly whom it appears cannot hold a deep or sophisticated conversation. Beverly is silent during this; she cannot add anything to a conversation of this calibre and is bitter that she for once is not the centre of conversation.

Later in Act 2, Laurence becomes animated speaking about Van Gogh, Beverly in response to this becomes frustrated and shuts him down: "Thankyou Laurence! We don't want all the gory details". Beverly's tendency to speak for her guests whilst putting other characters down is offensive and embarrassing to the audience and for other characters. Beverly cuts

Laurence off whenever he is enthused or entertaining anyone, Beverly is <https://assignbuster.com/jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice-and-mike-leighs-abigails-party-essay-sample/>

presented as a character who cannot stand someone else leading the conversation. Beverly's poor behaviour towards Laurence's results in him having a heart attack. Leigh presents this a direct cause of Beverly's prolonged disposition and behaviour towards Laurence. His heart attacks occurs when Beverly crosses the line by bringing down " That cheap pornographic trash". " To the audience Beverly is unbearable and Leigh presents that Laurence has lived with this tortuous women and he could only take so much. Beverly even blames Laurence for his own death: " Angela, I told him this would happen". Beverly's actions are an experiment of her levels of control, dominantion and used as a tool for the dramatic tension of the play, both with Susan's rushing to the lavatory and her explicit flirting with Tony.

Like Beverly Mrs. Bennet's behaviour has a negative impact on those around her. The episode describing Jane's fever is treated with mild disdain and appears comical. However as the novel continues it becomes clear that Mrs. Bennet's once comical behaviour has the potential to sabotage the long term happiness of her daughters. Austen portrays Mrs. Bennet in a negative manner with destructive implications. This couldn't be conveyed more than the episode in which Mrs. Bennet is insistent on Elizabeth to accept the proposal of marriage to Mr. Collins. Yes it may be financially wise for Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins however Elizabeths character does not share this desire for money and financial security, Mrs. Bennet as her mother should be aware that this would have not been a happy ending or in the best interests of her daughter.

This illustrates both Mrs. Bennet's carelessness with regard to the institution of marriage but also her role as a mother. If Mrs. Bennet had her daughter Elizabeth's happiness in mind she would know that she would not happily marry Mr. Collins. Austen presents Mr. Collins overtly in a negative light - his character is conveyed as idiotic and hypocritical, whom none of Mrs. Bennet's daughters can stand and whom she herself had only spoke about with contempt: "I cannot bear to hear that man mentioned. Pray do not talk of that odious man." A Marxist critique would justify this with the plausible point that Mrs. Bennet does not loathe Mr. Collins but resents what he will take from her and her daughters. Mr. Collins is the reason that Mrs. Bennet is nervous and anxious about the future and the position she and her daughters will be put in.

Mr. Darcy as outsider of the family and social circle of friends states Mrs. Bennet's disposition and its effects frankly:

"The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison with that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself..."

Darcy accurately, as Elizabeth comes to see, states the devastating effect that she has had on her daughters. It is not the girl's background or lack of wealth that affects their future marriages it is their mothers such blatant desire (however expected of her situation) for them to marry for money.

Leigh, as Austen does with Mrs. Bennet, portrays Beverly as a negative influence on the other characters in Abigail's Party, Angela in particular.

Beverly takes it upon herself to call Angela 'Ang' which is not a term of  
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endearment, it is a patronising, belittling tone. Beverly is pseudo-friendly, using colloquial language to manipulate her guests, and Angela and Tony are highly susceptible to her as they want to appear favourably to their new neighbours. Beverly speaks to Angela as if she were a child: "Will you try it for me next time". Beverly also uses alcohol to attract the other characters to her - especially to Susan and Angela. Angela inclines to her advances, Susan attempts to resist but Beverly literally forces her into having more and more alcohol.

When Susan becomes inevitably ill after so much alcohol Beverly is insensitive about it; she speaks openly of Susan's misfortunes in front of the male characters; which shows her malice as both a friend and a female. Beverly's language and attitude towards other characters is highly significant in that it gives her power, as the other characters are guests in her home they do not attempt to correct Beverly's mispronunciation or uncivilised manner. Her language towards Laurence is more premeditated than to the other guests. Her constant use of 'please': "Laurence, don't leave you bag on there, please." Beverly uses this formality to prevent retaliation. Leigh here demonstrates the subversive power of language.

Marriage is a key theme, which permeates through both texts. Both writers offer us insights into how marriage is viewed in their societies. Beverly and Laurence's marriage is a farce, exemplified by their kiss at the beginning of the play. Neither Beverly or Laurence is happy with one another. Leigh demonstrates the reality of marriage as we see them antagonise each other.

Austen uses Charlotte Lucas to present marriage as a mockery and necessity for women to be secure rather than a celebration of love or commitment to <https://assignbuster.com/jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice-and-mike-leighs-abigails-party-essay-sample/>

one another, but Charlotte's marriage works for her. Elizabeth is shocked by Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins proposal but in this society what kind of future was entailed for Charlotte if she did not accept. Charlotte claimed that marriage was the 'only honourable provision' for women in her position.

Austen uses this scenario of Charlotte's to demonstrate that it was a serious issue if women did not marry, and therefore states the seriousness of Mrs. Bennet's situation with five daughters and no sons. Charlotte Lucas is used as a critical tool for society in which an intelligent civilised woman should marry a man such as Mr. Collins in order to escape poverty and spinsterhood. Charlotte holds the view of many women at this time as does Mrs. Bennet in which financial stability is more important than love.

Although Abigail's Party is written more than two centuries after Pride and Prejudice, we can draw parallels between Beverly and Laurence's marriage and Charlotte and Mr. Collins. Beverly like Charlotte appears to have married for financial security. Leigh conveys their relationship lacking in intimacy and communication, whereby their marriage is treated as a business contract, she secures a comfortable home and he funds it. Leigh's play is distinguishable as post 1960s as there is a strong sense of sexual innuendo as evidence of post sexual liberation. Beverly and Laurence's relationship is sterile in the sense that they have no children. Leigh illustrates that however far society may have come with regard to sexual freedom for both men and women it has progressed little in terms of intimacy and love in relationships.

Mr. Bennet like Laurence avoids contact with Mrs. Bennet much of the time.

He secludes himself away from Mrs. Bennet and the family in his study. With regard to the Wickham scandal he is useless. It is Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Darcy  
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who take control and alleviate the strain on the family. The narrator explains to us that Mr. Bennet married for a love based on his wife's youth and beauty. Austen here is also showing that this is a consequential reason to marry as it represents a warning of such an irrational and impetuous approach to domestic happiness.

Beverly and Lawrence's marriage appears to have irretrievably broken down. We can assume this by Leigh drawing his audience into feelings of revulsion in the scenario he creates between Beverly and Tony. Beverly constantly attempts to flirt with 'Tony' throughout the evening. This is evident early on in the play; "TONY: How d'you do" "BEVERLY: He's got a firm handshake hasn't he". Tony is the only other male character in the play bar Lawrence whom Beverly seems to have lost interest in sexually. Beverly's flirtatious behaviour towards Tony is embarrassing. Leigh is intentionally emphasising Beverly's poor behaviour here to show her characterisation - she thinks she can do anything without criticism and when criticised by Lawrence she either ignores it or tells to 'shut up' or 'sod off'. She shows little care or consideration for her guests. It appears that Angela and Tony's purpose is to be impressed and look up to Beverly and Sue is there to be intimidated by her. She shows little consideration for her guest's feelings, she is self-centred, out to serve her own interests.

Mrs. Bennet's character also appears to not be able to accept responsibility or allow others to take control of the situation. When Mrs. Bennet's daughters do have relationships with men it is clear that Mrs. Bennet wants to sustain a dictatorial role. This is portrayed with regard to Jane's early relations with Mr Bingley; sending Jane on horseback in the hope of a chance encounter with <https://assignbuster.com/jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice-and-mike-leighs-abigails-party-essay-sample/>

Bingley, despite the prospects of bad weather. The narrative comment on this is stated with intentional irony: 'Jane was therefore obliged to go on horseback, and her mother attended her to the door with many cheerful prognostics of a bad day'. Jane Austen's mockery here is stressing the lengths Mrs. Bennet will go to in order to secure a wealthy husband - endangering her daughter's health in the pursuit of a husband. As Mr. Bennet quite accurately states 'if your daughters should have a dangerous fit of illness, she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley, and under your orders'. We are guided in our responses by Elizabeth who is often claimed to be Austen's 'voice' who is horrified by her mother's behaviour and takes the parental responsibility, she is concerned with the real issue - Jane's welfare and insists of walking to see Jane: "I shall be fit to see Jane - which is all I want".

Jane and Elizabeth overcome their mother's negative influence and marry for love. However Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's laxity results in the scandal of Lydia's 'elopement' with Wickham, with all its potentially adverse effect. Mrs Bennet's reaction to the news of the elopement merely focuses on her concerns with materials: "And tell my dear Lydia, not to give any directions about her clothes till she has seen me, for she does not know which are the best warehouses." Here again Austen is further criticising the link between marriage and materialism in this society. Mrs. Bennet fails to realise the long term damage Lydia has imposed on her family as a result of her behaviour. When Lydia and Wickham return to Longbourn Mrs. Bennet appears thrilled at this marriage whilst the other members of the family appear ashamed. Austen gives us a satirical progression of Mrs. Bennet a lady who once

appeared foolish and eccentric to a thoughtless, ignorant mother forcing Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins, to a careless mother who would sacrifice her daughter's welfare for the shows of marriage.

By the end of Abigail's Party, Leigh shows Beverly's character as futile and useless. When Laurence dies she can offer nothing. Her power is lost and the attention has been drawn away from her. Leigh uses her as a reflection of society whose values are empty and fundamentally worthless. Similarly Austen makes Mrs. Bennet explicitly responsible for Lydia's downfall. At the end of the novel she has had no part in her two daughters securing suitable partners who escape her negative effects. Both texts are highly entertaining and critical of their societies. The writer's use these characters in a warped manner to focus our attention to everything that is wrong in societal attitudes as we watch the characters initially of self-importance, and in an influential position to become practically worthless and humiliated in their lack of ignorance as the other characters either overcome their dominance or fatally succumb to their poor behaviour.