

# Women's lives in the late eighteenth century essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



From a reading of Jane Austen's short stories what do we learn about women's lives in the late eighteenth century?

Jane Austen's collection of short stories, "Love & Friendship", give a developed insight into the lives of women of the "genteel" society in the late eighteenth century. The stories, written in epistolary describe the characteristics and mannerisms that were true to women of this particular time period. The letters, exchanged between friends, illustrate the main aspects of life familiar to Jane Austen and women of a similar class to herself. She incorporates her personal opinion into the stories by demonstrating techniques such as tactful humour and undisputed irony of the lifestyle that surrounded her, day after day; thus provoking her to use satire and exaggeration to portray the lives of women as shallow, vain and pre occupied by insignificant priorities.

It is evident that marriage is a vitally important and significant part of women's lives in the late eighteenth century to the point of being almost obsessive. Mary displays her view early on in the first letter by writing, "I hardly know how to value it enough". Marriage is rarely the result of a loving relationship but because women of this era are solely dependant on their husbands and fathers; therefore their lives are forced to revolve around marriage. This is simply because a husband will provide money, status and freedom. Money is a very important aspect in a marriage, and many women such as Mary Stanhope make no effort to conceal this, as her opinion, "What's the use of great Jointure if Men live forever?" shows no sign of

feelings or affection towards the principles of marriage; and considers its main purpose to be finding financial security.

Mary's view of the purpose of marriage also becomes apparent at her meeting with Mr Watts. When she announces that she is "to have a new carriage, a new saddle horse, a suit of fine lace and an infinite number of jewels", to name a few of the possessions that she expects from marrying into this relationship, which clearly has no evidence of love or even friendship

Even married women are constantly aware of the importance of money in a marriage, for example Louise Burton has been brought up to understand that money is the main importance in marriage and was "taught to disguise her real disposition, under the appearance of his insinuating sweetness by a father who knew" that marriage was her only chance of survival. Therefore it came as no real surprise to Margaret when Louisa ran off and left her brother "in company with Danvers", in the hope of raising her status and riches.

A women's social in the late eighteenth century was segregated by marriage and, therefore marriage was important to achieve this status, there was no other suitable option for women of this time. Freedom is another important component of marriage. Before a woman marries they are forbidden to go out by themselves, in fact rarely go out at all; and when they do they must be escorted by parents, "We might meet in London, were my father disposed to carry me there" would be the usual context of a conversation between two young unmarried ladies arranging to meet.

Only when they are coming out will they begin to go out and meet people for the first time, but even then they must be accompanied by a chaperone and must not do too much at one, as in the first of a collection letters the mother begins to worry about her daughters and "can only dread their health." This comes across as quite pathetic as the most strenuous activity involved is to drink tea; this implies that young, unmarried women are weak and must be protected until they are married. Only then are they allowed to venture out into the real world and become chaperones themselves which Mary seems particularly enthusiastic about when she declares to Miss Dutton, "If Mrs Dutton should not go to it, I hope you will let me chaperone you; I shall certainly take Sophy and Georgiana."

Looking at evidence from the stories, marriage is portrayed as a business contract rather than a seal of love and trust, particularly in Mr Watts's case as shown in the way he goes about his proposal to Mary asking if she "will condescend to marry (him) or not."

The process of getting a husband is depicted as a competition, an achievement according to Mary Stanhope, "It will be such a triumph to be married before Sophy, Georgiana and the Dutton's," and she, "know(s) the Dutton's will envy (her)." The reader is given the impression that the aim of finding a husband has nothing to do with feelings but only to gain material possessions, "If he will promise to have the carriage as I like, I will have him, if not he may ride in it by himself. The procedure is very formal and orderly, the mother prepares her daughters for "their first entrance into life", where they are launched into the social scene for the whole world to see.

Mothers play a very important part in the process as they have created their daughters and “formed their minds,” their lives are devoted to preparing their daughters for marriage, therefore their first season is particularly important as it is the mothers chance “to reap the rewards of all (her) anxieties and labours towards (them) during (their) education.” It is also very important for her daughter to marry into an equal or preferably higher status as it reflects the family's name and status of the whole family; therefore the mother particularly values money within marriage. Such as Mrs Stanhope who proclaims that she is “determined not to let such an opportunity escape of settling one of (her) daughters so advantageously.”

Marriage is almost compulsory in the “genteel” society at this time and any alternatives were frowned upon and seen as an unfortunate existence. If women were not to marry it was thought that this would lead to a life of beggary or prostitution. Another alternative was to depend of other male family members. Women who came from a slightly wealthier background could become a governess or a nanny for another family. Unmarried women or “spinsters” were forced to stick together in a struggle for survival.

However the future for most girls was completely out of their hands, their mothers would usually plan every aspect of their life, until they married and their husband would replace them as the main figure of authority in their life. A mother would organise her daughters' introduction into public, which would be undisputable, “Tomorrow Mr Stanly's family will meet them, on Tuesday we shall pay morning visits, on Wednesday we are to dine at Westbrook,” and so on. The mother also seems to have a strong input in the

decision of who her daughters shall marry, as Mrs Stanhope expresses adamantly, " If Mary won't have him Sophy must, and if Sophy won't Georgiana shall." This gives the reader a sense that women's choices in life were very limited and most decisions were made for them.

Jane Austen portrays the lot of a married woman to seem quite unappealing and not particularly enjoyable. Mr Watts for example makes it clear that none of Mary's wish's, no matter how affordable they may be, will not be granted and she will have no rights within the marriage, " You had better discard them before you marry, or you will be obliged to do it afterwards." There is no sign on an equal partnership in the marriage.

It is debatable whether marriage makes women happy, however if it does succeed in doing so it is for the wrong reasons. As Georgiana convinces Mary to marry Mr Watts; she uses the argument, " Who is there but must rejoice to marry a man of three thousand a year," implying that the man she is going to marry will not give her happiness but his money will.

Austen gives a general view towards marriage as negative and does not seem to support the system. She shows this opinion through sarcasm and irony to describe women's attitude towards marriage. She portrays the women to be pretentious and shallow by exaggerating these facets in her writing. This is illustrated when Mary is listing her expectations of marriage, she continues this list until it becomes so ridiculous that it sounds humorous, " You must build a room on purpose and a theatre to act plays in. The first play shall be..." and so on.

The women in the late eighteenth century were not deemed fit to be given a proper education, it was seen as unnecessary therefore the lessons taught consisted of how to conduct manners, how to act in public, how to dress appropriately etc. " Their education has been such as will not disgrace their appearance in the world." Accomplishments to them were learning skills such as singing, dancing and knitting, " No one could sing a better song than she, and no one could make a better pye than I."

The fact that this is how women were brought up and educated largely reflects their behaviour and attitudes. It has influenced them to become prioritised by the wrong things; they are portrayed as shallow due to their lack of exposure to a real education and the real world. They have no interest in getting involved in weighty subjects or conversation and limit themselves to a number of insignificant discussion topics such as appearance, social activities and food.

Women's lives are greatly affected by social status it is essential for women to marry into the same or a higher status to her. It is so important in fact that one young lady, Miss Jane, is forced to hide her marriage from her father and consequently every one else she knows, " I married without consent or knowledge of my father." Her whole life is a lie, all because she is too ashamed to admit her husbands' social status.

A large amount of the stories contents consist of topics related to money, appearance and possessions, this reflects the importance of these aspects to women at this time, Austen uses techniques such as humour and

exaggeration to express what appears to be her personal view of what she saw from her observations of life. She would have been familiar with these issues therefore can give a clear picture of what the attitudes towards them were at this time. She seems to identify her ideas and opinions through the voice of Sophy Stanhope in the three sisters, " I expect my Husband to be good tempered & cheerful, to consult my happiness in all his actions, & to love me with constancy & sincerity." This gives the impression that she is not concerned with possessions and money and is much more focused on the important things in life such as love and affection and clearly does not approve of society's view or approach towards marriage.

Women in the stories are entirely dependant on either their family of husband. Mothers don't seem to show affection towards their daughters however they do show that they care by ensuring that their daughter is safe and provided for as she can't do so herself, therefore it is vitally important that the mother fulfils this role. Father seem quite distant from their families and do not appear as duty bound towards their families and the mother, for example Sir George does not even bother to invite his own daughters to his wedding.

Many friendships in the stories seem false and built on jealousy & rivalry. The competitive element of marriage largely contributes towards this, for example when Georgiana and Sophy cleverly manipulate Mary to avoid having to marry Mr Watts themselves, which again shows women's shallow traits and obsession with money. However this was hidden underneath women's duties to act polite and civil. A few friendships that seem to be



positive such as the bond between Margaret Lesley & Charlotte Lutterell, and Louise and Emma, are held together by dedicated letter writing and the sharing of thoughts and feelings.

Women convey the impression that they have a poor understanding of real emotion and come across as selfish and immature for example the young lady in the second of the collection of letters is over emotional about unimportant issues and doesn't understand the true meaning of love. Austen uses expressions such as "wound me deeper" and "have a greater affection," to describe a petty crush, which stresses Austen's opinion by poking fun at women's confusion of real emotion.

Another use of her humour towards women is shown when Louisa expresses her upset towards Henry, "You must expect from me nothing but the melancholy effusions of a broken heart which is ever reverting to the happiness it once enjoyed and which ill supports its present wretchedness." The reader cannot help but smile at the language used to exaggerate how ridiculous and over the top Louisa sounds. This characteristic is a result of women's restraint from the real world and issues around them. Austen uses the language and techniques in the stories to shock and warn others in a similar position to step back and take an overview of their own lives before they become the next Mary Stanhope or Louisa Lutterell.

The general image of women's lives in the late eighteenth century has been depicted as shallow and vain with petty priorities. Their lives are pre-occupied with marriage for the wrong reasons, they are not given a proper

education, their status is one of the most important aspects of their life, friendships are false and usually have a hidden agenda and women are so concealed from the world around them that they have no real understanding of emotions. Consequently, their personality is quite understandable reflecting the way they have been brought up and the life they have been born into. Jane Austen's use of witty humour and sharp wit, exaggerating the characteristics of women in this time period, not only makes very enjoyable reading but gives the reader a good impression of her own opinion and attitude to women's lives.