

What do women want?

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



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DISC 1313 April 4th, 2108

Title " What do women want? Seem[s] plain enough: education, respect, to be accepted as the intellectual equals of men, emotional and sexual fulfillment, and marriage."

(Staves 170) Susan Staves uses this powerful description to present the standing and role of women in the 18th century patriarchal society. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* boldly and skillfully manages and portrays the dynamics between the men and women in that era.

Love, infatuation and compromise are revealed through the relationships of different characters in the novel and the implications that these factors have on their decision to marry.

Society placed high expectations on women without providing equal opportunities in terms of education, hence there was always a constant wide disparity in the overall treatment of men and women. Marriage was considered to be an ultimate goal for all of the women, and the convention was to marry well.

There was a higher importance placed on economic security as compared to love. Heritance, estate and wealth were considered to be the primary factors, whereas love and connection were condemned to develop over time. While *Pride and Prejudice* represents all of the stereotypical society norms

and compliance of the expectations, it also dares to take a new stand in terms of feminism through the main female protagonist, Elizabeth.

Austen's Elizabeth defies social expectations and norms in a patriarchal 18th century, rising above the orthodox women including her counterparts. She, being sensible and wise, strongly justifies her decisions, presenting a new front on feminism. 18th century was considered to be a time where development was seen in the treatment of women, and this novel essentially depicts that improvement.

Jane Austen, as Wang and Liu believed, gave all her female characters an impersonal freedom, allowing them to be the focus as well as the reflectors of the narration. Austen concentrated on women's routine life and hence was able to provide the readers with a deeper understanding of the social expectations and norms that the women had to comply with on a regular basis.

Making her women the center of the novel, Elizabeth specifically, Austen got rid of the masculine discourse and dominance present otherwise in the society, proving the rather developed and sensible nature of Elizabeth. Austen also allowed Elizabeth to transmit information and by following her journey, viewing things from her perspective enabled the readers to build a more sentimental relationship with her.

Female characters were portrayed not only from the outside world, seen by an objective observer, but also from within the character giving an opportunity to reveal their own memories and thoughts. Elizabeth's

unaffected charming personality overshadowed the arrogant and wealthy men proving her to be an advocator of independence from societal bounds and from traditional views about marriage that hinder women's self-autonomy.

All of Austen's women are distinct individuals and have their own set of ideologies and views on marriage and societal expectations. While, some can be described as sensible and mature, others naïve and dumb. Elizabeth had a fascinating relationship with all of the characters, through which Austen reveals a substantial amount of insight into the shaping and development of Elizabeth as an individual.

Despite being the sensible sisters, who shared similar values and ideologies Jane and Elizabeth were rather different in many ways. Jane waited for the right man all along, marriage for her meant love, passion and meaning. She was willing to forgive Mr Bingley for the mistakes he had committed, accepting his long-anticipated marriage proposal. Jane shared her immense happiness with Elizabeth and wished for her to experience this joy as well.

This proves that despite being wise, Jane had a longing desire for Mr Bingley only, and chose to be a silent sufferer during their time apart. She didn't even blame Mr Bingley's sisters or Mr Darcy for the negative role they played in her relationship and even refused accept Elizabeth's views on how a bad influence they were to Mr Bingley.

As Reena distinguished, Jane was more aware of the manners of the society and believed that it was necessary for women to marry at a certain age,

while Elizabeth rejected men, aspiring to marry someone whom she thought of as an equal in terms of temperament and had a strong romantic connection with. Elizabeth was rather affirmative and outspoken than Jane, who was on the contrary naïve and kept to herself.

Despite being the younger one, Elizabeth had an instinct to protect Jane, this was proved when Elizabeth defended Jane's silence to Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley, when Jane and Mr Bingley's courtship was sidelined. Jane's beauty and charm were somewhat affected by her shy and quiet demeanor; and the outspoken and confident Elizabeth is rather protective of her for this reason.

Elizabeth is also a rather fastidious girl who discriminates between people. She was quick in observing the differences between Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley. She quickly understood the nature of Mr Collins whose proposal she rejected without least hesitation. Elizabeth claims that " There are few whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well". (164)

She also declares that she is fed up with the inconsistencies in human beings, showing that she is at times prejudiced herself. Jane, on the other hand, forms a good opinion about others and is indiscriminating in doing so. Elizabeth, the society in extension, believe that Jane is too nice and doesn't have a bad thing to say about anybody. Lizzy says to Jane, " You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life." (53)

They believe that because she has such a generous heart and the most affectionate personality, she must be naïve enough to think of the best in people.

The fact that she has captivating manners and an angelic personality, she is hence considered to be the more ideal fit into the 18th century society.

Elizabeth has a sarcastic wit which enables her to ridicule some people like Mr Collins. She has the capability to laugh at people's absurdities, as she herself tells Mr Darcy towards the end of the novel. Contrary to that, Jane could never mock or retaliate like Elizabeth would, proving her to be the more ideal and proper woman in terms of the societal expectations.

The society hence place the two distinctly; this was also seen with the way Mrs Bennet treated both of them differently, relying on Jane more than on Elizabeth. Through Lydia's elopement, Mrs Bennet demanded Jane's company more than Elizabeth's, and often confronted in Jane about Elizabeth's rejections and what a big mistake she was committing.

Because of these differences one can conclude that Elizabeth was the only one who dared to step up against the unfairness of the society, unlike Jane who was equally educated and sensible but didn't just possess it in her character to do so. On the hand, there was large disparity in terms of personality between Lydia and Elizabeth. Being the youngest of the five sisters, she received great amount of attention from their mother. Emotional and immature, Lydia is the daughter who shares her mother's characteristics the most.

However, she was the least dear to Mr Bennet, we often see him pass sarcastic remarks on how silly and dumb Kitty and Lydia are. On the other hand, Elizabeth resembles her father the most, being his favorite. She is strong-willed, stubborn, frivolous and foolish. Despite, having the same background and upbringing Elizabeth and Lydia are sheer opposites.

Lydia is Jane Austen's way of portraying some of the young girls of that era and satirizing them, while Elizabeth, on the contrary, is Austen's way of depicting the development of women in the male-dominated society. Lydia's interests lie within balls and flirting with the new men in town.

Not only does this cause great embarrassment to Elizabeth, but to the Bennet family as a whole. Her main aspiration in life is to attain the attention of men, uniquely different from Elizabeth's character. She elopes with Mr Wickham at the first chance that she gets. Samina and Khattak in their article identify Lydia as selfish for being involved in self-interested schemes to achieve individual rather than collective happiness.

Lydia barely knew Mr Wickham or his intentions, she was certain that they were going to get married but was so self-absorbed that she never wondered to consider what kind of a person he is and what his aim was. Unlike the other female characters, Lydia didn't entirely marry for money or wealth, everyone knew that Mr Wickham wasn't the owner of a large estate. She wanted to fulfill her desire of attraction and physical gratification, not love.

Like her mother, Lydia had very little common sense, poor judgement and no consideration or understanding of the consequences that her behavior would

have on the reputation of the family, especially her two unmarried older sisters. Society considered her elopement a big crime and the eighteenth century was unapologetic to women as such anyway.

Lydia's elopement hence brought disgrace to the entire Bennet family. Mr Collins in his letter to Mr Bennet as a form of condolence wrote that " The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison to this".

This portrays how ignorant Lydia was, despite knowing that society was extremely unapologetic towards women. It also affected the marriage prospects of the other sisters; the society's notion that the older had to be married before the younger sisters was also disobeyed by Lydia. Lady Catherine used Lydia's mistake to portray her disapproval of Elizabeth's presence in Mr Darcy's life. She embarrassed Elizabeth by saying, " I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest sister's infamous elopement.

I know it all; that the young man's marrying her was a patched-up business, at the expense of your father and uncles. And is such a girl to be my nephew's sister?" (Austen 358). She fails to be a good sibling to her sister Kitty as well, who adored Lydia and supposedly had a tight knit relationship with her. Kitty was upset that Lydia didn't even bother inviting her. Through the portrayal of Lydia's character and behavior, Austen successfully is able to stereotype women who lacked good sense, decorum, and empathy in that century.

In contrast, Elizabeth is a sensible young woman with a sharp wit and respectful nature. She takes pride in her background, despite knowing all

their faults. She passes a strong comment to Lady Catherine displaying that humility, " He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal." (Austen 357) Elizabeth demands respect and hopes to marry someone who would treat her as an equal and would allow her to retain her sense of self. She married for love, however not completely disregarding the need for financial stability in her companion.