

Katherine mansfield's
"the garden party"
and jane austen's
"pride and
prejudice" ...



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Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" Essay Sample

Jane Austen and Katherine Mansfield both choose to portray the position that women hold and the options available to them within the social context of the text. Both write with moral purposes, questioning whether society places women in their rightful role. However, it is more difficult to decipher which moral stance each writer takes as in both pieces, ambiguity and differing opinions are used as literary techniques. Austen presents different options to the reader, not just her own opinion. Mansfield uses ambiguity, Austen uses choice: both leave their readers to make their own decisions. This openness demonstrates how both texts have survived cultural and social boundaries.

Jane Austen and Katherine Mansfield differ greatly in social context. Austen writes in the late seventeenth century from an aristocratic background, similar to that demonstrated in her novels. Her lifestyle reflected the Bennets', as Virginia Wolfe comments:

' If jane austen suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her. It was impossible for a woman to go about alone. She never travelled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself.'

Austen lived in a time of great social instability following a new way of life being formed through the Industrial Revolution, where a plea for sexual equality in writing would not have been appreciated. This could be said to have inhibited Austen's true opinions about how women should live in her

novels. Her novels accurately echo the requirements and lifestyles of women in the day as Milbanke in 1815 claims:

' I really think it is the most probable fiction I have ever read'

Pride and Prejudice for example, shows the helplessness and dependence on men women had. Mrs. Bennet, although portrayed as a hysterical character, demonstrates the anxiety that arises when daughters must be married to financially survive:

' If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield and all the others equally married, I shall have nothing to wish for.'

This shows the developing " aspirations" or more realistically anxieties of women, from the want of a good, financially viable husband, to the want of the same for their daughters.

Katherine Mansfield writes from a different social context. Living between New Zealand and London and writing around 1920's, socially, the position of women had changed in terms of personal ownership, equal primary education and divorce was slightly easier to gain, yet still socially condemned. It can then be seen that the dependence of women on their fathers and subsequently their husbands, does not differ much from the time when Austen wrote her novels. It is interesting therefore to see how differently the authors address the issue of where women should be placed in society and in terms of social behaviour. This can be seen in terms of theme, language and the eventual conclusion readers are left with.

In Austen's writing there has been great differentiation of opinion on whether Austen condemned the position of women at the time or accepted it as a way of social stability. *Pride and Prejudice* has been used as a basis for criticism on this point. The heroine of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet should surely be the key to this. She is a complex character who, 'verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety' as Johnson says, but also fulfils the requirements of a woman with her eventual recognition of error and subsequent marriage, but also her naivety as a female makes her an attractive prospective wife of the time. In 1813 the *Critical Review* comments:

'From her independence of character, which is kept well within the proper lines of decorum, and her well-timed sprightliness, she teaches the man of Family-Pride to know himself.'

This seems to portray Elizabeth Bennet as an essentially "exciting" wife, remaining within the realms of submission yet questioning the subject of domination. Jane Austen's use of irony and satire explore both sides of this condemnation and acceptance of the role of women. She does this through characterisation, dialogue and often the integration of authorial opinion can be seen in the strong use of free indirect discourse.

Different characters in the novel portray different interpretations. For example, Charlotte Lucas presents the typical choice made by women; to marry comfortably when the opportunity arises. Lydia supports the social explanation of the time as to why it is better to marry on grounds of financial stability than love or lust. She disgraces the family, finds herself financially

unstable and utterly un-marriable to anybody. It is difficult to sieve out Austen's opinion on her character's choices. For example, Elizabeth Bennet at first condemns Charlotte Lucas's decision, but then progressively we see how Austen presents the marriage and situation in a pleasant and comfortable light. For example,

'...Though I am not certain that I consider her marrying Mr. Collins as the wisest thing she ever did. She seems perfectly happy, however, and in a prudential light, it is certainly a very good match for her.'

Surely Austen cannot wholly despise the marital system of the time, as it is here presented in a "comfortable" manner where practicality and contentment are perfectly acceptable-even for the heroine. For example, Elizabeth also observes:

'The room in which the ladies sat was backwards...but she soon saw that her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr. Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment, had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement.'

A similar image is portrayed in Mansfield's 'At The Bay'. This also supports the way that women found their happiness in temporarily escaping the confines of marriage:

'Yes she was thankful. Into the living room she ran and called 'He's gone!' ...Oh, the relief, the difference it made to have the man out of the house... She wanted, somehow, to celebrate the fact that they could do what they

liked now. Their was no man to disturb them; the whole perfect day was theirs.'

From looking at ' Her First Ball', ' The Singing Lesson' and ' Pride and Prejudice', it is clear that the main aspiration of young women is to be married to someone of good fortune. It is clear from female conversation in ' Pride and Prejudice' that this is the case. Of course, marriage and the want of a good man were not merely leisurely activities, but with no economic independence, it was a social and financial necessity. For example when we are first introduced to the novel, this is the exact conversation:

' A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!'

This is the focus for the characters in ' Her First Ball' as well. For example, Meg approaches a girl and says:

' This is my little cousin Leila. Be nice to her. Find her partners; she's under my wing.'

Not only was the prospect of leading a ' single life' almost financially impossible for women, where there was little or no option for earning money respectfully, but it was utterly rejected socially. This ' fear' is well portrayed in ' Pride and Prejudice', especially by Mrs. Bennet,

' Oh! Mr. Bennet...we are all in an uproar. You must come and make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins, for she vows she will not have him, and if you do nt make haste he will change his mind and not have her.'

Mansfield portrays the woman who does not marry in her short story, 'The Daughters of the late colonel'. They show an immense dependence on men, or their father in this case. They demonstrate their naivety and a submission that they can now release. For example,

' Do you think we ought to have our dressing gowns dyed as well? ...I was thinking-it doesn't seem quite sincere, in a way, to wear black out of doors and when we're fully dressed, and then when we're at home-'

We are also made aware, by both writers, the way women need men, and also the way men use this power or control. For example, in ' Her First Ball', Mansfield describes how the men stand segregated from the women and it was custom for them to ask the women to dance. She shows the constraints of women to social etiquette as she says:

' Why didn't the men begin? What were they waiting for?...Then, quite suddenly, as if they had only just made up their minds that that was what they had to do, the men came gliding over the parquet.'

Austen shows the dependence of women on men through the use of Mr. Bennet. Mr. Bennet is needed to introduce the women to Mr. Bingley. He uses this power to ' tease' Mrs. Bennet especially. For example:

' Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me.'

Mansfield and Austen differ greatly in linguistic style. I feel that this reveals different purposes in their writings. Mansfield uses much more experimental language techniques, such as in the use of figurative language. They are not <https://assignbuster.com/katherine-mansfields-the-garden-party-and-jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice-essay-sample/>

simple ideas that she expresses, and her stories often relate unsettling scenes. Her endings are often ambiguous, leaving a lot to the reader's imagination. I feel that this could signify a want for change, particularly in the role of women in society. She conveys realism with symbolically disturbing undertones, suggesting disapproval or even a rebellion against societal ways. Her tumultuous lifestyle may even support this. For example, in 'Her First Ball' we are first depicted a familiar scene within the context. A young, naive girl eager with anticipation, 'she tried not to smile too much... but everything was so new and exciting.', who is made aware of the restrictions and predictability of her life as a woman, as the Fat man says:

'And these pretty arms will have turned into little short fat ones, and you'll beat time with a different sort of fan-a black bony one...and you'll smile away like the poor old dears up there...and your heart will ache, ache.'

Here, the subconscious focus is upon the miserable, narrow future that awaits women; even in the language we are reminded of death ('black bony one'). The repetitive cycle and the merely functional system of marriage is emphasised in the phrase, 'and your heart will ache, ache'.

In comparison to Austen, we feel much more stability with the style of *Pride and Prejudice*. Mansfield's short stories in themselves are more like moral tales, and require a much more contemplative approach. There is much more comfort in the novel form, where we feel recognition, structure and ultimately a predictable ending-much like the lives of women. Mansfield presents realism, but also explores the faults and subconscious consequences in secular life. Just as says:

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' It is a familiar world in which all of us can freely move and breathe...like poetry, it surprises and delights us by producing something unexpected.'

Pride and Prejudice opposes this style through its stable structure and overt language techniques. She uses free indirect discourse prevalently, which gives a variance of interpretation through different characters' eyes. This leaves little room for reader interpretation as the novel's closure leaves us content and complete. In ' Marriage (la Mode', for example, we are left with the contrary, debating characters' decisions and wondering the outcome:

' ' Some other time. Later. Not now. But I shall certainly write', thought Isabel hurriedly. And, laughing in the new way, she ran down the stairs.'

Perhaps this portrays the more realistic approach, that not all women are content with their choices like in Pride and Prejudice, such as Mrs. Harry Kember in ' At The Bay', and Isabel here.

Mansfield rejects the familiar structure of the novel form, instead presenting inconsistency and instability. As..... says:

' The typical Mansfield story has seldom any beginning. It is abrupt and unprefaced. The reader is placed at once in the middle of the story.'

Mansfield conveys an unsettled style compared to Austen and even unbalanced. Austen focuses primarily on events, dialogue and uses many abstract adjectives and verbs. Mansfield, however, focuses largely on emotion and pays great attention to detail. This has some kind of symbolic meaning and provides escapism from the style of realism:

'...the bolster on which her hand rested felt like the sleeve of an unknown young man's dress suit; and away they bowled, past waltzing lamp-posts and houses and fences and trees.'

Here we are shown detailed description, but with metaphoric tones. The simile represents the anticipation and imagination of the young girl, and the rhythm of the last part of the sentence has a waltz-like metre, contributed by the sibilant sounds.

It is clear from her use of language, content and style, that Mansfield wanted change in the lifestyles of women. She portrays many different types of situations, particularly marriage and life for a woman without marriage. However, throughout all of these short stories, there is a degree of unease in the language, the events experienced by characters and the ambiguous endings. Austen, however, presents a more subtle view. She portrays a range of ideas and situations where characters are ultimately content, at least. She places focus on the types of education that women received, and how the purpose of this was to create an entertaining yet submissive wife, such as:

'You excel so much in the dance, miss. Eliza, that it is cruel to deny me the happiness of seeing you.'

Her small amount of rebellion is summed up in the character of Elizabeth Bennet. She creates a character with more life and vivacity than any other female characters as she is so closely linked with movement such as, 'quick pace', 'jumping', 'springing', 'impatient'. Elizabeth attempts to break from the restricting realms placed upon women by using her small power to her <https://assignbuster.com/katherine-mansfields-the-garden-party-and-jane-austens-pride-and-prejudice-essay-sample/>

advantage. I think through Elizabeth's authorial opinion is revealed. She remains within the boundaries of etiquette just as social stability was yearned for at the time of Austen's writing. However, she refuses to marry simply because she is given the opportunity of a 'comfortable home'.

She does not condemn others' choice to do this, such as her friend Charlotte, yet does not strive for purely emotional and irrational love as a basis for marriage, as is seen in Lydia. Elizabeth finds the balance between affection and practicality in her marriage with Darcy as reflected in the language Austen uses, which has little emotion, but portrays a content, yet mellow relationship. The way in which Elizabeth 'stretches' her role as a woman in her refusals to dance, witty and intelligent conversations with Darcy at Netherfield, shows how Austen did also strive for perhaps a different type of education for women, similar to men or even more freedom, although it is clear that, unlike Mansfield, she acknowledges a need for the stability of a 'prudential' marriage system.

In both Mansfield's and Austen's writings, the reader is strongly aware of the way in which women are portrayed. Austen's opening draws our attention to the importance of the marriage system to women:

'it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of good fortune, must be in want of a wife.'

We are constantly reminded in Mansfield's short stories of the isolation from society women must face who are not married, such as in 'The Singing Lesson':

' She would have to leave the school, too. She could not face the Science Mistress or the girls after it got known. She would have to disappear somewhere.'

Mansfield presents a much more vivid and dark portrayal of the situation of women in society in her day than Austen who uses humour and light-heartedness with her characters. I feel that Mansfield aims for realism, whereas Austen does not show a want for change, especially in her ending. Although years apart, both writers focus on strikingly similar situations: dependence on men, submission and the boundaries surrounding women, enforced by the decorum and etiquette of society. There is great depth of exploration of opinions and realism and ideas are clearly expressed through Austen's characterisation and free indirect discourse, and Mansfield's experimentation with psychological language techniques. The aspirations of women by both writers are explored, but whether they yearned for change or stability, is more difficult to determine.