

Was life easier for the young ladies of 'pride and prejudice' than it is for youn...

[Literature](#), [Fiction](#)



At a first glance, this subject seems straightforward. Today's young women have more opportunities, more freedom and are generally better educated than the women of the early nineteenth century; surely their lives must be considered easier. However, it is not that simple. Some aspects of life today are not necessarily easier or harder than then; just different. In some areas young women now may even encounter more difficulties.

Women's education in the time of 'Pride and Prejudice' was very different. The emphasis was not on stretching the mind academically but on developing a few fashionable skills, such as an ability to speak French or Italian and having a superficial knowledge of history and geography. Subjects like maths and science were not taught to girls beyond a very rudimentary level. The study of them was considered too taxing for their minds, and as the very popular Fordyce's sermons asserts 'most properly the province of men'. Their education would have usually been carried out at home, with a governess or just their parents to teach them.

They might then have attended one of the not very academically rigorous private 'seminaries' like the one the Bingley sisters went to, but could never advance their studies by entering university; they could only have broadened their mind through 'extensive reading' like Elizabeth Bennet. Women spent a significant proportion of their day in developing, as Caroline Bingley describes 'a thorough knowledge of music, signing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages', as the possession of these 'accomplishments' would affect their ability to make a 'good' marriage. This

is why Lady Catherine thought it 'very strange' that only one of Elizabeth's sisters played the piano and none of them drew.

Now, the education of boys and girls is largely the same, with little time being given over to such pursuits as drawing and sewing. It is recognised as very important for women to learn academic subjects; they even perform better at GCSE and A Level than boys. However, even though for many this is preferable, as they can stretch their minds and enjoy education for its own sake, it is probably not 'easier'. Young women today have all the stresses and pressures that coursework, exams and university admissions bring. It is certainly easier now to be educated to the same level as men but probably harder being in everyday competition with them.

Women had far fewer opportunities then as a result of their less academic education. Young ladies who out of financial necessity were compelled to find employment often faced difficulties; the few jobs open to women, like governessing, usually had meagre salaries and poor working conditions. This meant women were compelled to depend on men for financial security; and if left without a male provider would have to rely upon the charity of others, the predicament haunting Mrs Bennet. Their lives were also very restricted. Charlotte Lucas is still dependent on and living with her parents at twenty-seven; she would have had no choice as many, like Lady Catherine, believed that 'Young women should always be properly guarded and attended'. They had few responsibilities apart from organising the servants; their existence was a leisured one of reading, visiting friends and practising accomplishments.

It is not so today. Many women have jobs outside the home, often in managerial positions. There is still some inequality in the workplace; but it has vastly improved. However, this change means that women have responsibilities and areas of stress unknown to the protected women of those days; for example the anxiety that the juggling of family and work commitments brings. The daily life of a young woman in 'Pride and Prejudice' would have been less stressful, unless worries of future financial provision plagued her.

Due to young ladies' limited opportunities for financial independence then, women were under tremendous pressure to marry for economic reasons as they needed someone else to maintain them. Charlotte Lucas' situation illustrates this dilemma perfectly. She would have been left penniless had her father died, and when an opportunity to seize 'the pleasantest preservative from want' arose, she took it gratefully, even though she thought her intended 'irksome'.

Also, women could not always marry the man of their choice; if he did not have a sufficient, secure means of income then they would have faced severe difficulties with no Social Security or NHS available and often a large family to support. This is why Mrs Gardiner advises Elizabeth against a romantic relationship with Wickham which would have been 'so very imprudent' due to his 'want of fortune'. In addition, marriage was almost always for life. Women could never divorce their husbands; the only ground was her infidelity. A legal separation could be obtained by the wife due to

cruelty but she would automatically lose custody over any children. This meant some were trapped in abusive or violent marriages.

This is one area where life is definitely easier today. Young women today have a real choice over whether they marry as they can look after themselves. They are much more likely to marry for love than convenience; however there are some exceptions, like those who do so to secure residence in a particular country. A couple are also less likely to be deterred from marriage due to finances as men do not have the same, inherited income for life; they can rise in their career and eventually earn more than their older siblings and parents. Divorce is also a real option for women if in an unhappy marriage. Cohabitation is also possible as it is no longer looked down upon by society. However, they are much more likely to experience marriage and relationship breakdown and have children by different partners. This complicates life and brings additional difficulties

In the time of 'Pride and Prejudice', your place in society was determined by the social status of your parents. Women could only rise above their family's social class by securing a good marriage, and this was difficult as having bad 'connections' would 'very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world', as Darcy recognised. Now, women can create their own destinies through their increased opportunities and not be constrained by the situation of their parents; they can achieve and be recognised for their achievements.

Women had to behave in an acceptable way to be approved of by society in the early nineteenth century. For example, if you displayed the 'indifference to decorum' so despised by Caroline Bingley like Elizabeth does when she dirties her petticoat walking alone to Netherfield, you would be looked down upon. These rules were sometimes even more fixed. For example, you were not meant to 'come out' in society until the age of eighteen. This is why Lady Catherine thinks it is 'Very odd!' when she finds out that all the Bennet sisters are 'out', with the 'younger ones out before the elder are married'.

There were also some more serious transgressions that would result in the exclusion of a young woman from society, like having sex outside of marriage. Mr Collins advises the Bennets to 'throw off' their 'naturally bad' daughter Lydia from their 'affection for ever' after her elopement with Wickham. The shame encountered by the woman would have been even stronger if a woman had become pregnant as a result of such 'infamy', and there was no abortion to conceal it. If her parents disowned her, a real possibility, and the man did not support her then she would be left with the prospect of a miserable existence; perhaps as a prostitute, like the gossiping ladies of Meryton had hoped for.

The rules society imposes upon young women are not so strict now, so life is certainly easier in that respect. Nobody would ever be excluded from company for having had pre-marital sex and there is much more sexual freedom with contraception and abortion widely available. However, society still has its 'outcast' young women. One just has to look at the recent press treatment of the murdered women in Suffolk. Rarely are they referred to as

women, only prostitutes. It seems in their case that their drug addiction and the associated behaviour caused their downfall, rather than a man.

There are also differences at a less fundamental level. Transport in those days was much more of a challenge; there were no trains, cars or aeroplanes; only slow, uncomfortable and expensive carriages. This meant people travelled around the country far less often than now, moving in a much more 'confined and unvarying society'. Especially if a young lady lived in the countryside, she would not meet many new eligible young bachelors, which accounts for Mrs Bennet's joy when Mr Bingley moves into the area. Also, communications were much slower.

There were only letters; none of the texts, emails and instant messaging used so frequently by today's young women. They had to be more reflective and rely on family members for advice which may have led to their reactions being more measured and less instinctive. This is an aspect of life which is not clearly easier or harder; it is not necessarily bad to meet a more limited range of people or to be forced to be more inwardly contemplative. Some young women are too dependent on their mobiles; perhaps it would be better to return to more traditional means of contact like visiting and letter-writing.

In conclusion, the word 'easier' is a minefield, because the changes that have made our life better today also complicate them with the plethora of choices they offer. Choices bring dilemmas; opportunities bring sometimes crushing responsibilities. The changes in education, opportunities and

marriage that have resulted in greater freedom bind women in another way; not to a life of reliance on men, but to a life of self-sufficiency which can be at times much harder than the dependency of the young ladies in 'Pride and Prejudice'.