

Married life both before and after history essay



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Class certainly played a part in marriage in the 16th century, as romantic love was not seen as a good reason for marriage. The higher up the class scale a person was the more likely they were to have an arranged marriage. Marriage was considered rather important as it enhanced your standing in society, especially for the male as he would become a person of consequence and would gain the role of master of the house. “ Conscious of the responsibilities a husband assumed on marriage, parents of daughters favoured a man of means and maturity.”[1]

Arranged marriages were frowned upon by the church but nevertheless many arranged marriages took place with the newlyweds often being in their early teens and marrying through pressure with “ some women felt forced into marriage by their circumstances, unwilling to remain a burden on their family.”[2]

However the lower class tended to marry somebody they had spent a great deal of time with as they tended to socialise in groups, the lower class often married at an older age due to the need to save up and acquire some land to set up home.

Marriage in 16th Century Britain was very different to the marriages of today's world, as Stone pointed out “ marriage among the property-owning classes in sixteenth-century England was a collective decision of family and kin, not an individual one.”[3]

This shows that class was an important part of marriage with rich families often arranging marriages for their children from a very young age as it was more common for the wealthier families to arrange marriages as it was a

serious and complicated matter but, as Stephanie Coontz put it, “ If love could grow out of it, that was wonderful .”[4]

Poorer people could marry later and had more choice. Civil and ecclesiastical law enabled marriage at an early age – 12 for a girl and 14 for a boy.

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The legal requirements for a marriage before the Marriage act of 1753 was a simple process of promising to do so in the presence of a witness furthered by the physical consummating of the relationship.

Such informal marriages were not approved by the church who wanted all couples to marry in church before a minister, after the public announcement of the intention to marry had been carried out for three weeks, this is also known as the reading of the banns but “ resorting to irregular marriage was evident in the sixteenth century.”[5]

This form of engagement was much stricter than those of today as such a promise was seen, as equivalent to a marriage and it would not be a rare occurrence for the brides to be carrying child.

Most 17th century marriages were arranged weddings with consent being an important issue as love was not seen as a strong platform for marriage but was viewed as a foundation as this would mean the couple were both compatible and comfortable with one another.

The bride's family would often pay a sum of money known as a dowry to the groom to pay for the maintenance of the women who in return was promised her 'dower' which was a percentage of the bride's estate that the wife would be entitled to on his death.

However, love did begin to be used for marriage with the enlightenment train of thought and the belief that the pursuit of happiness was the meaning of life. Marriage through love was now beginning to be considered more important than material goods. The Industrial Revolution would further consolidate this view as the middle class increased tenfold and young bachelors could afford to pay for their own wedding, parental approval and arrangement for marriage were no longer as important or needed.

The Marriage Act 1753 or An Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriage to give it its full title gained Royal Assent in 1754 and came into force on March 25th of that year. It was the first statutory legislation to require a ceremony of marriage in England and Wales and revolutionized the way marriages performed.

Consent to marry for anybody under the age of 21 was made law but a limit on age was not introduced. The wedding would also have to take place and be celebrated in church with an entry, signed by all parties, being placed in the parish records. It can be argued that the law was a response to the upper classes agitation at manner in which young heir were trapped in an indissoluble marriage and would lose their money.

Furthermore, the Act made it a legal requirement for the reading of the banns to be carried out for three successive weeks prior to the wedding

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taking place if the parties wishing to marry did not have a license to do so. Marriages by under 21's were acceptable on licence if they had gained the parental consent they needed. However, marriages done so by the reading of the banns were valid unless the parent of the youngest had forbidden the banns. The Act was highly successful in its stated aim of putting a stop to clandestine marriages

By the 18th Century, couples were increasingly given the freedom to choose their own partner and many relationships began being based on personal preference and attraction rather than by the parent's orders.

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By the 19th Century British women carried the expectation of becoming pregnant, however due to life expectancy being greater for girls than that of the boys, coupled with the number of males serving in the armed force resulted in a shortage of suitable spouses.

English law became based on the principle that the male would earn the money whilst the females stayed at home and 'kept' the house. The few women that did work saw her wages passed directly to their husbands under the 1882 Married Property Act.

Women's rights had not really been affected by the Marriage Act with females from upper class families being the only ones who had access to education, albeit in subjects viewed as necessary skills for women, such as embroidery

This lack of education was seen as unbeneficial by women as it did not develop the women in any way other than menial tasks.

In her book, *A vindication of the rights of women*, Mary Wollstonecraft, claimed that through education would come emancipation and that women had a right to be educated due to it being she who is primarily responsible for the education of the young.

Furthermore, Mary Wollstonecraft stated that educating the women the same, as men would strengthen marriage, as the couple would have some topic to share and talk about and that a stable marriage is a partnership between a husband and a wife - a marriage is a social contract between two individuals

Wollstonecraft goes on to argue that educating women will strengthen the marriage relationship. Her concept of marriage underlies this argument. A woman thus needs to have equal knowledge and sense, to maintain the partnership. A stable marriage also provides for the proper education of children.[6]

It was impossible for a woman to be granted a divorce even if the male had committed adultery, as the ideal was that upper and middle class women were dependant on a male figure, father, and husband. Men were given the right to divorce if their woman had been adulterous under the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, women, however could not divorce their husband if he committed adultery.

If a divorce was granted the 'ownership' of the children was passed to the father who had the power to banish the mother from the children if he so desired.

Divorce became a less and less taboo subject due to the religious reformation and the way in which society began to question the validity of the church and God.

Notwithstanding the ardour of religious reformers in Europe, the established church was brought into question during the reign of Henry VIII and in turn, Protestantism prevailed with the new church taking precedent.

The role of the family became an important issue for theorists, none more so than Lawrence Stone, who, in 1977, put forward his theory the three stages of movement within the family. Stone claims that a power shift in the attitudes towards marriage could be seen through the early modern period, with 'affective individualism' replacing the cold patriarchal traits.

Stones three movements can be summarised as:

The open lineage family 1450 - 1630. The attitude towards relatives would have been formal to a point of almost been cynical and callous. Upper class couples were distant to each other and as a result, their (often-arranged) marriage was akin to a business relationship. The immediate family were held in the same regard as the lineage members.

Restricted patriarchal nuclear family 1550 - 1700. The importance of kinship was replaced with a growing importance been placed on the immediate relatives. This coincided with The Reformation criticising arranged marriages

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and the coldness within them, along with stressing the importance of a close nit family.

Closed domesticated nuclear family 1640 - 1800. Love becomes priority with patriarchy in fast decline. Children were shown great affection and seen as a gift rather than a burden. Marriage for love became the norm and replaced the economic reasons to marry. The rise of the romantic novel allowed sex and passion to be legitimate in marriage and not just a tool for reproduction. Romantic love was the reason for marriage, not business.

Stone did face criticism though, perhaps, none more so than at the hands of Alan Macfarlane who claimed that Stones thesis was flawed as it had overlapping periods, which gave no consideration to the fact it created conflicting evidence.

Stone was also criticised for using evidence associated with the Roman Catholics and using them to strengthen his argument about the Reformation, for example claiming sex was a mere tool for procreation.

Stones argument that people were discouraged from marriage and emotional attachment due to the high mortality rate is flawed, given that the mortality rates had sustained a high rate in the early eighteenth century, a time that Stone claims affection and love was growing and taking over as the main reason for marriage

Finally, manuscripts and other medieval sources (Chaucer) did not back up, nor consolidate his argument that marriage was a loveless union with a lack

of affection for the spouses. With romantic novels booming it was clear that people had an understanding and appreciation of love.