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Quietly Defiant:
Challenging Society's Ideal Woman in Jane
Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride
and Prejudice*

Alicia Hirvenoja Simon

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Supervisor: Cian Duffy

Abstract

Jane Austen is a well-known author, particularly within feminist literary history as her texts often included the lives of young women. The protagonists of Austen's novels have often been the subject of analysis regarding how the author argued about women's position in society however the minor characters are seldom discussed. In this essay I discussed whether or not her minor female characters can be used to argue against the ideal which women were expected to conform to during her time. When analyzing the characters, I took into consideration research on women's position in society during Austen's lifetime e.g. within education, marriage, and social class to understand how society affected the characters and their actions. I came to the conclusion that none of the four characters analyzed achieved the expectations of society and therefore their characterization can be used to argue that the ideal woman is unachievable.

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1. Introduction

When putting in the phrase “Jane Austen” into Google one is presented with over 55 million results. Some of the first results are about how Austen affected women by being a famous female author, and there are multiple search results describing the same effect though with the focus on her protagonists. I have come across a few articles and blog posts which state that the arguments of female equality can be channeled through these protagonists. But what about the other female characters of Austen’s novels? Is it possible that her texts use the female minor characters or even the female antagonists of her stories to argue for gender equality as well, even if they have different values and personalities than the typical Austen protagonist? In my eyes, there is more than one way to express one’s dissatisfaction with women’s role in society, which is why it is important to shift focus to and acknowledge the minor female characters of Austen’s stories. I believe that they can convey the argument that the ideals and expectations put on women are not only near impossible to achieve but do not contribute to making a woman a good person. Thus, this essay attempts to find in what way Austen’s minor characters divert from the ideal woman, and to discuss the reasons why. In other words, how do the minor characters of Austen’s novels diverge from the standards set on them as women, and how do their characterizations argue against the societal expectations and the ideal woman? Austen has a wide range of characters of different personalities and motivations, but if neither the major nor the minor characters can mirror the image of an ideal woman of their time, we must ask if the ideal woman is even achievable. This theory of analysis can be applied to many of Austen’s texts, but *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in particular were chosen for this essay due to their popularity and familiarity. The purpose of this essay is to shift the focus to those of Austen’s characters that have not been much considered in academic discussions before and to evaluate how they can be used to argue against the ideal woman.

This essay examines to what degree minor female characters from *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* conform to the expectations of Austen’s time and what it means that they do or do not, by reviewing their characteristics to understand if they oppose or endorse the expectations set on women. As far as the character choice goes, I - as mentioned - wanted to take into consideration

characters whose diversion from the norm has not been analyzed much before. Most of the work written about Austen and aspects of gender equality in her novels consider the message she sends through her protagonists, though less about the same theme considering the female minor characters. For instance, Susan Greenfield examines the importance of including a female way of thinking in literature, as Austen did with Elizabeth Bennet (Greenfield, 2006). In addition, Hui-Chun Chang analyzes feminist notions of the protagonist Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* in contrast to other female counterparts in the same novel (Chang, 2014). The discussions of feminism in regard to Austen's protagonists have been made for quite some time as e.g. as Wayne Booth applied a feminist method to understanding the moral values of the character Emma in *Emma* (1815) (Booth, 1983). Though these are only a few examples, they are typical in what kind of analyses that have been made within this area of research previously. By including characters that were not of the same general opinion and personality as the protagonists we may understand if the notion of differing from the norm and arguing against societal expectations is something generally found in Austen's novels or exclusive to the protagonists. My goal is to see to what extent my chosen characters represent the expectations and ideals of Austen's society, and if they do not: does it mean that they oppose the ideal? I will establish what the ideal was by examining the characteristics that were valued, as well as the position and conduct women were expected to conform to during Austen's time.

I have chosen to work with Mrs. Dashwood and Mrs. Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*. Both Mrs. Dashwood and Mrs. Bennet are mothers of the main characters of their respective novel and may provide different perspectives despite being of the same position in relation from the protagonists. Mrs. Fanny Dashwood and Lady Catherine de Bourgh provide us with additional perspectives as they act as antagonists in the story, possessing values different to the protagonists. I will provide a general character analysis in relation to historical facts on women's lives and theories of class so that we may understand how society affected their actions. As the accomplishments women were expected to fulfill in society were mostly connected to marriage and education these will make up the main focus of the discussion.

This essay will consist of two background sections followed by the character analyzes. Firstly, a historical background will be presented displaying the society of Austen's time, mainly focusing on women and the female perspective of life. Following is a section describing Austen's life and writing. The aim of these are to provide an understanding on how observant and accurate she was in depicting her society. Lastly the characters will be introduced, and their behavior and opinions analyzed by considering in what way society has affected them and if they as characters can be used to challenge the societal expectations and ideals. The characters are presented in order of appearance of their respective novels, starting with the first published novel, followed by the second.

2. Historical Background

This section aims to provide historical insight and understanding of the expectations society had on women and of what gender inequality was like during the latter half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. I have chosen to work with the years of (and closely around) the lifetime of Jane Austen herself, so that only events and social notions that were current for her and could have affected her work are included and discussed.

Marriage was an important step in life during Austen's time. Love based marriages were becoming more and more accepted during Austen's lifetime, and during the latter half of the eighteenth century there were several novels tackling this subject, some examples being *Evelina* written by Fanny Burney and *Belinda* written by Maria Edgeworth (Adkins and Adkins 3). Marrying for love was however less common in the upper classes of society. One might assume the opposite since the upper class had money to support themselves and therefore could afford to marry for love. The hesitance of the upper class to marry for love existed due to them being accustomed to their wealth and wanting to keep that comfort thus, they did not risk marriage outside their class (Adkins and Adkins 3). Though arranged marriages were common, men still had more say in the matter than women and parents often left their daughters a portion of their fortune to attract male suitors (Adkins and Adkins 3). This tells us that a woman was to be presented as the merchandise whilst men were the customers who had the freedom to pick and choose. It was generally believed that

women were too emotional to handle such an important task as to choose a suitable partner for marriage, and that the choice should instead be left to the men and parents (Jones 15).

It was also more important for a woman than a man to marry into money. As previously mentioned, the upper class valued marrying for money over marrying for love to preserve the lifestyle they were used to. Even so, it was important for women of any class to marry for money as they had no sustainable way to support themselves and had no right to ownership of property when married (Adkins and Adkins 4-5). Being an unmarried woman often led to poverty, and these women would often be looked down upon in society, as old maids or spinsters (Adkins and Adkins 15). In addition to marrying for love, there are several instances in Austen's novels where female characters marry for economic advantage - some of whom will be discussed in this essay.

Graham Martin explains that the modern economic view of class when used to analyze Austen's literature is problematic. He writes that Austen herself did not use economy as a class measurement in her stories but rather depicted her characters classes with duties and responsibilities in their hierarchical structure (Martin 131). In addition, he argues that since "class language" was not used in the same extent during the publishing of Austen's novels but rather later in the 1830's, it would be reason enough not to use class language when analyzing her texts. I do find that marrying to gain a stable living, as well as the behavior Austen portrays as typical within certain social classes is such a significant part of the women analyzed in this essay that it would be a poor choice to avoid these aspects of their characteristics. However, the point of not quite using a modern economic definition and a modern use of class language that Martin expresses is a valid point and will therefore be held in mind when doing the analysis.

Mary Wollstonecraft was an early feminist who argued for the rights of women, many times focusing on better education for women e.g. in her texts *Thought on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) as well as in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She believed that a well-educated woman would have more to contribute to society than one who is not. She was of the general belief that compressing a woman's place in society into only being a wife and to restrict her abilities, would lead her to become more emotionally frustrated and unstable than if she was allowed to express her thoughts and reason more freely (Wollstonecraft

52), which she could learn to do if she was educated. Thus, even though marrying for economic stability was the norm, there were a few people such as Wollstonecraft who were openly defiant towards the limited options and the status of women in society, and how this restricted women's independence.

Women's education was distinctly different from men's education during Austen's lifetime. For middle or upper class women, such as Austen and many of her characters, their education would either consist of being tutored at home by a governess, and much of the things they were taught was along the lines of religion or practical skills used in a home (Reena 125). Women were not allowed to study at public schools or universities, which meant that they were unable to acquire degrees or reach the same level of education as men. Instead of Greek and Latin, women were trained in domestic subjects and religion to make them prepared for their lives as wives. Women were instead to learn how to care for their household and family since they were not supposed to become anything else than mothers and wives (Reena 125). According to Wollstonecraft, because of the limitations of subjects in women's education women tended to not take their studies seriously – implying that this would not be the case if they were allowed to study e.g. language or literature – and in addition she claims that this misconception of what women should want and need to study “robs the whole sex of its dignity” (53). This lack of proper education caused there to be additional inequality within relationships between a husband and a wife. Wollstonecraft explains that during this time, diminishing the intellect of a woman would put her in an inferior position, which would make her more attractive to men as they, in turn, would feel superior. However, Wollstonecraft also argues that simultaneously there was a contradictory belief that this very same fact made women less attractive since they would be unable to contribute to conversations and discussions (Wollstonecraft 55). Thus, women were put in a difficult - almost impossible - position where they had to have an intellect that was inferior to their husbands, whilst being intellectual enough to be able to have discussions with the very same husbands.

There were certain things one expected women of the middle and upper classes to be able to do such as playing an instrument, painting, singing or other skills such as these (Reena 125). There were hundreds of periodicals and books (known as conduct manuals) explaining the conduct expected of women, which were increasingly popular within the middle class (Jones 14). By

painting a picture of what a woman should be, what she should be able to do, and how she should behave, conduct literature spread the image of the ideal woman. Vivien Jones presents parts of these manuals and letters of advice to young women e.g. where it is explained that a woman should not be passionate or emotional, and that a woman's lack of rights within a marriage is due to women, by nature, not being rational enough (Jones 17-19). Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) is - in part - a response to this type of periodicals, and according to Jones, responses such as Wollstonecraft's were increasing in popularity (14). Women during Austen's time were thus surrounded by the notions of the ideal woman and the pressure of achieving this ideal, and the expectations with regard to their conduct etc., were not hard to find in their society.

3. Austen's Writing and Life

Jane Austen's texts are still popular they have been studied in many levels of education for a long time, even to this day, and have gone through several TV and film adaptations. This spread, acclaim and popularity has caused her texts to be the first source some people come in contact with about what life and people were like in the Georgian era leading her texts to be considered as realistic and reliable as historical sources to a degree. Nonetheless, it is important to be critical of her texts and how accurately they portrayed her society and the typical behavior of the people living in it. In addition, Laurence W. Mazzeno explains that though Austen and her novels are quite popular today, they have not always been so, and describes that criticism of Austen and her novels has changed over time. This means that the arguments of her work are often reflective of the time in which those arguments were common and generally easier to accept (Mazzeno, *Jane Austen*, 1-5, 101).

Austen wrote lighthearted and entertaining stories and used exaggeration when creating her characters to get a comical effect, but also to criticize certain behaviors found within certain social classes (Trollope 52). This means that the characters we meet may be characterizations of stereotypes of e.g. the upper class, who then would be very arrogant or fixated on money, which in turn may not be accurate for everybody in the upper class. It has also been argued that while

Austen's work is illustrative of the situation in which she lived, and commenting on the people around her, it is also ironic and uses rhetoric to do so (Mazzeno, *Jane Austen*, 71). This is why it is important to discuss to what degree her characters could be considered realistic and if their behavior mimics Austen's own society before a character analysis can be done. This is partially done by comparing Austen's life experiences with the common themes of her stories such as marriage as well as what class of people she would have typically been meeting or observing.

By being a woman, we can assume that Austen has the experience to be reliable in her ability to portray women in her novels, and the difficulties they might face in life. Being of the same social class as her main characters in e.g. *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* adds to the same reliability of the accuracy in which she portrays her characters. One might argue that the lack of representation of the lower social classes, such as the working class, is due to Austen not being fully aware of their situation in society and therefore unable to represent them in an accurate way. However, since I find that the social class of Austen herself as well as the upper class are the ones pertinent to her stories as well as this essay, I will not consider this aspect as something negative to her ability to portray her society and the people in it.

Barin Akman states that Austen had the ability to illustrate her surroundings in an authentic way and supports this by comparing the social and legal disadvantages women faced during Austen's time to how these themes are described in Austen's texts. Being married was still the norm and the general goal of a woman's life, and women often had to settle for a man they were less than happy to spend their life with, as they dealt with the reality that the ideal marriage was unachievable. Austen's protagonists challenged this idea by achieving their ideal marriage by not accepting anything that did not live up to their own standards and by not compromising themselves and their integrity to satisfy a man. By this Austen challenged women to stay true to themselves, however, the idea of women choosing their ideal man was still somewhat a fictional concept. Yet, by including the struggle of marriage Austen's novels point to the fact that she was aware of the limited options women had and shared this by writing about diverting from standards, where those who did not conform to the expectations of society still managed to live happy lives. On the other hand, she also showed how those who went against the social expectations by being single did not live as happy lives, as is the case with Miss Bates in *Emma* (1815) for instance (Barin Akman 1101-

1115). It can be said that Austen rewarded her characters with happy endings and successful marriages if they had experienced some sort of character development “Prideful and prejudiced may be where these characters begin, but by the end of the novel their worlds have certainly expanded, and those will be rewarded with happy endings who are willing to adapt and change.” (Mazzeno et al. 41). In short, Austen represented her society in a fairly realistic way by including the real dilemmas women faced on a daily basis in her fiction. Therefore, she could be considered a reliable author when it comes to the struggle of women and the setting of her stories.

Austen herself came from a family where her father only made a modest living and after her father died Austen never married, which could have gained her more comfortable living (Adkins and Adkins 15). In 1802 she accepted a proposal of marriage, which would have been adventurous from an economical point of view, but the day after accepting she declined the offer (Mazzeno, *Pride and Prejudice*, 383). At the time this would have been a social embarrassment on her part, but it does mean that she shared the same experience of declining a marriage proposal as some of her characters e.g. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. In several of her novels she comments on how women are excluded from the process of choosing a partner to marry. An example of this can be found in *Sense and Sensibility* where the wealthy Miss Morton becomes the subject of interest of the two brothers Edward and Robert Ferrars. To this Elinor Dashwood comments “The lady, I suppose, has no choice in the affair” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 336) Elinor’s own brother then replies “Choice! - how do you mean?” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 336). This dialogue demonstrates that Austen was aware of the part a woman is expected to play when it came to marriage, though instead of stating her dislike of this explicitly she created dialogues such as this which, again, indicated how her arguments are found between the lines. Her critique of society is not very radical or explicit, but still present if one analyses the subtext of her stories and characters.

Apart from reliability in portrayal, the message and politics of Austen’s novels are important to consider - if there is any message in her texts at all. That is to say, if we do find a political message through this character analysis, would it be typical of Austen to have it explicit or knowingly written between the lines? The case might also be that some arguments or messages are created in the eyes of the reader. It has been commented, both in modern times and by Austen’s own peers -

as explained by Gilbert and Gubar - that even though Austen did express her opinions in her texts, she was not one to push boundaries (109). Though she had her own opinions she did not express these opinions explicitly in her texts, which is why one must look between the lines to find her sentiments and arguments, and the views she did present were not radical or very groundbreaking. Austen did have a group of readers who looked for her arguments and what they expressed was political messages about the situation of women in her texts. They then decided to advocate for these opinions in a more explicit way than Austen ever did herself (Gilbert and Gubar 112). This indicates that even though Austen herself may not be very argumentative, readers have looked for and found arguments in her texts they wish to promote. The way Austen argues is often indirect and it takes more than just reading on the surface to understand the message she tries to convey if there is a message to find. The novels Austen wrote were entertaining and not first and foremost political, thus there is not always an agenda to examine. However, since there have been a number of essays and articles explaining how there indeed are messages of female equality in her texts, I do believe that there must be some foundation for this, found in her texts. Therefore, my character analysis is an attempt to understand the characters better by searching for their motivations between the lines and on a more subtle level.

4. Character Analysis

Mrs. Dashwood

“I can feel no sentiment of approbation inferior to love”

(Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 19)

Mrs. Dashwood is the mother of the protagonist Elinor Dashwood in the novel *Sense and Sensibility*. She and her second daughter Marianne represent the sensibility of the family. Mrs. Dashwood behaves in an emotional way, and lets her feelings rule her judgement on more than one occasion. An example of this is that when we first meet her, she is supposed to welcome her daughter in law Fanny Dashwood into their estate, but because of the latter not sending word in advance about her arrival Mrs. Dashwood is so upset that her daughter Elinor has to handle the

formalities. We are also told that she would have made decisions which would have affected the family's economy negatively if it had not been for Elinor and her more logical reasoning, which demonstrates her dependence on her daughter. An example is when Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters have to find a new place of residence and Mrs. Dashwood is unable to accomplish this task and has to rely on Elinor. Despite Mrs. Dashwood's emotional behavior, she is generally well liked. She is devoted to the happiness of her daughters and supports them in their endeavors, though she may not understand their feelings and opinions all the time. Her teenage daughter Marianne is quite like her in being a romantic, but Elinor is in several ways the opposite of Mrs. Dashwood. At one point in a conversation with Elinor Mrs. Dashwood comments that she simply does not understand Elinor's mild feelings for Edward Ferrars, saying that she herself "can feel no sentiment of approbation inferior to love" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 19). This remark is very representative of Mrs. Dashwood's character, and sets the expectations for her actions throughout the text.

When it comes to marriage, Mrs. Dashwood is, as mentioned, supportive of her daughters' romantic ventures. One might suspect that her support is strictly for her own gain since well-married daughters would provide herself with stability for the rest of her life. This is evidently not the case, though, as Mrs. Dashwood decides to stay in the cottage they acquired even after her daughters are married instead of moving in with them, which would have saved money on household expenses. It seems more likely that her interest in having her daughters married is due to a general interest in romance and maybe also a lack of it in her own life. Though there are not many mentions of the relationship between Mrs. Dashwood and her late husband, it is explained that Mr. Henry Dashwood wanted his wife and their daughters well taken care of when he died, but this does not necessarily mean that there was a romantic bond between him and his wife. Richard Simpson writes that though the typical family dynamic in Austen's novels is comfortable, many of the parental figures have a mismatched relationship and that their "existence has been fulfilled in having given birth to the heroes and heroines of the stories." (Gray et al. 293). This indicates that after having children together, many fathers and mothers in Austen's texts do not have a common goal as a couple anymore. Thus, it would not be unusual to argue that a relationship such as the one between Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood would be without romance. In addition, Mrs. Dashwood was Mr. Dashwood's second wife, since his first wife died. This could mean that the age difference between

Mr. Dashwood and the current Mrs. Dashwood would be large, which also could contribute to a lack of romance or sense of solidarity and fellowship. Thus, the lack of romance could be the reason that she is supportive of her daughters' romantic endeavors.

Regarding education, Mrs. Dashwood is representative of women's education or rather, the lack of proper education, at the time. While her husband was alive, Mrs. Dashwood relied on him and after his death she is dependent on her oldest daughter, who despite being younger is more capable of independence. If Mrs. Dashwood had been able to gain a better education, maybe she would have been more able to rule the household after her husband's death. Mrs. Dashwood does, however, not seem to care about her dependence and lack of education as she tends to prioritize other interests and proficiencies, such as love and a good judge of character. On the other hand, by showing her flaws in management and explaining how Elinor Dashwood takes charge in her place, the text paints her daughter in a better light. Though it is not indicated that Mrs. Dashwood's daughters had any more or better education than herself, this implies that independence and an interest in developing your intellect is something to strive for. Even though Mrs. Dashwood herself does not argue for proper education for women, she is an instrument conveying this argument in an indirect way by portraying her as inferior when it comes to intelligence and independence.

In a way Mrs. Dashwood could be said to represent the ideal woman of her time. There are certainly aspects of her that were expected of a woman, e.g. her kind behavior and care for others, especially her children. However, her feelings are too much in control of her judgement and actions, and there are many events that she could have been handled better if she had not been as emotional as she is. She is sweet and makes great first impressions on other characters but does not possess enough composure to be considered ideal. Since Mrs. Dashwood cares more about love-based marriages than marrying for money and social gain she does to some extent think in a more modern way of the time. This does not make her divert from the ideal woman, but it shows that she does not only represent traditional attitudes.

Fanny Dashwood

“They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be!”

(Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 14)

Fanny Dashwood is married to Mrs. Dashwood’s stepson, John Dashwood, who is the inheritor of the Norland estate. Fanny and John Dashwood move into the estate after the passing of Mr. Henry Dashwood, which means that Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters have to make other living arrangements. Initially, John Dashwood plans to help them economically, as his father wanted them well taken care of however, his wife is shocked when she hears the amount of money he wants to gift them. She argues for him giving the four women less and less money as their conversation goes along, and the manipulation she is capable of becomes clear. Her arguments indicate that her motivation for not wanting her husband to give away money is their own son. She claims that if her husband provides Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters with money there will be no money left for their child, in spite of the fact that her husband had previously come to the conclusion that they could indeed afford this gift without compromising their needs. Though her motivations appear to come from her care for her own family, the actions of her character throughout the rest of the novel show that, to her, money is more important than other people. She lacks interest in people who do not possess a large sum of money or a high social status. Thus, using her son as an argument to not gift Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters money does not necessarily mean that her only motivation is the comfort of her child. Her character indicates that she does not want to risk falling into the same economic situation as those she looks down upon. However, it can be said that many of Austen’s characters have landed in relationships with the motivation of a stable living (Reena 125-126), thus Fanny Dashwood not wanting to risk her economic stability is not an outrageous behavior. In addition, the fact that she does want the best for her son cannot be disregarded as a front for her selfish reasonings, as it is highly likely that she does not only want riches for herself but for her child as well. This would also coincide with what she has been taught to prioritize by society, as she is a woman and a mother.

Being of a different personality than Austen’s protagonists, it may be difficult to see how Mrs. Fanny Dashwood would be able to oppose the expectations and ideals placed on women. However,

I do find that she accomplishes this, though indirectly. Fanny Dashwood does seem like a woman conforming to society's expectations on a surface level: she wishes the best for her family, as a mother and wife should, can socialize and converse in a respectable way and she is generally well married. However, from the moment she is introduced in the book less admirable characteristics are shown, being her selfishness and value of money over her fellow man. Other aspects which would not have been seen as proper of a woman would be her manipulation of her husband. She is not a subordinate wife, as society would expect. Fanny is able to get what she wants through her husband and is able to make him do what she wants, which indirectly makes her the head of the family as she controls the decisions. Though there might be commendable features in Fanny Dashwood's behavior, it was not unusual for Austen to write characters with ambiguity in their characteristics. Just as her protagonists are not ideal or do not exhibit perfect virtue, antagonists such as Fanny Dashwood are not inherently evil "It is her philosophy to see not only the soul of goodness in things evil, but also to see on the face of goodness the impress of weakness and caducity." (Gray et al. 294). However, by possessing these less admirable features, Fanny Dashwood's character is a demonstration that conforming to the expectations of society does not necessarily mean that you are a respectable or great person, thus negating the notion that the ideals put on women are not always favorable. By being this way, Fanny Dashwood's characterization works as an argument against the expectations of women during Austen's time.

Mrs. Bennet

"The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news."

(Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 4)

Mrs. Bennet is the mother of the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet and her four sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*. She is known for her constant attempts to marry off her daughters and her emotional behavior. In the family she is the subject of ridicule because of her emotional and impulsive behavior. Mr. Bennet is often happy to make fun of his wife because of this, while at the same time he gets frustrated with her when she is unable to understand him, which coincides with how Wollstonecraft expressed that lack of proper education and intelligence with women was both attractive and frustrating to men (55). It is very likely that she, just as her daughter Lydia, were

simply chosen to be married to the men they ended up with due to their appearance, which then later in their respective relationships would not be enough for the couples to be happy and satisfied with each other.

With regard to marriage Mrs. Bennet is little interested in her daughters' feelings and only has eyes for financial security. It even appears as though she endorses some of her daughters' bad behavior if it helps them acquire a husband. One might argue, however, that Mrs. Bennet's obsession with marrying her daughters is about survival. Being of the middle class - and as it was unusual to marry into the upper class - it is likely that the general motivation of a woman her social standing would be that you have to marry well to achieve a stable life. As the financial situation of women was dependent on them being married, Mrs. Bennet's concerns for her daughters getting married would then be considered quite realistic. She constantly, at any opportunity given, throws her daughters at suitors, and worries over their future, especially since two of her daughters are getting closer to being past prime marriageable age. To her, because of her social class, marriage is a numbers game which she has to play for her daughters' sake.

The characterization of Mrs. Bennet contests the position of women in several ways. She not only lacks the composure and ability to socialize in a poised way - and therefore does not fit the ideal - but at moments she ponders over the position of women and opposes the opportunities women are limited to. On several occasions she vents her frustration with the fact that her daughters cannot inherit the estate that they were living in. Her two oldest daughters have to explain this concept to her:

They had often attempted it before, but it was a subject on which Mrs. Bennet was beyond the reach of reason; and she continued to rail bitterly against the cruelty of settling an estate away from a family of five daughters, in favor of a man whom nobody cared anything about. (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 42)

It is as if her daughters, who have generally been considered to be more forward thinking than Mrs. Bennet herself, find it amusing that their own mother cannot understand the silliness of her own statement. This shows that though Mrs. Bennet is not the brightest of individuals, she does possess somewhat of an idea of the inequality women face. In this case the inheritance is due to entailment

which means that the Bennet children had no claim to the estate as they were all women, but if the case had been that they inherited the estate Mrs. Bennet would not have had to anxiously worry about her daughters being married. The issue is not with the women not being able to own estates, but the fact that since they – as women – did not have an income, owning an estate is more critical to their future than that of a man of the same class.

Additionally, Mrs. Bennet's worry for the security and future of her daughters can be argued to have affected her relationship with them. If she did not have to worry about her daughters having a roof over their heads, there would be more room for her to emotionally connect with her own children. Nina Auerbach describes the relationships between the young women and their mother in the Bennet family are almost nonexistent, as they exist in a hierarchy with the older daughters at the top (41). The sisters themselves have divided into groups, but Mrs. Bennet stands on her own (Auerbach 40-41). Though I find that Mrs. Bennet had somewhat of a relationship with Lydia, she is to a great extent unable to attach much to her children partly due of her anxiety with their economic stability.

The character of Mrs. Bennet can be said to represent the stress of attaining a stable living women faced as well as the lack of education for women. She is unable to converse with her husband since he feels that she simply does not understand enough. This could be seen as an argument against the view some men held of women, as they would marry someone simply because of her looks, to then discover later that it was not enough. Though Mrs. Bennet does not express this argument, her character is used to convey the notion that being attractive is not everything and for a relationship to last, both people need a fulfilled personality and character, not just looks. In a similar fashion her character demonstrates that denying a woman the proper education which men were provided, leaves her to be considered less of an accomplished person even by her own family, though she may not realize this herself. All of these factors make Mrs. Bennet is a character who indirectly challenges the position of women.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh

“‘Upon my word,’ said her Ladyship, ‘you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person’”

(Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 110)

Lady Catherine de Bourgh is the aunt of Mr. Darcy whom the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet later marries and acts as an antagonist in *Pride and Prejudice*. As previously presented, Austen sometimes exaggerated her characters for comical effect, e.g. the characters of the upper class. I find this to be the case with Lady Catherine de Bourgh as she is very stereotypical of the upper class, in that she is merely interested in the achievements in business or skills and social position of others as well as being the one in the center of attention. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is in general pretentious and always expects to be treated as the most valuable person in the company. She behaves as though her opinions are the most important ones and makes sure that everyone else will think the same as her. It is argued that Austen did not place this stereotype and criticism on every character of the upper class, only those who failed to fulfill their responsibility, as she took the hierarchical responsibility quite seriously (Martin 138). Though the exact fail of responsibility of Lady Catherine de Bourgh would be more pertinent in another essay, it is noteworthy that the stereotype of this character is not placed on every character of her social class.

Elizabeth Bennet finds herself disagreeing with Lady Catherine de Bourgh on several occasions, but in contrast to the other characters speaks her arguments out loud. This creates a conflict between the two where Lady Catherine de Bourgh shows how much she is used to be in control by being frustrated about having to deal with a young woman willing to correct her almost negligent assumptions and comments. In fact, Claudia Johnson states that it is Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s pride which blinds her to what happiness other people may strive towards, as Austen’s characters in *Pride and Prejudice* all work to pursue their own definition of happiness (Johnson 80-81). This means that though Lady Catherine has the same goal (happiness) in mind for herself, she is too focused on her own definition of the goal to even consider that other people have other priorities. It is clear that the two characters are from different backgrounds and are of different viewpoints. How then, could such a character as Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is so contrasting to Elizabeth, be used to argue against the ideal, just like the protagonist?

Somewhat similar to Fanny Dashwood, on the surface Lady Catherine de Bourgh's behavior represents the expectations of society. Her expectations on herself as well as on the other female characters in the novel are representative of those of her society, for instance in her attitude to the Bennet sisters' accomplishments in music and art. She is disappointed that Elizabeth Bennet is not as proficient in playing an instrument as she expects the young woman to be, and comments on this. She also confidently provides Elizabeth Bennet with advice on the pianoforte, despite having no experience playing the instrument herself, "If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient." (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 121). This represents the type of accomplishments women were expected to excel in. Lady Catherine does not care much for Elizabeth Bennet's intelligence and ability to argue but asks questions about her and the other Bennet sisters' interests in art and music, in other words the conventional areas of women's education which Lady Catherine de Bourgh seems to agree with. She also comments on Elizabeth's behavior and manners, since she obviously expects a young woman to behave in a more reserved way instead of voicing her opinions in a free manner. Lady Catherine thus represents the typical expectations on women and does not question these. Again, this is a situation similar to that of Fanny Dashwood in that Lady Catherine's behaviors reflect those expected by society, yet her demeanor is unpleasant and not admirable. This critiques her conventional attitude and attitudes similar to hers, that fulfilling the ideals put on you does not make you nice or pleasant person, which in turn criticizes the image of the ideal woman.

To summarize her character, I do believe that the character of Lady Catherine de Bourgh can oppose the expectations of women by conforming to them, whilst being an unadmirable person. She yet possesses characteristics not favorable, even by society's standards. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is very much in charge, a bit like Fanny Dashwood. She even tends to make decisions in the affairs of people who are not included in her household, e.g. Mr. Collins, which is not a behavior much wanted by a woman in the eyes of society. Needless to say, Lady Catherine possesses both money and influence over others and is in a position which women are not generally in. She uses her class to behave in the way she wants, and is able to get away with it, with no regard to her gender. If there was a character alike her of a lower class the case would most likely have been that her gender would have created a hinder, but as she is of the upper class she has more liberties. Though acting

to the point beyond decorum and being a unlikeable character, the characterization of Lady Catherine de Bourgh indirectly condones the argument of the fact that the ideals and expectations put on women are not something to strive for, as they do not make you a good person.

5. Conclusion

This character analysis has aimed to support the notion that the feminine ideal is unachievable. This is upheld by the texts since even if the case was that the female characters were to accomplish everything the ideal woman is expected to accomplish, it did not necessarily make them good people, and therefore, not ideal. All four of these women divert from the expectations set by society in one way or another. Though the characters analyzed in this essay do not speak up for the rights of women, their characterizations still manage to challenge the view of women by not conforming to the standards, expectations and ideals forced upon them. This is done by e.g. not being in control of their emotions, or not acting subordinate to the men in their surroundings. However, the characters who do conform to the expectations instead possess a behavior which is unpleasant, which sullies the image of a woman who acts according to the societal expectations. Their characterizations argue that accomplishment in marriage and certain skills do not build a good personality thus the expectations are not important to the character building and value of a woman. The women analyzed who are generally more well-liked by the other characters in their respective stories are actually those who do not quite live up to the ideal, which enforces this argument. The characters may not be argumentative in the same way the protagonists are, but Austen did write them in a different way than what the society would have wanted a woman to be, which shows that there are several ways to bring forth the argument of gender equality. The action of writing them in such a way might not have been revolutionary or very feminist, but it did show that women could have different values and motivations and could all still defy the expectations. By being who they are, these women indirectly argue against the ideal woman.

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