

Dialogic Essay - 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'Bridget Jones's Diary'

Discuss the similarities and differences in the way that Austen and Maguire portray the restriction faced by women.

Jane Austen's novel, 'Pride and Prejudice', and Sharon Maguire's film, 'Bridget Jones's Diary' both address the social values that govern an individual's life. While 'Pride and Prejudice' is set in Regency England, 'Bridget Jones's Diary' explores the social expectations of women that are still relevant in the 21st century, when the film is set. A variety of limitations are placed on women by men, society and themselves and, whilst the limitations themselves are quite similar, the ways in which they are enforced differ. Indeed, the texts expose the different challenges women face in the modern day, some of which are derived from the social mores prevalent in the 19th century; while women are entitled to more freedom, they are still pressured to marry and form romantic relationships. As well as this, women face a variety of expectations that they must uphold in order to be accepted by the social constructs that their worlds are comprised of.

Both women in the Regency era and women of the 21st century are expected to marry in order to uphold their positions within their societies; the rigid patriarchy in 'Pride and Prejudice' and the male dominated society in 'Bridget Jones's Diary'. Notably, Elizabeth had "... prepared in the highest of spirits for the conquest of all that remained unsubdued of [Mr Wickham's] heart..." The fact that women are expected to conquer a man's heart proves that it was a woman's role to find and keep a husband for herself. Certainly, this was a very difficult expectation to uphold, mainly because, more often than not, love was not an aspect of such a business-like transaction. The expectations of women with regards to marriage in the Regency meant that many could not pursue romantic relationships for fear of not achieving a respectable position in terms of financial wealth and status. Through Charlotte Lucas' dialogue and characterisation, it becomes clear that she is "... not a romantic..." and only asks "... for a comfortable home and ... [is] convinced that [her] chance of happiness with [Mr Collins] is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state." If Charlotte does not marry soon, whilst already at the age of twenty-seven, she will be considered a failure in the eyes of society. Moreover, all women are expected to marry if they are expected to have an opportunity at living a comfortable life. If not, as is clearly evident from the exchange between Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet, failure to marry leads to a woman not only being rejected by society, but by all familial connections. What is already a tense relationship between Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet is made even tenser after Elizabeth rejects Mr Collins' proposal and Mr Bennet tells her that she will "... be a stranger to one of your parents. [Her] mother will never see [her] again." Not wishing to make the same mistake as Elizabeth, Charlotte attempts to cover up her fear of failure and acceptance that Mr Collins is her best opportunity to find a husband by demeaning her ability as a person to have a romantic relationship. Importantly, Austen asserts the important role of marriage at the very beginning of the text when writing that "it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." As such, she portrays women as merely objects and men as their possessors. Therefore, one of the very few important roles of women in the 19th century was to marry in order to secure their family financial fortune and status.

Similarly, 'Bridget Jones's Diary' explores the social expectations of women to marry in order to be accepted by others and in order to assert their position as a fully-fledged woman. Maguire employs dialogue when one of the men, who is characterised as very stuck up by his smug grin, at the couple's party asks "... why are there so many unmarried office women in their thirties." This question demonstrates the pressure that society as a whole places on women to find a husband, as is also demonstrated in 'Pride and Prejudice' with Mrs Bennet encouraging Elizabeth to accept Mr Collins' proposal. Additionally, Maguire demonstrates how, in most cases, women are expected to settle for second best and not pursue their love life. Much like Charlotte pragmatically accepts that she must marry Mr Collins, Daniel tries to pressure Bridget into marrying him because, as is pathetically demonstrated through his dialogue, "if [he] can't

make it with [her], [he] can't make it with anyone." Certainly, most women are not expected to nor given the opportunity to pursue their own ambitions and love life as this is already set in stone by the males of their life. Maguire, however, expresses her condemnation of this when characterising Bridget as a strong and powerful woman who ultimately takes control of her life. This is demonstrated later in the film when it is discovered through her voice over that she seeks to "... find nice, sensible boyfriend to go out with ... and not continue to form romantic attachments to ... " those who prove to be detrimental to her love life. She most certainly does not settle for second best and, as she explains to Daniel, is "... looking for something more extraordinary than that," thus signifying the end of their relationship with one another. As such, Maguire's positive characterisation of Bridget is designed to reject society's claims that women must marry for ease and practicality, not love.

Whilst women in the 19th century had expectations placed on them with regards to marriage, they also had specific expectations placed on them with regards to their role as a female in general. Women are expected to be coy, playful creatures that taunt and tease men. Mr Collins is certainly under this impression and apparently, as he explains to Elizabeth, knows "... it to be the stablished custom of [her] sex to reject a man on the first application." Indeed, there is much confusion surrounding the actions of women as a result of unrealistic expectations being formed with regards to their actions. As such, women use their actions rather than their words to interact with their world and communicate with men. This is evident when Mr Darcy's dialogue states that Elizabeth and Miss Bingley are deliberately walking around the room because their "... figures appear to the greatest advantage ..." and, if so, he "... can admire [them] much better as [he sits] by the fire." Indeed, not only does this expose that women use their physical appearance to their advantage, it also shows that men are motivated by physical appearance, therefore accounting for the significant emphasis that society places on a woman's appearance. As Austen continues to demonstrate, women are not simply restricted by their appearances, they are also restricted in their abilities. The 1800s are, indeed, dominated by men and, as such, women are given very little freedom, especially financial freedom. Importantly, whilst describing family relationships, Austen states that the Bennet property, "... unfortunately for his daughters was entailed in default of heirs male." Indeed, as was common practice for people in Regency England, women held little to no financial or social power and it is only recently that they have been given much more freedom as a result of the breakdown of the patriarchy. As such, Austen continuously denounces those who place restrictions on women and stop them from being financially independent.

Conversely, women living in the 21st century have much more freedom than those living in the 19th century. Shazzer is characterised, through her fiery red hair, as an independent, raging feminist, so to speak, who stands up for her rights. Her anger stems from her unhappiness with the male dominated world she lives in. Regardless, Shazzer is a testament to the way in which customs have changed and women have been given much more freedom to pursue their own careers and financially support themselves without reliance upon a man. This is further reinforced through Bridget's position at work. Whilst her boss is male, she is a woman who holds her own job and is financially stable. Indeed, her job requires her intelligence and, just before the company function, her friends tell her to "... circulate, ooze intelligence ...", something that is, ironically, a deeper contrast to Bridget's own sense of what success requires. Due to this, it becomes evident that women working in the 21st century are not simply valued for their appearance but are also valued for their intelligence and therefore commitment and contribution to the workplace. Even so, heavy emphasis is still placed on a woman's appearance within the 21st century, much like it was in the 19th century. Bridget's boss, at the television show she works for, who has already been characterised as quite perverted, certainly holds these outdated yet still prevalent views, as is evident through his comment on her appearance; telling her to "put on some more makeup – I want you on camera." Notably, Bridget's attire is already overly sexualised as she is wearing a very short skirt whilst wearing a fireman's helmet. Maguire, however, challenges the emphasis placed on appearance when portraying the relationship between Bridget and Darcy. Darcy's dialogue to Bridget states that he likes her "just the way ..." she is, "not thinner ... not cleverer ... not [with] slightly bigger breasts ..." It is this exact moment which leads to Bridget's self-actualisation and realisation that she does not need society's approval to have self-confidence in her appearance and, more broadly, abilities. She forms standards and begins to take control of her own life. This is demonstrated when Bridget tells Daniel in a close up shot of the pair's faces that a life settling for second best is not

longer “. . . a good enough offer . . .” for her and she is “. . . not willing to gamble away [her] whole life.” Certainly, this proves that, in order to be accepted, women do not necessarily have to be physically attractive, therefore, challenging and disproving the very foundation of beliefs that society has built around women.

While Jane Austen’s ‘Pride and Prejudice’ mainly focuses on appearances, ‘Bridget Jones’s Dairy’ focuses on intelligence and a woman’s independence. Indeed, social expectations for women exist within both texts, however, Austen’s text focuses more heavily on implementing these expectations whereas Maguire’s text focuses more on challenging them. Even so, both texts place heavy emphasis on the importance of marriage for women, specifically marriages which have significant financial and social benefit. Maguire, however, encourages women to overcome these restrictions and marry for love. Certainly, women who prove that they are independent and make the decision to marry for love are demonstrated to be happier and much more content with their lives compared to those who are not and do not.

