

**Mladi za napredek Maribora 2020**

**37. srečanje**

**THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN  
VICTORIAN LITERATURE**

Tuji jeziki

Raziskovalna naloga

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Maribor, februar 2020



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## 1. POVZETEK

Namen moje raziskovalne naloge je ugotoviti, kako so v viktorijanskih časih opisovali ženske v knjigah. Včasih imajo knjige lahko na bralce na poseben način tudi psihološke učinke. Na primer, če nam je knjiga všeč in imamo dobro mnenje o glavnem junaku, mu bomo želeli biti podobni. Zato menim, da so knjige v takratnem času na subtilen način izvajale pritisk nad ženskami. Če je bilo v knjigi opisano, da je glavna junakinja uglajena in sočutna lepotica, so ženske imele občutek, da si moški takšne ženske tudi želijo. V takratnem leposlovju so (pretežno moški) avtorji opisovali, kako naj bi idealna viktorijanska družba izgledala. Seveda pa so se izogibali kontroverznim temam, kot so prostitucija, delo žensk, kako težko je bilo biti popolna žena ali kako zelo za moške privilegirana je bila takratna družba. Zato je v večini knjig opisana popolna idealistična ljubezen med olikanimi moškimi in tako rekoč popolnimi ženskami.





## 2. RAZŠIRJEN POVZETEK

V raziskovalni nalogi sem uporabila metodo opazovanja, ki vključuje teoretično analizo in uporabila različne članke, spletna mesta in dnevnik ženske iz tega obdobja, da bi izvedela čim več o obravnavani temi.

Liki, zlasti ženski liki v knjigah iz viktorijanske dobe, so bili zelo idealizirani. Prikazovali so le dobro stran obdobja, tako rečeno zgodnico, olepšano različico realnosti. Želela sem spoznati glavne stereotipe in koliko resnični so pravzaprav bili, vpliv, ki sta ga na vsakdanje življenje imela spol in razred, nekaj o religiji, znanosti, britanskem imperiju v viktorijanski dobi, kulturi in umetnosti. Toda večina moje raziskave je bila usmerjena v ženske. Potem ko sem pred sabo imela jasno sliko, kaj se je v obdobju dogajalo, sem prebrala zelo priljubljeno knjigo iz viktorijanske dobe; *Prevzetnost in pristranost* avtorice Jane Austen. Knjiga je roman o ljubezni in o tem, kako lahko ljubezen premaga vse ovire in težave ter na koncu še vedno zmaga. Skozi roman se nam malo nakaže tudi temna plat te tako imenovane moško centrirane družbe. Kljub temu pa je celotna zgodba polna romantičnih in sladkih prizorov ter ljubezenskih iluzij, stvari, o katerih sanja vsako dekle.

V viktorijanski dobi je moško centrirana družba ženske podrejala, razvrednotila in zatirala. V zakonu naj bi ženska igrala vlogo angela, bila vedno dobra in potrpežljiva žena, brez svojega mnenja. Ženska inferiornost je bila pogosto razglašena za nesporno, v knjigi *Prevzetnost in pristranost* pa je prikazana tudi nasprotna zgodba, torej ženska, ki se postavi zase. V resnici pa so bile ženske pravice in privilegiji omejeni. Poročene in samske ženske so živele v slabih razmerah, prikrajšane za marsikaj. Finančna in spolna zapostavljenost, prenašanje neenakosti v zakonskih zvezah in v družbenem življenju so le osnova tega, kar je povzročilo tako velike razlike med moškimi in ženskimi pravicami. Takratna zgradba družbe je moškim zagotovila finančno stabilnost in s tem prevlado v zakonu in nad ženami. Ženske v viktorijanskem času so bile predstavljene kot lastnina, namenjena temu, da moški v njej uživajo. Žene so bile neupoštevane, prav tako niso imele izobraževalnih, finančnih ali socialnih privilegijev, kot so jih imeli moški. Mnoge žene so trpele nadzor in krutost svojih možev. To je vključevalo spolno agresijo, verbalno zlorabo in ekonomsko prikrajševanje. Takšen odnos je bil nepošten; glavna naloga ženske je bila se poročiti in sodelovati v življenju moških, pred tem pa se je morala

naučiti gospodinjskih spretnosti - da je znala voditi hišno gospodinjstvo, organizirati zabave, se znati pravilno pogovarjati (seveda o pravih temah)...., saj je drugače bila označena za nekompatibilno. Poroke v tej dobi so bile kot pogodba, s katero si je žena kupila status, mož pa oskrbnico hiše. Medtem ko so moški pogosto imeli afere z drugimi ženskami, je bila za ženo ločitev skoraj nemogoča, saj je bilo to nesprejemljivo.

Zaradi vseh opisanih dilem sem želela napisati raziskovalno nalogo na to temo. Opisala sem stvari, ki so najmočneje izstopale v knjigi *Prevzetnost in pristranost*. Prav tako sem prikazala nekaj temnih plati viktorijanske dobe. Na koncu se je v knjigi seveda za vse vpletene dobro izteklo, vendar pa se moramo zavedati, da bi takšno žensko kot je bila Elizabeth Bennet, v viktorijanski dobi bolj težko našli. V raziskovalni nalogi sem prikazala takratno družbo in kar je bilo v njej najpomembnejše, temo poroke in njen pomen, zakaj so bile takrat tako pogosto iz ekonomskih razlogov in ne iz ljubezni. Zakaj se torej naša glavna junakinja, ženska iz revne družine srednjega sloja, kljub vsem družbenim pritiskom ni želela poročiti z moškim, ki bi lahko skrbel zanjo. Predstavila sem ženske like v knjigi in kako se je njihovo vedenje pojmovalo za viktorijansko. Moje osebno mnenje pa je, da je bilo obravnavanje žensk v viktorijanski dobi napačno in obžalovanja vredno.

### **3. ZAHVALA**

Zahvaljujem se vsem, ki so mi pomagali, še posebej pa svoji mentorici za nasvete in usmerjanje pri pripravi raziskovalne naloge.

#### **4. ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate how women were described in books from Victorian times, as it was supposed to reflect the perfect woman of the time. Books can sometimes have psychological effects on readers in a special way. If we like the book and have a good opinion of the main character, we will want to be like him/her. So I think the books have put pressure on women in their own particular way. So if the book said, the perfect female heroine is a graceful and compassionate beauty, women would feel that men wanted such women. In the novels of the time, the authors wrote what Victorian society should look like. But they did not write about controversial topics such as prostitution, women's work, how difficult it was to be the perfect wife, or how very male-centered the society was at the time. That is why most books have described perfect love between gentlemen and perfect women.

## 5. INTRODUCTION

People, especially women in Victorian literature were very idolised. Books show only the bright sides of the period, a fairy tale. I used an observation method with theoretical analysis and read different articles, websites and a journal of a woman from this era in order to find out as much as possible of the topic. I wanted to know about the main stereotypes and how true they were, the influence one's gender and class had, and a little bit about religion, science, the British empire, culture and art. But most of my research was directed at women. After I had a picture of the era clearly painted, I read a well-liked Victorian era book; *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. The book is a novel about love, and how love can pass so many barriers and obstacles and still win at the end. Throughout the novel we get a peek at the dark side of this so called male-centred society. But the whole story is filled with romantic and heart-warming scenes and love illusions, things that every girl dreams about.

In reality women were subjugated, degraded and oppressed by the male centred society. They were supposed to act the role of an angel in the house. Women's inferiority was often declared undeniable, while the book showed me quite a different story. In reality their rights and privileges were limited. Married or single, women had hardship and disadvantages that they had to live with. Financial and sexual disadvantages, having to endure inequalities inside their marriages and social life are only the beginning of what made such distinct differences in men's and women's rights. Social construct gave men financial stability and with that, power over their homes and women. Women at that time were seen as things to enjoy. Wives were not respected, they also had no educational, financial or social privileges, unlike men had. Many wives suffered their husbands control and cruelty targeted especially at them. That included sexual aggression, verbal abuse and economic deprivation. It was all very unfair, since woman's major function was to get married and take part in their husbands life, and before that a woman was to learn housewife skills. Marriages in this era were contracts. While men often participated in affairs with other women it was near to impossible for a wife to divorce. It was seen as a social taboo.

Because of all that, I wanted to write a research paper on this topic. I think that what was happening in that era was wrong and despicable. In this paper, I have therefore shown some

dark sides of the Victorian era. In continuation, I have written about things that were most strongly depicted in Jane Austen's book, *Pride and Prejudice*. I included society and what was the most important part of it, marriage and its importance. Why they were so often out of economic reasons and why not out of love. So why did our main character, a woman from a poor middle-class family refuse to marry a man that could take care of her? After that, I have described our main female characters and how their behaviour was considered Victorian.

## **6. THE VICTORIAN ERA**

The Victorian era lasted from 1820 to 1914 which roughly corresponds to Queen Victoria's reign, which started in 1837 and ended 1901 with her death. In the era, an increasing number of people got to vote. England and its economy grew, which made it the most powerful empire in the world. (Britannica, 2019)

Britain was a powerful nation with a rich culture. It was wealthy because of industrialization and its imperial holdings, although  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population was working class. Later in the period it started to fall behind other countries, growing with power such as the US, which wasn't noticeable until World War II. (Britannica, 2019)

### **6.1. Stereotypes**

Today we picture it as if the Victorian era consistently covered up the existence of sex but on the other hand they constantly discussed it, covered as warnings. There is a truth to both sides as some educated Victorians wrote a lot about it, on the other side, most middle-class women were proud on how little they knew about human biology and childbirth. (Britannica, 2019)

Besides that they lived with a sexual double standard, that was not really questioned before the end of the period. It stated that men wanted and needed sex, while the wives only did it to please their husbands. This double standard was contradicted by prostitution, STDs, women with sexual desires, same-sex desires, ... (Britannica, 2019)

### **6.2. Gender and class**

While race, religion, occupation, ... were meaningful aspects of social identity and status the main principles by which the society was organised were gender and class. (Britannica, 2019)

Gender was considered biologically based and determinative of the individual's character and potential. The ideology was based on the "doctrine of separate spheres" which taught that men and women were meant for different things. Men were seen as physically strong, independent, women as weak and dependent. Men had sexual desires, while women only wanted to reproduce. Men belonged in the public sphere and were meant to participate in politics and paid work, and women in the private sphere to run households and raise families. Women were also

taught to be more religious and morally finer than men and their sexual desires. But although this doctrine was influential over all classes the working-class families could not live it out, since they could not survive on a single wage, brought home by the man. (Britannica, 2019)

Class was economic and cultural. It included the income, occupation, education, family structure, politics and hobbies. 70 - 80% of the population was working-class with an income under 100£ per year. The middle-class, which was rapidly growing in number had an income between 100 and 1000£ from salaries and profit. It thought that the working-class was trying to imitate them best as possible, but they were strong, specific and based on their own values. The upper-class had an income of 1000£ or often much more per year all due to their titles, wealth and land. (Britannica, 2019) Just for comparison how much you could buy in that time for a pound: a pound was 100 pennies, and a loaf of bread cost around 0.35 pence. (Patterson 2003)

### **6.3. Religion and science**

The majority of England was Christian. State churches were Anglican churches. They dominated the religious landscape, even though most of the Welsh and Irish population were not Protestants. The Church of Scotland was Presbyterian<sup>1</sup>. There were also Methodists<sup>2</sup>, Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hinduists, ... (Britannica, 2019)

The most known scientific development was the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin, although other versions were developed by some other thinkers as well. There was also the pseudoscience of eugenics<sup>3</sup>, which was seen as an evolutionary theory. In addition the Britons<sup>4</sup> were absorbed by the growing psychology and the physics of energy. (Britannica, 2019)

### **6.4. Government and politics**

A constitutional monarchy was the formal political system. During this era there were five rulers: King George IV (1820 - 30), King William IV (1830 - 37), Queen Victoria (1837 - 1901), King Edward VI (1901 - 10) and King George V (1910 - 36). With time the monarchy transformed into a national symbol. But in practice it was dominated by aristocratic men. Their constitution was unwritten and consisted of written laws and unwritten conventions. The

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<sup>1</sup> A form of a church government developed by Swiss and Rhineland Reformers during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation

<sup>2</sup> A branch of Protestant Christianity

<sup>3</sup> Study of improving the human race through genetics

<sup>4</sup> A native or inhabitant of Great Britain, or a person of British descent.



government consisted of the monarch and the two houses of the Parliament - the House of Commons and the House of Lords. House of Lord lost most of its power in this period, though it remained influential until the Parliament Act of 1911, while the House of Commons became the governments centre. It was populated by 600 MPs<sup>5</sup> who were elected to represent England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. England was the most represented one because of its status, tradition, political power and wealth. House of Lords consisted with several hundred noblemen with life tenures. But members of both Houses were wealthy men. (Britannica, 2019)

The MPs were elected at the beginning of the period when only ½ million people got to vote out of the population of 21 million. That were the property-owning men. In 1829 the vote was granted to Catholic men, in 1832 to most middle-class men. In 1867 and 1884 it was extended to the working-class men. Women over the age of 30 got the vote after 1918 and in 1928 full adult suffrage was achieved with the second Representation of the People Act. Before that they expressed their opinions via demonstrations, petitions and pamphlets (Britannica, 2019)

During this era there were many politically important events. Slavery in the British empire was abolished, the franchises expanded, the working class started with political activism, most notably Chartism, liberalism rose as the dominant political ideology, Conservative and Liberal parties were nationalized at the emergence of the British Labour Party in 1906. The growing of the state was also seen in major acts such as public health act that put a limit on working hours for factory and mine workers. The Married Women's acts and the Contagious Diseases acts were a result of Political conflict between Ireland and Britain, the rise of Irish nationalism and women's rights activism. With time women also got better educational and employment opportunities. (Britannica, 2019)

## **6.5. The Victorian British Empire**

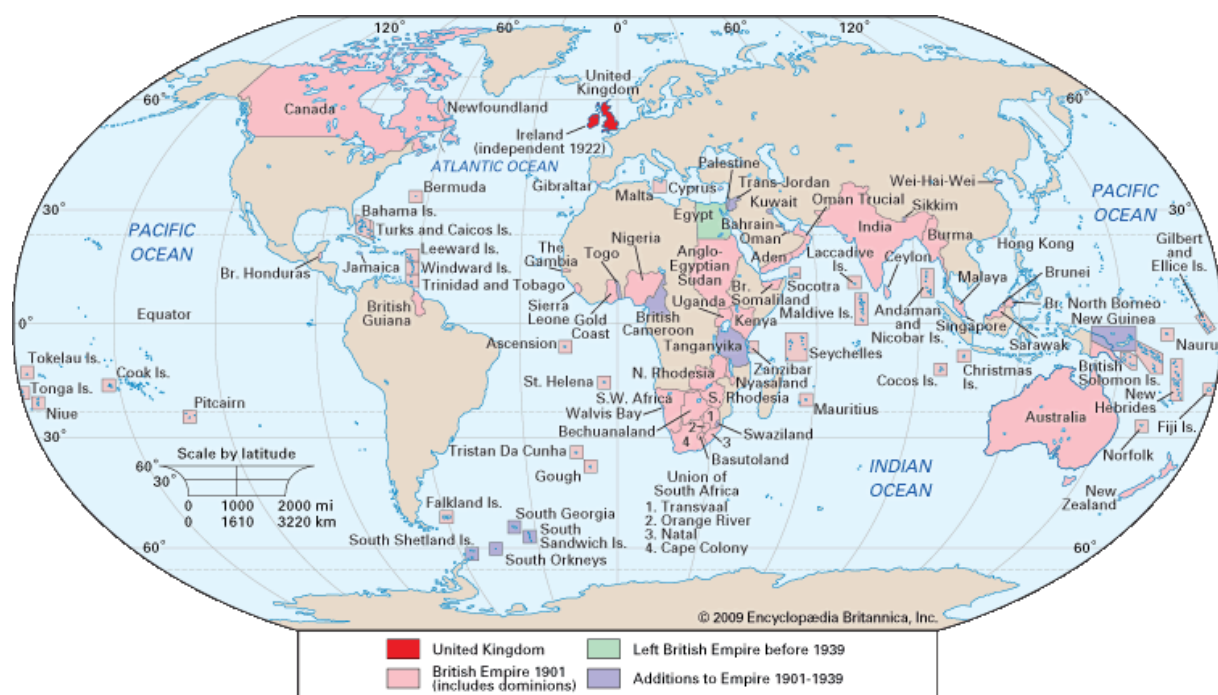
In the Victorian era Britain dominated the globe, although its forms of influence and ruling were uneven and diverse. Traffic with colonies was constant, complex and multidirectional. Abroad jobs included civil and military service, missionary work and infrastructure development. People from various imperial locations travelled to, studied or settled in Britain.

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<sup>5</sup> Members of the parliament

Money flowed both ways. The empire was a source of profit, while emigrants sent money back to Britain as well as goods such as jute<sup>6</sup>, calico cotton cloth and tea. (Britannica, 2019)

Between 1820 and 1870 the empire east and increased the number of non-white people over whom it had control. Much of it involved violence, including the Opium Wars (1839 - 1842 and 1856 - 1860) in China, the Indian Mutiny (1857 - 1859), the Taranaki War (1860 -1861) in New Zealand and the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865) in Jamaica. A lot of people also migrated to colonies of Australia and New Zealand, later to China and South Africa. Britain from 1870 to 1914 continued the expansion, but now they were assisted with new technologies such as railways and telegraphy. Because it colonised parts such as Egypt, Sudan and Kenya it held in control about 30% of the African population. At the end of the period anticolonial movements started rising, which ultimately lead to decolonization after World War II. (Britannica, 2019)



Picture 1: British Empire (Britannica Library 2020)

It grew rapidly between 1820 and 1870 which reinforced Britain’s status as a world political power. After that came a time of economic depression, followed by a small recovery from 1896 until 1914. Because the earliest stages of industrialization were over by 1840, the British economy expanded and became the richest country in the world. Many people were working

<sup>6</sup> A glossy fiber from either of two Asian plants that is used chiefly for making sacks, burlap, and twine.

long hours in harsh conditions, but the life standard was rising. Therefore the 1840s were called “the hungry forties”. Most families had a roof over their heads and food to eat, and enough left over to buy alcohol, tobacco and vacations to the seaside and the countryside. But, of course some decades were times of want, others of plenty. Because Britain was relatively prosperous it became a nation of shoppers, not only of shopkeepers. Increased wealth with higher wages from 1870 meant more privileges for the working class too. Mass production made clothes, souvenirs, newspapers, and other things affordable to almost everyone. (Britannica, 2019)

## **6.6. Culture and art**

Wide access made British cultural products more important, and it reveals a lot about the society from which they emerged. Britain was the cultural capital of the English speaking world including the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. (Britannica, 2019)

Theatre grew widely in popularity. Melodrama, which featured evil villains, virtuous heroines and complicated plots was the most popular genre early on. Sometime later sensation drama became popular. In 1850 most favoured were music halls which included singing, dancing, sketches and more. By 1870 there were hundreds of them all over Britain, some even seating thousands of people. They were well liked by all classes. (Britannica, 2019)

Print culture also got large and diverse, hundreds of magazines and newspapers were available at a very cheap price. In the 1880s “the New Journalism” emerged and drew readers in with stories on violent crimes and high society crimes. Novels were the key feature of the Victorian print culture. They had many characters and were often quite long with complicated plots. They were often centred on marriage. By mid-century all classes could afford and read novels. Therefore some were aimed at the higher educated people that were well off, others at less-educated readers looking for entertainment. (Britannica, 2019)

## **7. CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS ABOUT WOMEN IN THE VICTORIAN ERA**

“Sweetness is to woman what sugar is to fruit. It is her first business to be happy – a sunbeam in the house, making others happy. True, she will often have “a tear in her eye”, but, like the bride of young Lochinvar, it must be accompanied with “a smile on her lips.” (Scott, 1888)

As seen in this quote women were supposed to be perfect and happy, but regarding the phrase “she will often have “a tear in her eye”” it is visible that what was happening on the inside might be quite different. Women in this era really were suffering, but nobody could hear them in this male centred society. A woman ought to be perfect, but what about her life, her decisions, her thoughts and her feelings?

Authors of that time idolized women. Therefore, most of the bad things that were happening in their lives were ignored and not written about. Books were about idolizing women and men. They show us things that every girl would like to experience. True love. Happiness. Acceptance by society. But there were many things they did not write about. They did not write about the shameful things such as prostitution, or things that did not follow the society’s rules, for example, working women.

### **7.1. How to learn to become a perfect wife**

On the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many things changed. Middle-class girls did not have to help their mothers with housework anymore, because now they had servants. Their father’s business was several miles away; therefore they did not help there either. Now they were home all day doing nothing. Therefore they needed a new set of skills to prepare them for the life ahead. The sole aim of middle-class women was to get married to a man, one who is hopefully solvent, healthy and had her parents’ approval. To find a husband she had to make herself attractive, which meant learning particular kinds of accomplishments. The accomplishments that upper-class girls were taught, but now middle-class girl were being taught it too. Typically that would include learning conversational French, playing the piano, dancing and some more subtle things. Because she will soon be part of a world where she will have to know how to behave, how to manage her physical presence, how to stand upright and not slouch, how close it is

appropriate to stand to other people, what happens when you need to be excused or go to the ladies room. (Hughes, 2020)

It may sound simple, but it certainly was not. Middle-class girls were constantly supposed to be educated, also in the sense that they were expected to read to expand their minds, but not too much so that they would become a “blue stocking”. That was the worst tag a young girl could get. A blue stock is a young woman who simply knows too much things, someone who reads too widely, or someone who cares too much about what she reads. A girl who sort of takes up the role of a young man in the sense that she wants to argue about politics at dinner and wants to read classics in their original languages, such as Latin, Greek or even worse, in Hebrew. With all of that she made herself masculine. Some doctors even believed that quite literally the more a girl reads the more masculine she would appear. She would start to look hollow cheeked, something very unpleasant would start happening to her ovaries, she would start to become a desiccated spinster.<sup>7</sup> That is the kind of a girl that middle-class Victorians were concerned about. They thought that no man that still has all his senses would marry her. (Hughes, 2020)

## **7.2. Appearance**

So the emphasis was on learning but not too much learning. Of being able to speak in a lively manner without touching the serious subjects too deeply. On top of all that, there was also a big pressure on being sexually attractive. There was a great emphasis on how a girl looked, because it was one of the main things that she brings to the marketplace. But heaven forbid she starts to express a sexual desire or think too highly of her looks. (Hughes, 2020)

Fashion played an important role in defining what it meant to be a middle-class woman. When they were at home they were not involved in any kind of profitable behaviour since their clothes were severely impractical. In the late 1840s we can see the development of the crinoline. A woman wearing one could not do anything practical, although it made an extraordinary shape as she walked. But she definitely could not go down on her knees and scrub the floor. She could barely move or take a bus since she took up three seats with the large crinoline. Therefore it was a kind of a mechanism that literally kept women in one place. (Hughes, 2020)

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<sup>7</sup> An unmarried woman, typically an older woman beyond the usual age for marriage.



Picture 2: Cage crinoline (Britannica Library 2020)

We also have evidence of young individual women who found this role that was planted upon them incredibly constraining, even suffocating. A fine example is Florence Nightingale, a very smart, educated young woman who suffered something near hysteria throughout her teens and her early twenties. She felt constrained in her home, even though her home was nice, the problem was she had nothing to do. She longed for a theatre where she could make good works and make a difference. She recalls horrible experiences of not being able to eat in front of her own family. She could not bear being looked at, because she felt as if her tongue was too big for her mouth, which is a classic sign of hysteria. (Hughes, 2020)

### **7.3. Prostitution**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were estimated around 80.000 prostitutes in London. But the word “prostitute” was not exactly what it is now (women who sell their bodies for sex). At that time it was used much more widely. It was used to refer to women who had illegitimate children, lived on the corn or to refer to women who had relationships with men exclusively out of pleasure. But for men all women who behaved or dressed inappropriately were deemed to be whores. (Flanders 2014)

Most women that earned money from selling their bodies were working class. The more fortunate worked as prostitutes for a few years, while saving to get married. But most of them were less fortunate and worked long hours in wet and cold conditions. (Flanders 2014)

That was the world of heterosexual commercial sex, but they knew that homosexual commercial world existed. Most of the information was retrieved from court cases, since it was illegal at the time. Irrefutable proof was reports on cases of homosexual brothels and pubs being closed and the owners being prosecuted. (Flanders 2014)

### **7.4. Women’s work**

Many women in this era supported their families with wage paying jobs, alongside their already heavy domestic burdens.

Women’s work was rarely recorded, because of contradictory and inconsistent instructions. They simply did not think it was important, since they mostly worked part time, casual jobs that were regarded as not important enough to even declare. Sometimes their work was illegal, for example prostitution or it was performed in unregulated sweatshops<sup>8</sup>, which is a further reason it was unrecorded. Since they played more important roles as mothers and wives, they also did not see their occupation as a centrally defining characteristic, and often failed to even mention it. Besides, some women may have preferred to keep their income earning a secret from their husbands. (Hudson, 2011)

Women were mostly employed in professions associated with female skills. Domestic service of all kinds was the single largest employer of women; about 40% of women in provincial cities

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<sup>8</sup> A workplace with very poor, socially unacceptable or illegal working conditions

and 50% of women in London were employed in it. Textile and clothing sectors came close to a second. Women were in larger numbers found also in metal ware, pottery and all sorts of trades, especially in towns (confectionery, brewing, seam stressing, laundry work, cleaning and retailing). (Hudson, 2011)

Some middle-class women, especially widows and spinsters were rarely in a position to rest on their laurels.<sup>9</sup> Many widows carried on husbands family businesses, while many spinsters found work as governess or in trades regarded as suitable for women such as millinery<sup>10</sup>, grocery retailing and other victualling<sup>11</sup>. (Hudson, 2011)

Women provided a flexible, cheap and adaptive workforce for sweatshops and factories. They had feminine skills that were very useful in industries such as textile, pottery, clothing and victualling. (Hudson, 2011)

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<sup>9</sup> To be satisfied with your achievements and not to make an effort to do anything else

<sup>10</sup> The hats and other goods that are sold by a milliner.

<sup>11</sup> Food fit for human consumption.



## **8. A CASE STUDY AND A REVIEW OF LITERATURE: DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE BY JANE AUSTEN**

Jane Austen inspired her women from her living conditions. It was all she knew about, how difficult it is to be a woman, all the pressure, injustice and prejudice that women faced. (Britannica 2020)

Pride and Prejudice is a novel about love that is at points awkward, hard and difficult, but nevertheless wins at the end, which is reflected in the relationship between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. In the book it is shown as if there is always something that moves the world, a pure feeling of love. Even though it shows the dark side of the male centred society the story is covered with romantic scenes and love illusions, facts that every girl dreams about. The latter is exemplified with the following quotes, when Mr. Darcy appears like the too perfect gentleman:

“In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”- Darcy to Elizabeth. (Jane Austen 1813)

“You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever.” - Darcy to Elizabeth (Jane Austen 1813)

### **8.1. Society**

The Victorian era was a male centred society, where men were severely favoured. They were in charge of the decision making, they could earn their own money, study, do business, be successful and even have privileges if they married rich. This kind of belief was present even when a queen was in charge of the country.

In this period, appearances and class were everything. Money as always had the real power. In the book, it is clearly visible that the ultimate goal was to impress with money and your personal prosperity, for your family to be considered as part of the “society” and as somebody important to gain honour and respect.

Women in this society were seen as an ideal for the most part; her body was pure, they were labelled as saints, their main role was to raise children and tend the house. On the other hand, they had no legal rights whatsoever. They did not have the right to vote, to own a property, to divorce, ...

## **8.2. Marriage**

Marriage was more an economical arrangement than an institution where love was principal. For many women it was a salvation to have a comfortable life thanks to the wellbeing her husband provided.

“Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life.” Charlotte Lucas. (Jane Austen 1813)

As seen in the quotation, marriage was a matter of chance to have a better life, since women had no legal rights. Therefore love was not important as long as you lived well and were accepted in the society. For that exact reason Mrs. Bennet wanted to marry off her daughters as quickly as possible, to maintain herself.

All possessions of a woman were passed to her husband when she got married. It was very difficult to be a woman. One had to be perfect, be pretty, have a set of skills and more, therefore women often felt as prisoners to the society. Because a woman was dependant on her husband, she had to obey him, which was sometimes only a little better than slavery.

When the woman was married to a wealthy man, she was obliged to organize parties to make new acquaintances and establish new economical relationships. Women in order to get married also had to have certain knowledge in different areas in order to help and educate children.

Whereas in the novel the heroine Elizabeth rejects two proposals. With that she stood against traditional values and establishes herself as an independent woman in the male centred society. She believes that affection, friendship and respect are major elements of a happy and strong marriage, not status and wealth of the man. Contradictory to the reality she is shown as a liberal

feminist. And because she wanted to achieve independence in marriage, she refused the proposal of Mr. Collins, a traditional character that would find this idea absurd, since he wanted to have complete control over his wife as it is shown with Charlotte.

### **8.3. Characters**

Elizabeth Bennet, the main character of the book was the bravest one. She expressed her opinion, minding no one. She was, including her sisters, under immense pressure of her mother to find a husband. But, despite that, she disagreed to go against her feelings, because she wanted happiness in her life. Therefore when she refused to marry Mr. Collins, her mother was disappointed and angry with her, all due to the fact that it was socially disapproved to be a single woman. While a single man was not that bad off, since he could raise a business and find a wife with ease, a woman had no such options. Consequently, her mother's anger and disapproval were reasonable, especially since Elizabeth did not worry at all.

Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's best friend was quite the contrarily very worried about staying single. She saw the marriage with Mr. Collins as an opportunity, because she knew how little options she had at her age. She was not in love with Mr. Collins, but she was positive, love might come after all as long as she has a comfortable life and was accepted by the harsh society. This novel gives you an impression as if everything was about love. But love in this era was a secondary term, since the society, the approval, the appearances and having a respectable wellbeing was the main issue.

Women could stay single, but only if they were very wealthy. Lady Catherine was not single, but she was alone. Her husband died, leaving her with a daughter. If she were a poor woman, all her possessions would be under a man's hands, but her wealth allowed her independence. Her high social position made her acceptable to the society. Everybody worried about pleasing her, for example Mr. Collins's behaviour. We also cannot forget about the marriage arrangement between Mr. Darcy and her daughter, which was exclusively for economic benefit. Therefore she was so frustrated when she found out about Elizabeth's relationship with Mr. Darcy since she knew the economic situation of Bennet's family and thought that she was only interested in his money. Lady Catherine belonged to the upper-class, where social standing and appearance was truly important.

Mrs. Bennet was always faking being educated and intelligent. It was quite silly of her, telling her daughters to act naturally, while she pretended all the time. It was all just to impress Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. She had to show herself and her family as a probable and noble choice for wealthy men in order to arrange marriages. According to Miss Bingley she was very snobby, always worrying about her image, social standing and prestige. She did not like the idea of being linked with people from the middle-class. This act of hers was really superficial, unreal; thankfully her daughter Elizabeth did not follow her footsteps as a daughter should, and stayed genuine. This kind of behaviour was very common for this era, since the situations were demanding a lot of rules, codes and etiquette, of being fake and superficial.

Marriage was indeed very important. It was the base of the society at that time. It was not excepted at all, for example, that a single woman escaped with a man without being married first. Lydia Bennet committed a mistake that was very horrifying to the family, when she escaped with Wickham. For men, since it was men centred society, such and worse behaviour was acceptable. They could have many affairs, be free, but if a young girl acted as Lydia did, it brought many bad consequences to her family. They could have lost the prestige if this information was known by the society.

Jane Bennet was the “ideal woman”. She was respectful, discrete, beautiful and she had grace. Even though she belonged to a middle-class family, she never put the families name at risk. She loved Mr. Bingley but their marriage was seen as something economical, although they married out of love. Her attitude towards life represented romanticism that women lived in that era, even more into a courtship. She was genuine, though she knew her silly and snobby mothers real intentions. At the end she was very lucky to get engaged to a wealthy man. Mrs. Bennet was pleased about this, because it meant that she and her family were “safe”.

#### **8.4. Conclusion**

Pride and Prejudice reflects the English society during the Victorian ages. Money ruled the world and labelled people into classes. Appearances were really important to create new kinds of relationships. As a male centred society, women were the basis of the family, but had no voice or vote. Their options were very limited by rules imposed by the society. Their roles were quite different. They were pure but had no rights. Life was unfair, which is what Jane Austen wanted us to think about. Even though the novel was about love, and how love can pass many

barriers, women in it play a very poor role. Throughout the novel we can see many different types of women. There were single and married women, some were rich, others poor. But all of them had one thing in common. They all knew how difficult life was for them in general. Sometimes the society and codes restricted them from being real or fighting for a fair life. Jane Austen also showed us in the novel some unreal behaviour in several situations, for example, when they tried to impress someone or to be accepted by the harsh society in order to have a happy and comfortable life. The novel makes us think about women's situation then and their situation now, how things changed, and show us there were noble and brave women wanting a change. Women, after all, are the base of the society. However, nobody ever said that being a woman was an easy task, but it is admirable how they faced life.

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## **10. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Throughout the research, I strove to investigate the life of the Victorian woman and how it was depicted in books. My main conclusion is that life back then was much worse for women as it is now. With this research paper it has become clearer how women's position has evolved in the last century, which I would like to believe all women are grateful for. Even if we do not have gender equality yet, we are almost there already, although it is most commonly only written on a piece of paper (for example, women's salaries).