

Throughout history, society has played an important role in forming the value and attitudes of the population. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* are two novels which exemplify the negative effects of society's influence. Both Elizabeth Bennet and Marian McAlpin are strong women who rebel against society's influences in their lives. They refuse to accept the pre-set roles and identities handed to them. Both women realize that the individual's needs are not necessarily the same as what society imposes on them; they rebel against this very society in order to gain the independence necessary to discover what they want from life.

Society in the early 19th century world of *Pride and Prejudice* is represented through Mrs. Bennet and those like her, who are "of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (Austen 53). From the beginning of the novel, society prominently displays its views on marriage. When Mr. Bingley moves to town, Mrs. Bennet immediately entreats her husband to go introduce himself. Mrs. Bennet describes Bingley as "a single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!" (51). Bingley is immediately acceptable due to his money and connections, and Mrs. Bennet is already dreaming that one of her children will marry him. In fact, "the business of her life was to get her daughters married" (53). One of Elizabeth's close friends, Charlotte Lucas, feels "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (69). She feels that marriage is a vehicle to gain wealth and connections, a view which has obviously been pushed upon her by society. Elizabeth refuses to accept this view. She feels marriage is for love, not money, and finds it a "fantastic nightmare" that "economic and social institutions have such power over the values of personal relationships" (Harding 167). However, Charlotte later marries Mr. Collins and sacrifices love for worldly advantage. Mr. Darcy also assumes everyone marries for wealth. He feels the Bennet's lack of money "must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration of the world" (Austen 82). Darcy "is mindful of his relationship to society, proud of his social place, and aware of the restrictions that inevitably limit the free spirit" (Litz 104). Darcy's admiration of Elizabeth grows when she demonstrates her wit in a conversation with him. Darcy "really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger" (Austen 96). He thinks he loves Elizabeth, yet he continues to degrade her on the basis of her family's socioeconomic situation. Society's view of marriage is evident through the many characters who express monetary views of the sacred institution.

Elizabeth finally finds happiness when she takes control of her situation and completely disregards society. After a series of events both Darcy and Elizabeth fall in love for real. However, the two are still not free to be together. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who represents high society, soon pays a visit to Elizabeth and informs her that Elizabeth and Darcy are completely unsuitable for one another. She tells Elizabeth that to marry "a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world" (364) would "disgrace him in the eyes of everybody" (367). Lady Catherine does not care about her nephew, instead she is only concerned with what "everybody" will think. Elizabeth, however, will not let herself be intimidated, and refuses to promise that she will not marry Darcy. Lady Catherine replies to Elizabeth's defiance by asking, "do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this" (364). Hence, society is not used to being rejected. But due to Elizabeth's resistance to what society dictates as her needs, she and Darcy find their way back to each other and are betrothed. While this marriage may not be suitable in the eyes of "everyone", as Lady Catherine thinks, it is right for the two people who matter.

Atwood's late 20th century novel also illustrates society's influence on people when it comes to marriage. The "office virgins" hope that after a few years of work and travel they will "get married and settle down" (Atwood 15). Marian assumes she will do the same, although the prospect is far from appealing to her.

However, she holds the conventional assumption that she must "marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does" (100). Peter exemplifies the acceptable male. He is a rising young lawyer, socially acceptable, all around popular guy. For this reason Marian accepts Peter's marriage proposal. She is not in love with him, but accepts because she feels it is what she is expected to do with her life, even if it is not what she wants. Before her engagement Marian was self-supportive and outgoing. However, she now attempts to change herself to fit society's pre-set role of women. When Peter asks her a simple question, she replies with "I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you" (87). Thanks to society, not only does Marian become engaged when it is not what she wants, but she also reverts to pre-set feminine roles that are the exact opposite of her natural personality.

Marian proceeds to subconsciously rebel against society's pre-set role for her, using food as her vehicle for rebellion. The first time she is unable to eat is the morning after accepting Peter's proposal, when she discovers that she is no longer able to consume eggs. At this point in the novel there is a dramatic switch from first to third person. The viewpoint is not that of a detached narrator; "rather, Marian has resolved to view her own actions from an external perspective" (Keith 43). The next time Marian encounters her problem is during dinner with Peter, where she discovers that she can no longer eat meat. Her mental state becomes progressively worse when, preparing for a dinner party, Marian begins to visualize the vegetables as living things. As she peels a carrot, she begins thinking of how people come along and dig it up, maybe it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn't die right away, it keeps on living, right now it's still alive" (Atwood 183). Marian believes she is torturing the carrot, and is now unable to eat them also. Even vitamin pills, now her main source of nourishment, become forbidden as she "wonder[s] what they grind up to put into these things" (234). Finally, the morning after her affair with Duncan, which is a rebellion in itself, Marian is unable to eat anything at all. She finally realizes that something must be done, and proceeds to take matters into her own hands.

Marian breaks the spell of anorexia when she finally decides to stop trying to change herself and instead to take control of her life. Marian loses her psychological stability in her quest to be normal. She became engaged because it was the normal thing to do, but "what was essentially bothering her was the thought that she might not be normal" (211). Marian, for the first time, sees Peter for what he really is, "not a potential husband but a two-dimensional advertisement-cliché" (Keith 63), another attempt at "normal". Marian bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and offers it to Peter, saying "this is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork" (Atwood 284). Marian realizes that she is being consumed by Peter. She proceeds to break off the engagement and "suddenly she was hungry. Extremely hungry" (285). Marian has attained full control of her life once more. But most importantly, the novel returns to first-person narrative, and Marian is a complete person once again. Marian realizes that her needs are different from what society imposes on her, and changing herself to fit society is not the answer.

Both characters ultimately realize that they never desired the "norm" of society. In Elizabeth's case, she does not want to marry for wealth and good connections; she wants to marry for love. After working past initial obstacles she finds love in Darcy and proceeds to put all her energy into attaining his love again. As for Marian, she is no where near ready for marriage, yet due to her underlying need to be "normal" she tries desperately to mold herself into a role which proves to be very destructive. She, too, takes the control of her life away from society and puts it back where it belongs, in her own hands. Thus rebellion is necessary in both situations in order to fulfill the needs of the characters and restore them to their previously healthy, happy lives.

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