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Mary Bennet

The most contradictory girl in the neighbourhood

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ABSTRACT

Critics of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* often tend to focus on the central characters but focus in this essay will be on the middle sister Mary Bennet. Author Alex Woloch claims in his book *The One vs. the Many* that Mary's main function in the novel is to be a contrast to Elizabeth in order to fulfill her as a character. The purpose of this essay is then to show that Mary is an important character and what it is that makes Mary's character different from her sisters'. A close reading of the novel has been applied in order to analyze Mary's character and her function in the novel. The essay will show that Mary could be read as a representation of the women of her time who had more faith in themselves than to rely on men in order to have a secure future.

Key-words: Pride and Prejudice, Mary Bennet, function, character, caricature, minor character.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It has been more than a century and a half since *Pride and Prejudice* was first published. The novel is considered to be one of Jane Austen's most popular novels and is declared as a favorite among its readers. *Pride and Prejudice* has more speaking characters than the other Austen novels do (Bush 91). However, while critical focus is often put on the central characters, in this study I will put focus on the middle sister Mary. It becomes evident from the beginning of the novel that Mary is different from the other characters and that she stands out. Mary does not fill out the same amount of space in the novel as the other characters do but she still has an impact on the reader.

The story takes place in 19th century England with an obvious main theme of courtship and marriage. *Pride and Prejudice* is the story of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their five daughters; Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty and Lydia. The fact that the daughters do not benefit from their father's will, leads their mother to an obsession of finding husbands for them in order to secure their financial future. The novel begins with a conversation between Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet about their new neighbours at Netherfield Park, the young and wealthy bachelor Mr. Bingley and his friend Mr. Darcy. The arrival of the young bachelor excites all the marriageable girls in the neighborhood and sets the plot of the novel.

Author Dorothy Van Ghent states that the reader becomes aware of Jane Austen's ironic writing from the beginning of the novel. What we read in the novel is according to Van Ghent the opposite of what actually happens in the novel (301). Austen's irony in the novel is portrayed through the different characters and Mary Bennet is an example of this constant mockery. In a society where social activity is important for a woman's future, Mary stands out. She often chooses her books or music before any social activities and that choice is ridiculed along with her socially incompetent behaviour.

Author D.W Harding refers to this ironic writing with accentuation on specific features of characters as caricature (84). Mary's character is portrayed around her plainness which is quite exaggerated and ridiculed throughout the novel.

Alex Woloch claims in his book, *The One vs. the Many*, that the different female characters in the novel exist as subordination to the character of Elizabeth Bennet (75), he also claims that a protagonist needs a contrast in order to be fully individualized (47). This makes you as a reader wonder about Mary's function. Does she have a deeper purpose than being a

contrast to Elizabeth? Even though Mary could be seen as subordination to Elizabeth, Mary emerges as a strong character. Woloch's statements of Mary's function in the novel does not necessary suppress her character. In this essay I will show that Mary could be read as a more important character than what Woloch suggests for her.

I will mainly focus on the portrayal of the middle sister in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mary Bennet and her function in the novel. She is different in comparison to her sisters but I believe that strengthens her function even more. In this essay I will show that Mary Bennet is a representation of the learned women of her time. Of women who had more interest in developing their knowledge than finding a suitable husband. Mary is different from the other female characters in the novel and it makes her a quite radical character in the sense that she does the opposite to the others.

1.1 AIM

The aim of this essay is to show that Mary Bennet has a deeper function in *Pride and Prejudice* than being a contrast to Elizabeth. Mary is portrayed as plain and different because of her manners and her inability to be social. Therefore, the aim of this essay is partly to investigate what it is that makes Mary's character so different from her sisters' and partly show that Mary is an important character in the novel.

1.2 THESIS STATEMENT

Alex Woloch claims that Mary's major function in the novel is to mainly contrast Elizabeth in order to fulfill her as a character. However, I state that Mary is not there mainly to contrast Elizabeth but a character of her own, representing the learned women of her time. In this essay I will argue that Mary Bennet is an important character in the novel and that she is a rebellion against the issues and the dreams of her time. In order to do so I am going to include the following questions to my thesis statement:

- ***How is Mary depicted in the novel?*** What features are significant for her character?
- ***Is there an ironic representation of her character?*** Why is she so serious? Could the stereotypical description of Mary as plain and bookish restrict our understanding of her character?
- ***What function do her music and her books have?*** Books and music are important to Mary but the question is; what kind of function do they fulfill in her life and in the novel?
- ***What is her function in the novel?*** Mary does not fill out the same amount of space in the novel as the other characters do. What is then the purpose of her character?

1.3 MATERIAL AND METHOD

The material that I am going to work with consists of both books and articles that deal with the character of Mary Bennet and the way she is portrayed in the novel. My main secondary source is *The One vs. the Many*, a book written by Alex Woloch, an assistant professor of English at Stanford University. In his book he deals with characterization and minor characters in novels. Steven D. Scott is another assistant professor in English, specializing in literature and theory at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. In his article “Making Room in the Middle”, he deals mainly with the character of Mary Bennet. In the book *Narrative fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, professor of English and comparative literature Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan examines main approaches to narrative fiction. I will also include other books and articles that deal with these subjects and do a close reading of *Pride and Prejudice* with focus on Mary Bennet in order to investigate her function in the novel.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the main issues within literary criticism concerns the way in which a character in drama or fiction is said to exist. In 1961 Marvin Mudrick formulated two different views of character, the purist and the realistic arguments (Rimmon-Kenan 31). According to the purist argument characters do not exist outside the textual frame. Purists emphasize characters to the extent that “they are a part of the images and events which bear and move them” (31). Mudrick continues by claiming “that any effort to extract them from their context and to discuss them as if they are real human beings is a sentimental misunderstanding of the nature of literature” (31). The realistic argument on the other hand points out that characters obtain some independence from the events in which they live and that they can in fact be discussed at some distance from their context (32). Realists tend to see characters as imitations of human being and therefore treat them as if they were our friends or neighbours. This approach also speculates about the character’s unconscious motivations and constructs for them a past and a future outside what is written in the text (32).

In this essay I intend to interpret the character as according to the purist argument. When reading a novel, characters may seem real because the reader enters a fictional world. However, these characters do not exist outside the textual frame and therefore it is not possible to consider them as real human beings. As a reader it is important to keep in mind that in both fiction and drama it is not our reality that is being described but the reality of the characters.

2.1 CHARACTER & CARICATURE

What is significant for a nineteenth-century novel is the fact that it contains more characters than previous literature, in *Pride and Prejudice* at least forty-five characters appear (Woloch 32, 68). In *Pride and Prejudice* the main characters are the five Bennet sisters with the central protagonist Elizabeth Bennet and Jane, Mary, Lydia and Kitty as different minor characters.

The different characters in a given text rarely have the same degree of ‘fullness’. Edward Morgan Forster recognized this in 1927 by distinguishing flat and round characters (Rimmon-Kenan 40). According to Forster flat characters are similar to caricatures and can be expressed in one sentence since they are constructed around a single idea or quality. Forster continues by claiming that flat characters are easily remembered by the reader because they do not develop throughout the novel. Round characters on the other hand do not have a restriction of qualities and they develop in the course of the novel (40). The terms flat and round characters are also used by Woloch. Rimmon-Kenan criticizes Forster’s assumptions that a flat character is both simple and undeveloping, whereas a round character is both complex and developing (40). According to Rimmon-Kenan fictional characters can be complex and undeveloping as well as simple and developing (40).

To be a character in one of Jane Austen’s novels is, according to Woloch, to be constantly contrasted and related to others (43). Therefore, the most common way of reading the Bennet sisters is to simply assume that they represent different qualities and that their purpose is to mainly contrast each other. According to Woloch, this would then mean that the sisters are in the novel only to benefit Elizabeth’s character (69). The characters that can be found in *Pride and Prejudice* are all portrayed with emphasis on different personality traits and qualities. Some characters are more fully described and given more space in the novel while others are developed around one single idea. This could be seen in the portrayal of the Bennet sisters. Even though Elizabeth and Mary to some extent share the same interest in reading and playing, the reader still gets different depictions of the interest and of the two characters. In a scene where Mary succeeds Elizabeth “at the instrument”, Elizabeth knows that she “had been listened to with much more pleasure though not playing half so well...” (20). Even though Mary seems to have more skills than Elizabeth, her playing is not as appreciated as Elizabeth’s.

In “The critical faculty of Jane Austen”, Richard Simpson writes that Austen does not demonstrate ideal characters or perfect virtue (294). This would mean that as a reader of Austen’s novel, you should not expect to find an ideal character because they all have their

flaws. Author D.W Harding suggests that characters constructed around one single idea or with exaggerated features could be referred to as caricatures. Harding defines caricature as a form of stereotype because it isolates and exaggerates a few features and by this the reader neglects the features that would make a full character. The significance of a caricature in a novel is the fact that it focuses on a few traits and that is all the reader needs to know. Harding continues by stating that it is not only the character's own behaviour that decides whether we consider him/her as a caricature, it is also the treatment from other characters that count (Harding 89-92).

Throughout the novel the different characters are constantly compared to each other and according to Woloch this occurs mainly to assure Elizabeth's central position in the narrative (70). The comparison is most evident with Mary (71) because they are portrayed as opposites of each other. Woloch is quite confident that Mary is not depicted for her own sake but mainly to appear in contrast to another character. Austen portrays Mary in a way that her flaws outweigh her abilities (71-72). In doing so, Austen transforms a character into caricature by giving ironic comments and indications of their behaviour and personalities (Harding 86). Mary's character is developed around the idea of her plainness which often tends to be exaggerated (Austen 19). Her plainness is portrayed with such exaggeration that it fills up her entire character without giving any attention to her other qualities. Jane Bennet is portrayed as extremely kind and sees no flaws in anyone, this is also an exaggeration of a character.

Critics seem to agree on the fact that Mary's character is one of comic relief in the novel and refer to her as a caricature. Even though some parts of Harding's definition of caricature coincides with the portrayal of Mary, I still think that Mary is not that different from the other characters. Many of the characters in the novel are formed around one single idea just like Mary. By including the definition of caricature I will show that caricature does not only coincide with Mary's character but with other characters as well.

2.1.1 MINOR CHARACTERS

In *The One vs. the Many*, Alex Woloch writes about the importance of minor characters to a novel and to the protagonist. According to Woloch, minor characters are the ones that tie a story together and a protagonist is the result of this (14). Minor characters are essential to a novel because they are “delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else.”(27). Woloch claims that a minor character is necessary to a novel in terms of emphasizing a protagonist. Joseph Ewen quoted in Rimmon-Kennan states that minor characters are often characters that do not develop but they do serve some function beyond themselves (41).

Nevertheless, Woloch states that the balance between different kinds of characters and the asymmetrical space that they occupy is of great significance to the novel as a whole (45). Minor characters are esteemed as simple throughout the novel and their presence is especially recognized with parody and it is the parody that motivates asymmetric structure in the novel (49). This asymmetry can be found in the portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet, who in contrast to Mary Bennet is more interesting and more thoughtful. According to Woloch a protagonist needs a contrast in order to be individualized. Author Page Norman on the other hand claims the opposite in her book *The language of Jane Austen. Pride and Prejudice* is considered to be one of Jane Austen’s most dramatic novels, filled with dialogues and conversations (Norman 25). Norman claims that characters are individualized by their speech. Talk is important for most of the characters in the novel because in several occasions talk is a social activity (27, 31). Speech used in different situations mark characters personalities and at times dialogue comes closely to caricature in the novel. Conversation and the way the characters speak are significant for the way they are treated (28, 31).

Even though minor characters are not given the same amount of space in a novel, they stand out because the writer has done a lot with a little (Woloch 37). The author has to choose the right words in order to give a full description of a minor character.

3. ANALYSIS

Critics have divided opinions about Mary's actual function in the novel. However, they do agree on the fact that Mary is different from her sisters and the other characters but they have shared opinions to the reason why she stands out from the rest.

3.1 MARY BENNET

Mary Bennet is the middle sister in the Bennet household. Mary stands out from the other characters because she is described as having more time for books than for social activities (Scott 229). In the novel Mary is often described as the plain one in the family:

Elizabeth was eagerly succeeded at the instrument by her sister Mary, who having, in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishment, was always impatient for display. Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity has given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached. (Austen 19-20)

It is obvious that Mary's character is constructed around one idea, her plainness, which according to Forster would make her a flat character. The quotation above indicates how Mary is according to Elizabeth but it is also the way other characters interpret Mary's personality. Georgiana Darcy is considered to be "the handsomest young lady that ever was seen; and so accomplished! She plays and sings all day long." (Austen 210). While Mary's pursuit for accomplishment seems to have no effect on her surroundings, Mr. Darcy's sister Georgiana is considered to be accomplished because of her playing all day long. Mary spends all of her time reading and striving for accomplishment through books and music, though her efforts are not appreciated. Mary does in fact stand out and with her character it becomes obvious that the writer has done a lot with a little. The main descriptive word for Mary is plainness which is enough in order to give the reader a portrayal of her. Since Mary lacks social ability and beauty, she tries to compensate this by reading and becoming attractive in an intellectual way. Her plainness is obvious throughout the novel and the consequence of this is that she works

hard for knowledge and accomplishment (Austen 19). However, she is quite vain and in constant need to show off her accomplishments but she ends up embarrassing herself instead. Also, Mary is the only one who finds Mr. Collins a suitable companion. Yet, she does not consider him being as clever as she is but “she thought that if encouraged to read and improve himself by such an example as hers, he might become a very agreeable companion” (Austen 109). With this quotation it becomes more evident that Mary is vain and thinks very highly of herself and her knowledge. The ironic part of Mary’s statement is that even though the other characters do not consider Mary being agreeable or intelligent, she considers herself being so. Also, Mary is quite confident that she was encouraged to improve her reading and playing but that is not evident throughout the novel. The novel indicates that the girls were encouraged to read but that encouragement is not obvious, Mrs. Bennet prefers that the girls engage themselves in social activities while Mr. Bennet desires time by himself in his library.

According to Steven D. Scott, Mary is a problem in the novel because she does not fit in to the society of her time. Living in a world that considers marriage as an only option for young woman, Mary stands out. She stands out because she does not show the same interest in marriage as the other sisters do. She is “accomplished” through books and music but for everyone around her, being accomplished is only a way in order to catch a husband (235-236). In the novel it is obvious that Mary shows no interest in marriage. In order to find a suitable husband, the girls have to more or less show themselves off by engaging themselves in different social activities. However, this is something that Mary often chooses not to participate in. Instead she spends her time with books and music.

Mary is portrayed as socially incompetent, as “someone who has spent too much time inside her own head and not nearly enough time in the company of good society” (236). She speaks more as a writer and not as a speaker and since speech is a social activity, along with walks, dancing and cards she does not know to play the game and does not care to know. Mary’s speeches seem to be recitations of her reading and are of a moralizing kind. Living in a society that prefers social activity to books makes Mary stand out. She is considered to be accomplished and is referred to by others as “the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood” (Austen 9). Hence Mr. Darcy’s ideas of an accomplished woman are:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, all the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her

address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved. (Austen 32)

According to Mr. Darcy there is more to an accomplished woman than reading and playing, an accomplished woman has to have manners and knowledge in different social activities. Even though Mary is accomplished through books and music, she lacks social skills and can therefore not be considered accomplished as according to Mr. Darcy's ideas of the word.

Professor in literature, Gracia Fay Ellwood writes in her article "How not to father: Mr. Bennet and Mary", that Mary is considered to be the failure of the family. Ellwood employs a realist assumption in stating that Mary's arrival is thought to have been a disappointment to her parents because Mrs. Bennet was expected to give birth to a son, who would inherit the family property. Ellwood's statement is interesting and yet problematic because she treats Mary as a human being and analyzes her beyond her character in the novel. Scott also employs a realist assumption stating that the best explanation to why Mary is singled out is because she is the first disappointment in the Bennet family (228). He continues by claiming that the first two daughters were treated as valued children and while Mary, who was supposed to be a son, is a constant disappointment and that is why she spends her time reading (Scott 228). Mr. Bennet shows more concern for Elizabeth and Jane than for the younger daughters who he often refers to as "three very silly sisters (Austen 198). Throughout the novel it is evident that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet value their older daughters the most by the way they talk about them and to them.

According to Woloch Mary is not an interesting person by herself which is the reason to why she always appears in a comparative context in the novel (71). Steven D. Scott on the other hand claims that Mary's reading, playing and pursuit for accomplishment is something personal, something to improve herself (234). Nevertheless, this could be questioned because to some extent Mary is vain and in desperate need to show off her intelligence. The constant recitation of literature and playing on the piano could be a way of showing off that she has more knowledge than her sisters do.

When reading *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader is immediately thrown into a world where marriage, social life and class are of great importance. With this pompous society as a background, Mary Bennet lives a quite simple life in the shadows of her surroundings. It often becomes obvious that her family does not take her or her feelings in consideration and they have no expectations of her. Austen's constant mocking of Mary is evident from the beginning

of the novel through different characters. As according to Norman, Mary is often mistreated because of her inability to participate in a conversation and because of her choice of words, which are often recitations from her reading. The few times that Mary comes into the narrative, she is ridiculed. When Mr. Bennet includes Mary in a conversation with the rest of the family about Mr. Bingley's arrival she becomes speechless:

“What do you say, Mary? For you are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books, and make extracts.”

Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.

“While Mary is adjusting her ideas”, he continued, “let us return to Mr. Bingley.”(Austen 5)

Even though Mr. Bennet himself enjoys his library and his books, he manages to mock Mary's reading. She becomes astonished when he addresses her, which she is not used to and therefore is not able to give an answer to his question. Her father continues the mocking by stating her inability to communicate and continues the conversation without Mary, completely ignoring her. Mr. Bennet treats Mary as a nonperson and even though she tries to communicate, she is constantly neglected which according to Ellwood causes a dehumanization of Mary. While Elizabeth receives favoritism from Mr. Bennet, Mary lives in a constant shadow with no attention. According to Ellwood, Mary strives to get attention from her father and that is the reason to why she spends all of her time reading and playing the piano. Like Mr. Bennet, Mary often takes refuge in books since she has no one else to turn to. While Ellwood states that Mary is in constant need to get her father's attention, Alex Woloch claims instead that Mary's character is a way to assure Elizabeth's central position in the novel (70). Moreover Woloch claims that Mary and Elizabeth are total opposites of each other. Whereas Mary has artificial knowledge, Elizabeth has real intelligence and is more thoughtful (71).

Mary's presence is often ignored in the novel by the narrator and the different characters but one obvious example is when Charlotte announces her engagement to Mr. Collins (Austen 109). Scott clarifies that in this scene the reader gets a list of the reactions of the members of the Bennet family except for Mary's (226). What is interesting with this is the fact that the reader does not give an account of Mary's reaction in spite of the fact that Mary was the only one who “rated his abilities much higher than any of the others” (Austen 108) and there is an implication that Mary might have been persuaded to accept him (109). Scott

suggests that Mary's presence in the novel is merely one of comic relief and that this treatment is an indication of Mary as a caricature rather than a character (Scott 226). Mary's character fills out little space in the novel and she is constantly mocked but what she has to say is not always stupid. The scene when the family dines after Lydia's elopement is the first time someone actually listens to her, in this case Elizabeth:

“This is a most unfortunate affair; and will probably be much talked of. But we must stem the tide of malice, and pour into the wounded bosoms of each other the balm of sisterly consolation.” she added; “Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable--that one false step involves her in endless ruin--that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful--and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex.” (Austen 245)

Mary's speech in this scene is unexpected and something that could have been said by anyone in the room. Moreover, Ellwood claims that this speech is what makes Mary genuine and proves that she is able to communicate without being ridiculed. Scott on the other hand thinks that Mary does not deserve to be ridiculed at all in the novel and instead be “admired as a precursor of a modern woman” (236). In a critical article “Jane Austen; irony and authority”, Rachel M. Brownstein writes that the main subjects of the women's novels of Austen's time were “attitudes of patriarchal authority on sex and marriage”, which are parodied in *Pride and Prejudice* (64). According to Brownstein Austen had a tendency to mock these novels for their moralizing and this is portrayed through Mary. Brownstein claims that Mary represents the women writers of Austen's time and their constant moralizing (63).

Mary is constantly parodied because of her recitation but she often talks of sensible things. As when Elizabeth decides to walk from Longbourn to Netherfield Park and Mary does admire her benevolence “but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and, in my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to what is required” (Austen 26). Mrs. Bennet reacts on the dirt and not on the distance, which only makes Mary's comment more reasonable. Miss Bingley reacts in the same way as Mary does when she is told that Elizabeth has walked three miles alone (29). This only indicates that Mary is fully capable of reasonable thinking and talking if she is given the chance to do so.

3.2 MARY BENNET AND HER SISTERS

Mary is considered to be rather boring in comparison to her sisters because she does not enjoy life in the same way as they do. In comparison to her sisters Mary is asocial, unattractive, less clever and thoughtful although she is more learned than the others. Jane is considered to be the most admired and beautiful among the sisters (Austen 2, 9). Elizabeth has both beauty and brains (2). Lydia and Kitty are strongly influenced by their mother and has nothing but balls, pranks and flirtations in their mind (Ellwood).

Mary's plainness and her inability to be social close her out from the rest of the family. For instance when her sisters agree to walk to Meryton, Mary chooses not to go with them (Austen 61). Even the criticism that has been brought upon Mary Bennet agrees on the fact that she is not like the other characters. Mary has the opportunity to enjoy life in the same way as her sisters do but she simply chooses not to do so, the younger sisters try to engage her in their activities but Mary does not see the purpose of those activities. When the four sisters return from George, Lydia tells Mary she wished that she would have gone with them because they had so much fun. Yet, Mary does not understand the pleasure of it and it is nothing that lures her, she would prefer a book over it (Austen 190).

The other Bennet sisters are more outgoing and more social than Mary is. They know how to converse and behave accordingly to the unwritten rules of society. Unlike the other sisters Mary's life revolves around books and that is everything she knows of. However, it is not that she always neglects social engagements; Mary knows "Society has claims on us all" (Austen 75). She does not exclude herself entirely from social life as long as she has enough time for her own engagements.

Mary often chooses to not spend time with her sisters and at the end of the novel the reason becomes quite obvious. At the end the only daughter left at home to accompany and comfort Mrs. Bennet is Mary:

"Mary was obliged to mix more with the world, but she would still moralize...and as she was no longer mortified by comparisons between her sisters' beauty and her own, it was suspected by her father that she submitted to the change without much reluctance" (Austen 332)

Finally she does not feel the need to compete with her sisters and can have the parents all to herself. For once she has Mrs. Bennet's attention and instead of Mary being in need of her it is the other way around. In a sense the end sets Mary free since she no longer has to be reminded or compared to her sisters.

3.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF BOOKS & MUSIC

According to Scott, books and reading are objects of mockery in the novel since they are connected to individuality rather than social activities (230). The only book mentioned in *Pride and Prejudice* by its name is James Fordyce's *Sermons*, which Mr. Collins chooses to read aloud to the Bennet sisters (58). Scott quotes Fordyce on his understanding of female virtue and the fact that men are frightened by female pedantry:

A woman that affects to dispute, to dictate on every subject; that watches or makes the opportunity of throwing out scraps of literature, or shreds of philosophy, in every company; that engrosses the conversation as if she alone were qualified to entertain; that betrays, in short, a boundless intemperance of tongue, together with an inextinguishable passion for shining by the splendor of her supposed talents; such a woman is truly insufferable. (Scott 231)

Mary's reading and her recitation of what she reads makes her the "insufferable woman" and someone men should be afraid of. This should make Mary an interesting person (Scott 231). Fordyce's description of an insufferable woman depicts Mary's character. As Fordyce writes, Mary is in constant need to show off her new knowledge by recitation and quotation. Furthermore, Mary has a quite vain behaviour and does not think that anyone can measure up to her level of accomplishment.

The few times that Mary is mentioned or comes into the narrative are when she is in comparison to the other sisters (Woloch 71). Woloch also notices that the other characters neglect Mary and do not listen to her. She is often ignored by the other characters and has never an actual conversation with anyone which is the reason to why she does not talk much in the

novel (73). However, with no attention or any help in social development, Mary often tends to recite what she reads without understanding the actual meaning of the words (Ellwood). After the first meeting with Mr. Darcy, everyone considers him being rather arrogant and proud. Mary interrupts a conversation about Mr. Darcy's pride by reciting what she has read;

“Pride,” observed Mary, who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections, “is a very common failing I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed, that human nature is particularly prone to it, and that there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary. Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others than of us.” (Austen 15)

With the above quotation it becomes obvious that Mary struggles with her speech skills and that the narrator mocks her reflections. Already in the beginning of her speech, Mary is ridiculed by the narrator. This could be an indication from the narrator's perspective to show that Mary in fact is in constant need to moralize and show off her accomplishments. Further on she tries to reflect on the subject but ends up reciting what she has read and the conversation continues without any consideration to what Mary has said. It also becomes evident through other characters that Mary spends much of her time reading. When Elizabeth and Jane return from Netherfield Park, they find “Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough bass and human nature; and had some new extracts to admire and some new observations of the threadbare morality to listen to.” (Austen 51). Again it is evident that the narrator ridicules Mary's reading and expects it to be some kind of moralizing speech.

Like Mr. Bennet, Mary often takes refuge in books since she has no one else to turn to. Throughout the novel it is obvious that Elizabeth and Jane share a special bond and it is the same with Lydia and Kitty. Unlike the other sisters Mary is often left outside alone with no one to turn to but her books and music. In this sense, books and music fill out the empty space that she lacks from not having a close relationship with any of her sisters or parents for that matter. Books and music function as consolation for Mary and her loneliness.

4. CONCLUSION

The first time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I did not pay much attention to Mary Bennet's character. Mainly because there are stronger characters in the novel that occupy more space and get the reader's attention and mainly because she is portrayed as quite boring. However, when reading the novel a second time, I began to ponder about Mary's character and pity her in a way. Throughout the novel it is evident that Mary struggles to fit in but fails over and over again. She does not think in the same terms as her sisters or the other female characters do. While her sisters strive to find a suitable husband, Mary strives for accomplishment through books and music. However, I would say that all her reading and playing compensates the fact that she is more or less alone. There is not another character in the novel with the same personality or qualities as Mary's, there is no one of her kind and therefore she has only her books to rely on. Mary does not exclude herself entirely from social activities but she does not engage herself in them as much as her sisters do. According to Mary there are more important things to do than to strive for a perfect husband and marriage. Personal development through knowledge is more important to Mary.

Throughout the novel it is obvious that Mary is only a minor character to the extent of being a caricature. As according to Forster, Mary can be seen as a flat character that is constructed around a single quality, her plainness. Even though Austen does not give a full portrayal of Mary's character, she manages to leave an impression on the reader. Mary's character is limited to her plainness, constant reading and moralizing. To then state that Mary is a caricature would mean to single her out from the rest. Like Mary's exaggerated features, the other characters of *Pride and Prejudice* have exaggerated features, for instance Elizabeth's independence, Lydia's flirtatious behaviour, Jane's exaggerated kindness and so on. The common thing for all the character in the novel is that focus lies on a few remarkable traits which elucidate their personalities. Yet, some fill out more space than others in the novel. It is obvious that Mary is ridiculed and portrayed as an incompetent character in comparison to the others but it is only her flaws that are compared and not her abilities.

Pride and Prejudice depicts a society where marriage, social life and class are of importance to people. In order to be admired in this kind of society one has to have beauty along with good manners and social skills. This is where Mary fails as she has neither beauty nor social skills. In order to compensate for her flaws, Mary spends her time reading and playing. According to Ellwood, Mary strives to get attention from her father by reading. I

would rather say that Mary strives to get attention from anyone and not specifically her father. There is no indication in the novel which suggests that Mary shows off her skills only to her father. It is rather the opposite; she tries to show off in front of an audience in any given moment. Mary does not share the close-knit that the other sister cultivate. She is often left alone with no one to turn to but her books. Apart from reading in order to become more accomplished, Mary also uses the books fill out the empty space that she lacks from not having a close relationship to a family member or a friend.

Alex Woloch stated that Mary's main purpose in the novel is to assure Elizabeth's central position. However, I do not agree with him because Elizabeth does not need Mary to assure her central position. Elizabeth is portrayed as such a strong young woman with beauty, manners, social abilities as well as flaws. Nevertheless, my conclusion coincides with Joseph Ewen's statement that minor characters serve a function beyond themselves. A general conclusion is that her plainness and inability to communicate strengthen other characters positions. Yet, a deeper analysis of her character reveals the opposite. A deeper analysis shows that Mary is a unique character in comparison to the other women. She does not have the same interests as they do and she believes more in knowledge than beauty in order to have a happy future.

In comparison to the other female characters Mary has more interest in her personal development through reading. She understands that there is more to a female than beauty and participation in different social activities. I think this is what pushes her to constantly show off her accomplishments by recitation. She may come off as vain but I would say that she tries to prove that women can be learned and read great books just like men can. Mary stands out because she does not spend all of her time looking for a suitable husband. That is why I think that Mary is a representation of the learned women of her time, the women that saw more in life than a husband and a household. Mary is in fact similar to the "insufferable woman" that Fordyce speaks of.

However, since Mary is not given the opportunity to converse with anyone in a sensible way and prove her intelligence, she shows off at any given possibility (Austen 87). Even though she does a lot of reading, she is aware of the expectations of society. So the problem is not always the things she talks about but the way she puts them forward to other people.

As according to Rachel M. Brownstein, I believe to some extent that Austen portrays the women writers of her time through Mary. Brownstein suggests that Mary is used as a metaphor by Austen to portray the women writers of her time. Brownstein claims that Austen had a tendency to mock women's novels because of their moralizing issues and in *Pride and Prejudice* Mary is constantly exposed to mocking for her moralizing words (64). The fact that Mary often chooses books instead of engaging herself in social activities proves Brownstein right about women writers "attitudes of patriarchal authority on sex and marriage" (63). Throughout the novel Mary does not show any interest in marriage and through her bookish and plain self she proves that there is more to a woman than a husband and a marriage.

At several occasions Mary proves to the reader that she is not only a plain character who lacks social skills. But rather sensible and able to say the right things in the right moment as for instance when Elizabeth decides to walk from Longbourn to Netherfield Park or at the dinner table after Lydia's elopement. A few critics agree on the fact that Mary should be "admired as a precursor of a modern woman" and this is according to me is the right interpretation of her character. Mary is a character, a woman beyond what her society expects allows. She does not follow the norms of society; instead she chooses her own path and in a way sets her own rules. This is something that resembles today's society where women choose their own path, set their own rules for their lives and rather strive for accomplishment than for husbands.

My conclusion of this is that Mary Bennet's main function in the novel is to portray the women that actually had more interest in knowledge than marriage. Mary is a rebellion against the issues and the dreams of her time. It becomes obvious through Mary's character that marriage and social activities are not everything in life. Certain accomplishment is more important than marriage to Mary and according to her you can achieve happiness through that accomplishment.

To sum this up I would say that my conclusion about Mary's function in the novel does not coincide with Woloch's statement. Mary is more important to the novel than being subordination to Elizabeth. Mary is a representation of the women of her time who had more faith in themselves than to merely rely on men in order to have a safe and happy future. By this I mean that Mary shows that women can achieve knowledge through books in the same way as men can.

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