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Can Chick-Lit be Canonical? A feminist reading of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and The City*

– An analysis of literature deemed to be
feminine fiction

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Introduction

Jane Austen is one of our best-known nineteenth-century female authors. Austen's most celebrated novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, describes the everyday life of a young woman in her search for individuality and love. This novel has been referred to as an example of "women's literature" that only describes tea parties, balls and relational issues. On the other hand, Austen has also been called wittily sarcastic and ironic. Obviously, *Pride and Prejudice* has been analyzed and interpreted on many levels. The varying opinions concerning Austen's works and the different ways of reading and interpreting her texts are what have made her works a part of the literary canon. My aim with this essay is to investigate the concepts of high literature and the literary canon as related to literature written by women. I want to gain some understanding of how some authors and some novels become part of this highly esteemed collection of authors and novels. I want to see what sort of ideas and values are at play when literature is evaluated, and what themes are most likely to be of interest.

Candace Bushnell is the author of the novel *Sex and The City*, a novel that is probably more famous than she is. This work by Candace Bushnell began as a column in the New York Observer and has now become a bestselling novel. The novel inspired the TV-series *Sex and The City*, a show that influenced and changed popular culture's portrayal of women. The "concept" "Sex and The City" has actually come to define an era in which women still are living in. If Bushnell's *Sex and The City* is one of our first and best-known "chick-lit" novels, does this mean that *Sex and The City* only can be of interest for women, since the plot and the settings are typically female? And does this in turn mean that it has less value?

By using Austen's and Bushnell's two novels as my primary sources I hope to find out whether what has been seen as typically female themes, plots and settings are perceived as less important from a canonical viewpoint. Do the terms "chick-lit" and "women's literature" determine the status of a novel? I hope to find out what made Austen an esteemed writer and if the same criteria of evaluation can be applied to Bushnell. Are there any similarities between today's most famous "chick-lit" author who gained her fame by writing about women and their sex lives in an unromantic and shocking fashion, and a pre-Victorian author whose works are part of the literary canon?

The Term Chick-lit

During the nineteenth century, romantic and gothic novels were seen as the equivalent of today's "chick-lit". Chick-lit is a rather derogatory term for literature considered to be women's literature. Chick-lit and women's literature are often accused of being lightweight and silly. In her article "Women's Studies", Rebecca Traister puts forth the critics' opinions regarding chick-lit which are mostly negative and condescending, as most critics of fine literature argue that chick-lit reduces the female heroines to shallow stereotypes of femininity. Writing about the Orange Prize for women's fiction, Lola Young called it a "cult of big advances going to photogenic young women to write about their own lives, and who they had to dinner, as if that is all there was to life." Doris Lessing, who questioned why women felt compelled to write such "instantly forgettable" books, supported this remark (qtd by Traister, 2005: 2).

As a response to the negative attitude concerning chick-lit, Traister argues that: "Chick lit provides a comparable female historical record today. Women may not be shut out of the public sphere, but the genre is helping to chronicle their journey inside it" (Traister, 2005: 2). Traister claims that chick-lit could be seen as a document of time that portrays the present day's thoughts on femininity and the issues of active women in a male dominated world, such as the business world.

Traister states that stereotypical femininity in literature is seen as a weakness of an educated mind. Intelligent and knowledgeable women avoid the literary form chick-lit. Traister argues that this is the result of the fear of not being taken seriously. This fear is what compels other women authors and critics to slander the literary form chick-lit. Traister also

argues that female critics often critique with an imagined male perspective in mind. These ideas and attitudes put forth by Traister show that feminine fiction still has an extremely low reputation among the critics of high literature and fine culture since the critical viewpoint is what I believe to be nothing but patriarchal.

The Perception of Jane Austen and the Novel

The web- page “The Republic of Pemberly” quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge on his opinion regarding the literary form of the novel: “where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind” (qtd. by The Republic of Pemberly, <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/janeart.html#dfensnovl>).

Ian Littlewood printed an article written by G.H Lewes in his anthology, *Jane Austen Critical Assessments*. This article by G.H Lewes is a review of Jane Austen’s novels and a discussion of her skillfulness as an author. The article is titled: “The Novels of Jane Austen” and was originally published in “Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine” in 1859. Lewes is very positive about Jane Austen and her works, yet the critic has to mention that she is fairly unknown to men and that she hardly ever is mentioned ‘among the glories of literature’. Despite her unnoticed greatness and her lack of plot which is scarce and only consists of what Lewes calls ‘character and motive’, Lewes still praises her as an artist and draws the conclusion that “Miss Austen’s works must possess elements of indestructible excellence, since, although never ‘popular’, she survives writers who were very popular; and forty years after her death, gains more recognition than she gained when alive” (Lewes, 340).

As mentioned earlier, the literary form of the novel had low status in the nineteenth century. Deirdre Le Faye states that the nineteenth century mentality claimed that such literature affected young women destructively. “Novels, especially the romantic tales of mystery and horror that were then so popular- were considered by the serious- minded to be conducive to frivolity and immorality, especially among female readers” (Le Faye, 106). Even though Austen enjoyed a commercial success, her novels were not looked upon as high literature. In Jane Austen’s defense one must add that during most of the nineteenth century, women were not allowed to study at the universities. Instead, Jane Austen stayed at home and helped her mother at Steventon. Just as many other women of this era, was Austen also confined to reading and studying the literature available to them. Kathryn B. Stockton writes that the nineteenth century woman’s was isolated social life and lack of academic or intellectual friendships affected women’s exposure to literature and literary studies. Instead,

women studied the literature written for them and by other female writers (Stockton, <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/janeart.html#dfensnovl>).

The author of the biography *The Life of Jane Austen*, John Halperin, suggests that *Pride and Prejudice* is a burlesque re-write of an earlier romantic novel, *Cecilia*. Halperin claims that *Pride and Prejudice* is Austen's attempt to re-write the story of *Cecilia* in a more realistic way. Halperin refers to letters written by Jane Austen and Cassandra when he declares that *Pride and Prejudice* was written between October 1796 and November 1796, and he believes that the style of the novel's literary form changed during this period. According to Halperin, this was the time-period when the element of parody became a part of the novel. Halperin claims that the stylistic change of the novel indicates that *Pride and Prejudice* was a response to *Cecilia* and other romantic novels, which in turn suggests that Austen was a slightly ironic and satirical author (Halperin, 66).

I believe the influence of parody is of interest when evaluating Austen's writings since the satirical and ironic features of Austen's writings show her skillfulness as a writer and her views on women's socioeconomic situation during the nineteenth century. Nonetheless Austen wasn't always appreciated for the slight satire and the stylistic simplicity of her novels. Lewes quotes Charlotte Brontë as Currer Bell in an article on Jane Austen as an example of how people with little humor and a desire for a dramatic reflection of their own emotional lives might perceive Austen's novels as inadequate. Currer Bell writes in a letter,

Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point... I had not read *Pride and Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her elegant ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses (qtd. by Lewes, 350)

I agree with Lewes that people who feel that books are written for the sole purpose of entertaining and mirroring one's personal needs and emotions in poetic escapism might not like Jane Austen since she is not poetic and since she writes about everyday life in a straightforward manner that is realistic rather than lyrical.

On the other hand, I strongly disagree with Lewes when he claims that the reason for Austen's lack of popularity springs from her inability to stir deeper emotions and that she at the 'utmost only teaches us charity for the ordinary failing of ordinary people' (Lewes, 355). Lewes actually goes as far as to argue that the lowering of her claims as a great author will make people see the greatness in her portrayals of (what Lewes considers to be)

the small things in life, and his finishing lines in the article “Jane Austen and Her Novels” clearly shows this positive yet slightly condescending attitude: “But, after all, miniatures are not frescoes, and her works are miniatures. Her place is among the Immortals; but the pedestal is erected in a quiet niche of the great temple” (Lewes, 355). My response to this idea is the question whether a typically female style and the themes of gothic and romantic novels are what make Lewes see her works as miniatures rather than frescoes.

Although I agree with Lewes that ‘miniatures aren’t frescoes’ one has to remember that Austen was restricted to a life at home with her mother. Hers was a life that didn’t lead to a university degree but to an extensive knowledge of the duties of a housewife and the social life of the countryside. She has been criticized for not depicting the political conditions of the time, and for not bringing up the French Revolution in *Pride and Prejudice*. Le Faye’s answer to that question is that Austen didn’t personally know anything about the French Revolution, she had never been to the war-stricken Europe and could for that reason not write realistically about the situation. Le Faye finally comes to the conclusion that the absence of international politics actually is Austen’s way of portraying her view of the political situation: she did write about the French wars from the point of view of a single woman living in the English countryside” (Le Faye, 149).

I agree with Le Faye that the absence of a subject might say more than stating the obvious. By leaving out the French revolution Austen gives the reader a subtle indication that she as a woman is excluded from international politics. Le Faye also argues that the reason for Austen is leaving certain issues outside her novels is a confirmation of the pedantic personality of the author. Le Faye describes Jane Austen as an extremely accurate portrayer of the world she lived in. By leaving out descriptions of international affairs, Le Fay argues, that Austen shows a strong desire for professionalism as an author and a factual accuracy in her novels. These arguments put forward by Le Faye combined with Ellen Moers’ argument quoted by Kathryn B. Stockton show that Jane Austen did portray the political conditions of her time. Stockton quotes the feminist critic Ellen Moers in order to describe Austen’s involvement of the female socio-economic conditions of her time:

All of Jane Austen's opening paragraphs, and the best of her first sentences, have money in them; this may be the first obviously feminine thing about her novels, for money and its making were characteristically female rather than male subjects in English fiction. . . . From her earliest years Austen had the kind of mind that inquired where the money came from on which young women were to live, and exactly how much of it there was (qtd. by Stockton, <http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/austen/gender.html>)

A Feminist Perspective on Literature

I have chosen to rely on Judith Fetterley's descriptions of the concepts of patriarchal cultures and the connections and consequences of binary oppositions between men and women as tools for my feminist analysis of Austen's and Bushnell's novels. I believe the theories Fetterley puts forward in her reading of Faulkner's "A Rose For Emily" can be applied to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sex and The City* since Fetterley's descriptions of the structures of a patriarchal society and the consequences of it in turn can influence the procedure of how women rebel and fight back against these structures. Furthermore, I claim that both Austen and Bushnell have used the images of stereotypical women's literature (romantic and gothic novels as well as 'chick-lit') to convey a positive message concerning female independence and individuality.

Fetterley bases her discussion of patriarchal society on the concept of binary oppositions, which become established and a part of men and women's social status and identity by marriage. This happens indirectly when men and women decide to define and contrast each other for the rest of their lives by titling themselves husband and wife. The idea that marriage influences society springs from the fact that marriage unites and binds men and women together by law and/or religion. Fetterley's reading of "A Rose for Emily" is based on a theory that men and women become connected in a patriarchal society through the interdependence of binary oppositions: "Patriarchal culture is based to a considerable extent on the argument that men and women are made for each other and on the conviction that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are the natural reflection of a divinely ordained complement" (Fetterley, 494). Fetterley's word choice, 'divinely ordained' gives strong associations to the church and to religion, and this makes me believe that the binary oppositions of men and women established by marriage can become a universal foundation for a patriarchal society. After all, what can be more divinely ordained than the union of man and woman in holy matrimony?

Judith Fetterley suggests that what truly defines a patriarchal society is that men are the definers of a woman's life and identity. Fetterley analyzes Faulkner's narrator's description of women in order to show how the male definition of femininity is oppressive. Faulkner's narrator describes Emily as a real lady, which accordingly implies: 'eccentricity', 'coquettishness decay', 'slightly crazy', 'absurd but indulged', 'dear' and 'inescapable' (Fetterley, 492). I have chosen to use and contrast the same ideas of femininity in my analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sex and The City* since I see them as rather typical literary

descriptions of femininity. As Fetterley suggested patriarchal oppression springs from the fact that the female definition is set and depends on men's view of masculinity and femininity and that the masculine definition is the primary definition hierarchically.

Fetterley's critique of "A Rose for Emily" argues that the final oppression exerted by Emily would be impossible if Emily herself had never been oppressed as a woman. Fetterley also states that men's patriarchal structures eventually will turn back on themselves. Fetterley has suggested that a woman can take advantage of the power structures that oppress her in order to avenge herself. She argues that the male perspective on what defines an honorable and dignified lady creates a definition that is oppressive at the same time as women can use it to get what they want. These arguments by Fetterley connect to Gilbert and Gubar's interpretations of female literacy in their feminist readings of nineteenth century female literature in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that one allegedly feminine characteristic, inconsistency, is a negative personal trait from a male perspective while it could be seen as a source of strength from a feminist point of view. Since the term inconsistency indicates duplicity according to Gilbert and Gubar, this suggests that women "have the power to create themselves as characters, even perhaps the power to reach toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/text and help her to climb out" (Gilbert, Gubar, 16). Gilbert and Gubar claim that inconsistency makes the overturning of patriarchal structures possible since duplicity means the ability to shape-shift in order to fit into a mould, but also the ability to split the personality and, for example, become the more active (darker) side of femininity with the aim of breaking free from the norm and oppression. The viewing of inconsistency as a positive form of duplicity indicates a palimpsest in literature produced by women writers.

Jane Austen refers to her work space as two inches of ivory (accomplished women painted miniature portraits on ivory) something Gilbert and Gubar link to the female situation during the nineteenth century since, "almost all nineteenth-century women were in some sense imprisoned in men's houses. Figuratively, such women were, as we have seen, locked into male texts, texts from which they could escape only through ingenuity and indirection" (Gilbert and Gubar, 83). This statement implies that women writers as Austen have sometimes deliberately chosen to write in such a manner that meets the expectations and standards set by men. This is something that connects to the ideas of duplicity. It also suggests that female novelists for such reasons disguised and concealed their authorial voices within the characters

and settings. The structure of female fiction can therefore be seen as ‘two inches of ivory’ on which a woman author has to depict her story, which of course must be incredibly confining. Gilbert and Gubar’s discussion concerning female confinement strengthens my belief that there is another message within the stereotypically feminine themes and settings, a message that has nothing to do with fashion or tea parties. The authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* claim that the female clothing and domestic furnishing that appear so frequently in literature written by women many times symbolize nothing but just female imprisonment.

The authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* suggest that the duality within female writings has become a phenomenon since the male perspectives of literary female roles are often two extremes. Gilbert and Gubar discuss female stereotypes, such as the angel and the monster, and claim that women are always the ‘other’ in relationship to the masculine since a woman always personifies one of the two extremes. By always personifying the extreme women have become something strange, an ‘other’. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the otherness connected with femininity excludes women from culture since they’re not part of the norm, and this makes women the outsiders which results in the loss of subjectivity and autonomy in the cultural hierarchy. This means that a female nineteenth-century author such as Jane Austen has to exercise an intricate form of balancing act in the creation of a novel. She has to stay within the norms and structures to avoid becoming a monstrosity, and this is where women risk losing their subjectivity and autonomy in the cultural hierarchy.

The disguise of opinions was a necessity for female authors during Austen’s productive years since literacy in women was ridiculed and seen as an unattractive and monstrous feature that of course didn’t agree with the traditional notion of femininity. Male authors attacked literary women by suggesting that, “language itself was almost literally alien to the female tongue. In the mouths of women, vocabulary loses meaning and sentences dissolve, literary messages are distorted and destroyed” (Gilbert and Gubar, 31). Another attack on female writers implied that women preachers were like “a dog standing on its hind legs’ (qtd. by Gilbert and Gubar, 31) “or that *all* women were inexorably and inescapably monstrous, in the flesh as well as in the spirit. [...] Thus for Swift female sexuality is consistently equated with degeneration, disease, and death, while female arts are trivial attempts to forestall an inevitable end” (Gilbert and Gubar, 31). By explaining the status of and the conditions for women authors I hope to shine some light on the phenomenon of duplicity in women’s writings. This I hope will lead to an alternative way of interpreting stereotypical women’s literature and will help readers see beyond all the fashionable clothing, parties and relational dramas.

A Description of the Literary Canon

Professor George P. Landow states in an article on the web-site “The Victorian Web” that he finds the definition, “an authoritative list, as of the works of an author” to be the most relevant of all eleven definitions of the term canon in the *American Heritage History* (qtd. by Landow, <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/canon/litcan.html>). These authoritative works are taught and established as high literature and fine culture at universities. The list also indicates that there are works not included in the authoritative list, works considered not good enough. Jan Thavenius declares in his book *Den Motsägelsefulla Bildningen* (1995) that the canon is not the result of a historically independent collection of texts. The canonical texts have been chosen due to the social hierarchy in society and depend on the ideologies presently at play. Thavenius argues that every canon has been narrow and rather closed; shutting out women; lower socio-economic groups and popular culture. An interesting aspect raised by Thavenius is that works deemed to be popular culture can never become canonical, instead, they become “cult”.

Landow proclaims that entering the literary canon adds prestige and privilege to the authors and their works. He refers to all the influential critics, museum directors and their board of trustees as “The gatekeepers of the fortress of high culture” (Landow, <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/canon/litcan.html>). He pronounces it exceptionally clearly in this quotation: “To appear in the Norton or Oxford anthology is to have achieved, not exactly greatness but what is more important, certainly -- status and accessibility to a reading public. And that is why, of course, it matters that so few women writers have managed to gain entrance to such anthologies” (Landow, <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/canon/litcan.html>).

There are of course contrary arguments that claim that to include new authors’ works would affect the canon negatively since the inclusion would lead to the exclusion of old ones. An advocate of keeping the traditional canon, Harold Bloom state that art is absolutely unnecessary and elitist. Bloom puts forward the arguments that including and considering literature written by women and/or non-western authors only on the account of socio-economic interests has nothing to do with literature from an artistic perspective. Bloom puts it like this: “Pragmatically, the ‘expansion of the Canon’ has meant the destruction of the Canon, since what is being taught includes by no means the best writers who happen to be women, African, Hispanic or Asian, but rather the writers who offer little but resentment they

have developed as a part of their identity” (Bloom, 1993: 7). This argument of Bloom’s is a response to what he refers to the ‘School of Resentment’ that consist of academics who want to expand the literary canon to contain more than mostly ‘Dead White European Males’.

However Bloom believes that the strongest literary works always to some extent are influenced by literature already written. This is why Bloom still considers ‘Dead White European Males’ to be of importance. Bloom also claims that good literature springs from new interpretations of old literature and the will to be better than the precursors (Dead White European Males) this is why he deems the old influences important since it spurs new inventions, better metaphors and more elaborate figurative language.

Pride and Prejudice and Sex and The City

Lonely Independence or Dependency in Marriage

Bushnell plays on the emotional conflict and difficulty of choosing between the two lifestyles of staying single and lonely or lowering one’s standards and settling down. This emotional battle is portrayed from the viewpoint of the many different characters in her novel. One character, Rebecca, for instance, is of the opinion that the women who fail to marry ought to lower their standards and stop waiting for and expecting to marry the man of their dreams, and her good friend, Trudie, is of the same opinion having lowered her standards to only include three crucial qualities: “smart, successful and sweet” (Bushnell, 183).

This manner of showing different perspectives of a situation or ideals through the characters in the novel is also the style of Jane Austen’s writing. Austen portrays an unromantic idea of men, women and marriage through the character Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte voices her ideas concerning these topics to her friend, Austen’s heroine, Elizabeth. Charlotte does not believe that a man and a woman need to spend too much time getting acquainted before marrying:

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 pass your life (Austen, 20).

Trudie’s and Charlotte’s words both point towards the unromantic idea that the state of matrimony can and should be reached by being strategic. Because of her somewhat strategic and unromantic attitude, Charlotte Lucas actually ends up becoming Elizabeth’s cousin, Mr Collins’ wife. She did not consider Mr Collins attractive or reasonable but the match secured

her future since Charlotte was neither beautiful nor rich, and at age of 27, her attitude towards marriage was nothing but calculated. Jane Austen explains the socio-economic situation for women of the nineteenth-century which clarifies the actions of Miss Lucas: “Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object, it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune” (Austen, 98).

Austen has chosen to show another attitude towards love and marriage from Elizabeth’s perspective with Elizabeth’s disapproval of the strategic approach of her good friend, Charlotte Lucas. Elizabeth discusses Charlotte Lucas’s marriage to Mr Collins with her older sister, Jane. Elizabeth’s contribution to the discussion clearly states her view of love and marriage. She utters her thoughts on the situation to her sister, Jane, and they are rather harsh and self-righteous: “You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger security for happiness” (Austen, 107). This quotation shows that Elizabeth sometimes is both proud and opinionated and that she does not shy away from expressing what she believes to be the truth. Still, however strong and idealist her advices and comments are, Elizabeth is far too independent and believes she has a far too realistic outlook on marriage to actually believe that she will find the perfect husband.

Bushnell shows the same attitude towards marriage through her characters perspective in a discussion concerning a surprising union between two people, the marriage of a ‘Boston naïve country-mouse’ and a rather promiscuous New York woman: “ She’d already gone through so many guys in New York and she had a reputation. No Guy in New York would marry her” (Bushnell, 29). The issue described is that successful women postpone marriage for as long as they can, until they can’t wait any longer, maybe because they want to have children or have slept with too many men. “Then they have that moment, and if they don’t take it...” I shrugged. “That’s it. Chances are they’ll never get married” (Bushnell, 29-30). The reasons for marrying expressed in the two novels are different although the underlying belief is that women have an “expiration date”, after which they lose their attractiveness. By the age of 27 and without a large fortune, Charlotte is not considered an attractive candidate for marriage, neither is the promiscuous New York woman who has slept with too many men to be taken seriously.

By using a feminist perspective I would like to suggest that this “expiration date” depends on rules set by men. These rules become norms, which privilege men and uphold society’s patriarchal structures. Maybe the women in the novels fear reaching a certain age and still not be married due to the patriarchal belief discussed by Judith Fetterley in her

feminist critique on Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily", which suggests that women without a father or husband fall in the hands of society, which in turn means the end of independence and individual recognition. The prospect of becoming society's responsibility must frighten all independent women since it suggests an incapability of taking care of oneself. As a consequence the independent lifestyle chosen might all of a sudden become a liability. I believe this connects to and explains why the women in the novels have difficulties choosing between the lifestyles of strategic settlement or lonely independence.

The Splitting of the Female Self

The ambiguity of the novels' depiction of love and marriage lies in the fact that the heroines or main characters in both *Sex and The City* and *Pride and Prejudice* resent the idea of marrying a man because of social pressure or because it simplifies life, even though none of our heroines are genuinely happy or satisfied as single women. Despite their high regard for female and individual independence they constantly search for a man, maybe not as aggressively as the other women and young ladies described in the novels, but still the search for a man to love is ever so present. Maybe the truth and the real complexity lie in the search for love, a concept I believe Carrie and Elizabeth want to separate from the institution of marriage. Both authors portray the difficulty of loving, and from a feminist perspective one can make the connection that, since the heterosexual relationship requires a man and a woman, the search for love becomes equivalent to the search for a man. To search for a man in a patriarchal society is equivalent to admitting a dependence on men, which in turn might suggest that a woman alone is not enough. Gilbert and Gubar explain the ambiguity of the connection between love and marriage as an expression of the 'splitting' of personality women do in order to survive in a patriarchal society.

Austen implies that the psychic conflict can be resolved. Because the relationship between personal identity and social role is so problematic for women, the emerging self can only survive with a sustained double vision. [...], Austen describes a kind of dialectic of self-consciousness to emerge. While this aspect of female consciousness has driven many women to schizophrenia, Austen's heroines live and flourish because of their contradictory projections (Gilbert, Gubar, 162)

I believe the same argument can be connected to the duplicity of the character Carrie in *Sex and The City*. Although Carrie isn't schizophrenic she does at times express a certain amount of madness during her relationship to Mr Big: " 'Don't fuck with me', Carrie said and leaned across the table, suddenly so angry she didn't even know who she was anymore. 'If you fuck

with me, I will make it my personal business to destroy you. And don't think for a second that I won't take a great deal of pleasure in doing so' ” (Bushnell, 258). This outburst of Carrie takes place at the beginning of the downward spiral of her and Mr Big's relationship, a relationship she decides to terminate in order to remain sane. I believe the duplicity of Carrie's character helped her to end an unhealthy relationship that it did not give her the emotional security and personal independence she craved. I believe Carrie becomes mad in order to make the break with Mr Big, something that could be connected to Gilbert and Gubar's ideas of the 'splitting' of personality. Even though Carrie feared being single again she eventually chooses her own sanity: “I'm not going to ask,” he said. [...] She got into bed and began to take the long, delicious slide into hysteria. [...] “I'm not happy,” she said” (Bushnell, 287). These words and thoughts mark the end of Carrie and Mr Big's relationship. At the end of the novel, Carrie chooses independence and the hopeful outlook that she eventually would find a man who could give her everything she wanted in a relationship and if she didn't, she would be happier alone. The last lines in the epilogue states, “Mr Big is happily married. Carrie is happily single” (Bushnell, 289).

However independent and strong-minded the heroines Carrie and Elizabeth are, Bushnell and Austen also give us examples of women who are submitted to the co-dependent lifestyle that marriage is. One character, Kitty, has found a solution to the difficulties of finding love, and she explains why women do need a man in their life in this quotation:

“They give you something women can't'. Shiloh said, nodding. ‘A man should provide for his girlfriend. Hubert makes me feel really safe. He's allowing me to have the childhood I never had,’ said Kitty. ‘I don't buy into all this feminist idea. Men have a need to be dominant- let them. Embrace your femininity’” (Bushnell, 132).

This quotation has a rather sarcastic air although it still addresses the complexity of marriage and, most importantly, it raises the question if it is possible to stay independent while being married. This question is probably more central in Bushnell's *Sex and The City* than in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, nonetheless, *Pride and Prejudice* does address some elements of difficulty connected to independence in opposition to the situation of dependence marriage can cause. This is subtly illustrated in the description of the marriage of Elizabeth's parents, Mr and Mrs Bennet.

Elizabeth's parents no longer have a fulfilling marriage. The once youthful, cheerful and beautiful Mrs Bennet had once blinded Mr Bennet with her young looks and

youthful spirits. This led him to make the imprudent decision to marry a woman beneath his social status, with too liberal manners and a weak mind. Unfortunately, as the years went by he lost interest in both his wife and his children and spent his days reading books in solitude. Elizabeth was fully aware of her parents' loveless marriage, however she tried not to judge her father too harshly since she was his favourite. But she could not help seeing how her father's disinterest affected her and her sisters: "But she had never felt so strongly as now the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which, rightly used might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters', even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife" (Austen, 183).

Elizabeth's thoughts do address the problems concerning women's dependence on men in marriage. Since Elizabeth's father has forsaken his responsibility regarding his marriage as well as the future of his children, has he actually left his wife with all the responsibility. By resigning his fatherly duties has he forced his wife to become the sole carer for his daughters' futures. This duty in turn comes to require Mrs Bennet to become the laughable, hysterical scheming woman she is.

Mrs Bennet wants to secure Mr Bingley's affection towards Jane, and this is why she sends her to Netherfield by foot even though she knows that it's going to rain. Mrs Bennet does this since she knows that Mr Bingley would never let Jane walk back home in the rain, which would lead to Jane spending the night at Netherfield. Unfortunately, the rain falls early during Jane's walk to Netherfield. The cold and wet walk makes her ill, all to Mrs Bennet's delight since the illness would force her to stay longer at Netherfield. The next morning Elizabeth receives a letter from Jane where she explains all that have happened, and Mr Bennet gives a sarcastic remark on the matter explained in the letter: " 'Well, my dear,' said Mr Bennet, when Elizabeth had read the note aloud, 'if your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness- if she would die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr Bingley, and under your orders' " (Austen, 27). However pathetic and manipulative she might seem, the mother of the Bennet sisters is actually the most responsible and caring one of their parents, Mr Bennet maybe perceived as the most agreeable and rational one but he is no doubt the reason for the Bennet's unfortunate economic situation.

A father more interested in his daughters' lives and futures would have done his best to secure the outcome of their lives since Mr and Mrs Bennet are without a son and Mr Bennet's assets are to be inherited by Mr Collins. This following paragraph shows Elizabeth's mother's distress concerning this matter but mostly their father's disinterest: "I can never be

thankful, Mr Bennet, for anything about the entail. How anyone could have the conscience to entail away an estate from one's own daughters, I cannot understand; and all for the sake of Mr Collins too! – Why should *he* have it more than anybody else?" "I leave it to yourself to determine," said Mr Bennet" (Austen, 105). Elizabeth and her sisters' possible future poverty and the laughable picture that is their mother clearly show the consequences and the uncertainties regarding a woman's future even if she succeeding securing a marriage. This comes down to the fact that the entire family depends on a husband's good nature and a father's responsibility. And in the Bennet's case this father and husband left the entire family in uncertainty due to his negligence and lack of interest.

The Definitions of Feminine attractiveness

The manner of judging women from a male perspective is an important theme in both novels and I believe that it connects to what I have interpreted as the main message in both *Sex and The City* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which is to find an alternative lifestyle for women.

The descriptions of women and femininity are topics often raised in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr Darcy, Elizabeth and Miss Bingley bring these topics to discussion, and the conversers try to establish what characterizes a truly accomplished woman. Mr Darcy is rather opinionated in this question as he considers that "A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and 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, 33). Austen often allows her characters to discuss young ladies' accomplishments. This makes me believe that young women were judged by these standards in the nineteenth century and that one of the reasons for the frequency of the topic might be that the author finds the establishing of female accomplishments to be quite ridiculous. I believe this to true be since she has made her heroine rather uneducated in the fields of feminine accomplishments while her antagonist, Miss Bingley, on the contrary is very much accomplished.

Elizabeth's response to Mr Darcy's list of accomplished characteristics is that she personally never met such a woman that possesses all of the accomplishments mentioned by him. Miss Bingley's opinion disagrees with Elizabeth's and she decides to venture her opinion about the character of Elizabeth to Mr Darcy, " 'Eliza Bennet,' said Miss Bingley,

when the door was closed on her, ‘is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own; and with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. But in my opinion, it is a paltry device, a very mean art. ‘Undoubtedly,’ replied Darcy, to whom this remark was chiefly addressed, ‘there is meanness in all the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation’ ” (Austen, 33). These quotations plainly show the patriarchal views of feminine actions and the intriguing and scheming character of Miss Bingley. The manipulative character feature is not uncommonly seen a feminine trait, which Mr Darcy indicates in his reply to Miss Bingley’s comments concerning Elizabeth’s suggested ‘mean art’ of manipulation.

I have interpreted Bushnell to consider that the standards by which women are judged spring from a male perspective, this idea becomes apparent when the main character Carrie is listening in on a conversation between a man and a woman discussing sex. “I think men are turned off by women who have sex with them on the first night,” the woman said” (Bushnell, 58). But the man replies that the rule only applies to a certain type of women, beautiful women of a higher class can do whatever they want. The man’s comment indicates that certain women can do what they want because they are attractive enough for the men to let them act as they please.

Bushnell establishes the requirements for attractiveness when the narrator and three of her friends meet to discuss the advantages certain women in Manhattan have: ”There are a handful of women like Camilla in New York. They are all part of a secrete club, an urban sorority, with just a few requirements for membership: extreme beauty, youth, (age range seventeen to twenty-five, or at least not admitting to being over twenty-five), brains, and the ability to sit in restaurants for hours” (Bushnell, 126). The tone in this quotation is somewhat sarcastic and condescending, and this makes me assume that Bushnell, just as Austen, regards these criteria as quite ridiculous, demeaning and degrading. This paragraph shows two of Bushnell’s male characters discussing the secrets of dating. One of the men described a dating- situation that occurred at a party when he met Libby. “Like most men in New York, he made up his mind about the woman right away. Put her in a category – one-night stand, potential girlfriend, hot two week fling. [...] Libby was definitely a one-night stand. She wasn’t pretty enough to date, to be seen in public with” (Bushnell, 144).

As we can see none of the characteristics describing stereotypically attractive and accomplished women from a male perspective are active traits. Bushnell describes the features of the exclusive group of privileged women in Manhattan, the most important qualities were: “[...] extreme beauty, youth, (age range seventeen to twenty-five, or at least

not admitting to being over twenty-five), brains, and the ability to sit in restaurants for hours” (Bushnell, 126). Austen shows the nineteenth-century’s criteria for femininity through the perspective of Darcy’s, according to Darcy the most important standards concerning femininity are: “ a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and 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, 33).

Judith Fetterley found the characteristics for femininity from a patriarchal viewpoint in Faulkner’s “A Rose For Emily”. The strongest ones were: ‘eccentricity’, ‘coquettishness decay’, ‘slightly crazy’, ‘absurd but indulged’, ‘dear’ and ‘inescapable. Fetterley’s picture of the patriarchal view of femininity can be applied to both Bushnell’s and Austen’s novelistic descriptions of ‘feminine accomplishment’, ‘absurd but indulged’ and ‘coquettishness decay’ can be other words for, ‘a thorough knowledge in music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern language’ and ‘the ability to sit in restaurants for hours’, since a lady of leisure doesn’t need to know anything about politics or the outside world, especially not if she had ‘a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions’ moreover, bookishness not a flattering personality trait in a young lady during Jane Austen’s time period and apparently not an important one during the modern days of Manhattan either. Bushnell suggests that men favour young and beautiful women since there will and always should be men that inhabit all of the active and rational characteristics that women lack.

Other feminine characteristics often portrayed are, manipulation and intriguing. These aren’t seen as an attractive female feature; nonetheless, are they often portrayed as being typical traits of the active woman. I believe these active traits are part of the female inconsistency and duality, it is the dark side of femininity, the cunning and monstrous side every woman inhabits which is what Gilbert and Gubar describes in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar claim that the ‘monstrous’ part of femininity is the more active side of a woman that helps the more angelic and passive side to ‘climb out of the mirror’ and to get what she wants. This side of femininity scares and disgusts men and women, which is why neither truly want to admit the monstrous side’s existence.

Portraying the Strategies in Everyday Life

During the time period during which *Pride and Prejudice* is set unmarried young men and ladies did not naturally interact. One couldn’t just pick up the telephone and ask for a date, the

course of events, which had to take place before interaction was a bit more complicated. Austen describes these social codes for courtship and encouragement beautifully. All the small details that the characters interpret as signals of affection or the opposite are quite invisible and could sometimes seem ridiculous to a modern day reader, although Austen illustrates it in such a fashion that we all can understand and relate to the social codes of the nineteenth century.

When discussing the actions of courtship Charlotte Lucas suggests that Jane Bennet, Elizabeth's sister, ought to show Mr Bingley more affection in order to secure a good marriage. "We can all begin freely- a slight preference is natural enough: but there are very few of us who have the heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show more affection than she feels. Bingley likes your sister but he will never do more than like her if she doesn't help him" (Austen, 18). Elizabeth Bennet defines the differences of trying to marry well or falling in love when she gives her reply to Charlotte's suggestion. "Your plan is a good one, replied Elizabeth, where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I dare say I should adopt it" (Austen, 19). Elizabeth's answer indicates an ambivalent attitude, and through her reply Elizabeth shows the nineteenth century female attitude towards marriage. Her answer suggests that women can go about marriage in two different ways, the strategic and calculating approach or the opposite more random one, and the similarity of the two approaches is the hope that both of them lead to marriage.

One of Candace Bushnell's strongest features, as a writer is her great ability to describe the social codes, acts and "rules" of urban successful men and women's dating habits. This narrative style is rather similar to Austen's skilful descriptions of everyday life and upper societal courtship of the nineteenth century. One of the differences of style might be that Austen shows us entire scenes of small details, minute chains of actions described without haste. Austen lets us follow every single development of an interaction, right from the start until the end, while Bushnell, on the other hand, gives us glimpses of peoples' lives, and her narrative style can be described as a form of eavesdropping on peoples' conversations or as events retold by a friend or a colleague. Bushnell's novel is full of comments, statements and one-line sentences that powerfully express the dating habits and social lives of urban men and women. Elizabeth's remark on Charlotte's advice to Jane illustrated the career like approach towards marriage that signified the nineteenth-century female mentality.

Bushnell's description of a conversation between a couple of young, beautiful and privileged women introduces the character Kitty's friend, who refers to acting the person

of a man's fantasy as "accessorizing". "It doesn't matter how pretty you are. If you can create who the guy wants you to be, you can get him" (Bushnell, 130). The slightly cunning approach to secure a man by using his impressions and expectations of women connects well to Gilbert and Gubar's idea of inconsistency and duality. Even the most stereotypically feminine women have duality, an active side to compensate for the more passive side, and this active side is also the darker side. The active side of Kitty's friend who refers to the demeaning act of becoming someone else in order to secure a man as accessorizing shows how the female duality can make women active even in her most passive and compromising moments. Although the narrative styles of the authors differ I believe their intentions to be rather similar as both strive to depict the lifestyle of a certain type of people and to portray the daily events of women and the attitudes concerning dating or courting in a fairly realistic way but also with a hint of irony and sarcasm.

Turning the Patriarchal Structures Around

The common feature of Bushnell and Austen is to show the readers' different viewpoints and ideas concerning femininity through the characters of their novels. Bushnell and Austen show us what happens when a woman transgresses the standards for femininity. They also show us female independence and what happens if women don't exert their individuality.

Austen's two strongest examples of active female duplicity in *Pride and Prejudice* are the characters of Mrs Bennet (whom we've already discussed) and Lydia: "Lydia was a stout, well grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humoured countenance; [...] She had high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence, which the attention of officers, [...] and her own easy manners recommended her, had increased into assurance" (Austen, 38). Lydia is the youngest of the Bennet sisters and her mother's favourite. Her mother on the other hand, complains of 'poor nerves' but is loud-mouthed, aggressive and overly ambitious when it comes to the marrying of her daughters. Both Lydia and Mrs Bennet are very active characters who take matters into their own hands, Mrs Bennet has to be the one caring for her daughters' future since her husband exercises a negligent attitude towards his entire family and their future. Lydia has on the contrary been over-indulged, being her mother's favourite has made her just as aggressive but on a personal level since she hasn't been forced to take on these active personal traits in order to be able to care for someone else.

Nonetheless, Lydia's actions do actually secure her future, although this future is rather grim. The elopement with the anti-hero, Wickham, results in the family's and male

society's (Darcy) involvement. Wickham is forced to marry Lydia, the marriage secures her future and makes her the youngest wife of the Bennet sisters. Lydia's reputation, as a young lady of honour, must be upheld and this is why Darcy interferes and rescues Lydia's honour and financial future. Lydia manages to secure her future by turning to her 'dark' side, the more active side and eloping. She has forced the patriarchal structures of the male society (Mr Darcy) to take responsibility for her and to secure her future, since she cannot be responsible for herself. Wickham, on the other hand, will probably eventually become tired of her just as Mr Bennet tired of Mrs Bennet and just as Mr Bennet he will be forced to spend the life with a woman who has neither sense nor riches.

The situation of Lydia reminds me of Judith Fetterley's feminist critique, where Fetterley draws the conclusion that a woman without a husband and a father is useless and therefore falls in the hands of the town she lives in. The connection is that Lydia hasn't got a father caring for her future, she is unmarried and can obviously not take care of herself, so she falls in the hands of the male governed town she lives in which the interference of Mr Darcy symbolises. Another connection between the destiny of Lydia and Fetterly's feminist critique is that the patriarchal structures enable women to turn these around.

Bushnell has more or less based her entire novel on active, confident female characters and their sexual forwardness. The following quotation shows the idea and theme of Bushnell's novel beautifully. The narrator and a group of her women friends were talking about women having sex like men, which means having sex without romantic feelings: "We were hard and proud of it, and it hadn't been easy to get to this point- this place of complete independence where we had the luxury of treating men like sex objects. It had taken hard work, loneliness, and the realization that, since there might never be anyone there for you, you had to take care of yourself in every sense of the word" (Bushnell, 50). I believe this quotation shows how Bushnell uses sexual liberation as a symbol for female emancipation. The word choice 'having sex like men' is to me a clear connection to the feminist ideas explained by Fetterly, that oppressed women will eventually evolve and use the patriarchal structures set by men and turn the oppression back on them.

Another quotation also shows how women have turned men's treatment of women back on the men. This quotation in particular portrays men's view of women as sex objects, which is the exact same way as the heroines of Bushnell's novel treat men. One character, Ian, tells a group of his friends of a general opinion of how men treat women they are not interested in. This remark arises in a discussion about threesomes, "It's the easiest way to do it," Ian shrugged. "It's sport. You don't care for the girl; otherwise you wouldn't let

your buddy have sex with her. It's not like she means anything to you" (Bushnell, 80). These two quotations from Bushnell's novel show how the women of her novel have taken the objectifying masculine attitude and made it their own. In order to survive within the male dominated structures have they evolved and become active women who can turn the objectifying male eye back on to the oppressors.

Conclusion

The most obvious common theme of the two novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sex and The City* is the complex search for a loving relationship and at the same time keeping one's individuality. I believe the strongest theme in the two novels from a feminist perspective is what Gilbert and Gubar refers to as duplicity or inconsistency. Duplicity is a feminine characteristic, which is the result of the complex connection between the two opposites angelic wife in the search of love and the monstrously independent woman in search for individuality. The main issue addressed in both novels is the difficulty uniting the two opposites in the women's search for love and individuality. I believe this to be a huge philosophical question from a feminist perspective. I also believe this question has been overlooked since it has been cleverly hidden beneath and within the structures of typical female literature, such as romantic and gothic novels and chick-lit.

Both Bushnell and Austen are literary women that write back to the patriarchal society. They have used a method of writing that fits into the standards of feminine fiction and have by that succeeded in reaching the women 'on the other side of the mirror' and helping them to climb out. This is made possible by the depicting of everyday events through the natures of stereotypical as well as more lifelike characters. By using 'light' plots, slight comedy and satire, Austen and Bushnell show that the patriarchal structures of society have both women and men in a chokehold since the definitions of masculinity and femininity through binary oppositions give little room for individuality and make men and women unhealthily dependent on each other.

Jane Austen's works are part of the literary canon because of her original and outstanding ability to portray everyday life and people in an accurate and comical manner. Her slight irony and sarcasm also makes her literature a response to earlier romantic and gothic novels. Nevertheless, Jane Austen's works have been criticized for being mere miniatures and for excluding important socio-economic issues. I have two comments to this,

one is the argument put forward by Le Faye and Gilbert and Gubar that Austen does portray the socio-economic situation of the nineteenth-century from a young countryside woman's perspective, and the other argument is Bloom's response to why so few women and non-western authors' works are part of the Canon. Bloom's answer to the question is that art is and should not be political in that sense that it only re-tells the stories of oppressed peoples' agonies. I guess both reasons are answers good enough to explain why Jane Austen's works are deemed canonical both from a socio-economic and feminist perspective but also from Bloom's conservative Canonical viewpoint.

I have had certain difficulties finding critiques and reviews concerning Candace Bushnell's *Sex and The City* due to the fact that her novel is a rather new one and maybe also since it is not considered to be of any literary importance. Nevertheless, I believe that theoretically, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and The City* could become a part of the literary canon, since the arguments for and against Jane Austen's greatness as an author also can be applied to Bushnell and her novel. However, I also believe that Thavenius' remark that popular culture never becomes canonical but cult to be true. In the eyes of critics, feminine themes will always seem too light. The straightforward language will be perceived as too simple and the relational plots aren't intricate enough. This analysis has made me believe that popular culture, especially, literature considered to only be of interest to women have extra difficulties acquiring high enough status to be considered fine culture or high literature.

Maybe the patriarchal ideas that constructed the femininity portrayed in the novel have created a concept too strange and odd for the general (male) reader. Maybe this feminine "otherness" prevents feminine fiction from reaching acclaim as important and interesting literature. Even though Jane Austen has succeeded in becoming an esteemed author, present writers of feminine fiction still struggle to be taken seriously. Maybe later generations will deem *Sex and The City* to be of canonical importance.

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