

# Marriage: Not One Size Fits All

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Louisa Ellis, Edna Pontellier, and Elizabeth Bennet are literary characters synonymous with the topic of marriage. While each character has her own individual view of wedlock, they share the fact that each of their views, at some point, contrast with the standards of their respective societies. The writers behind these characters—Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, and Jane Austen—display that every society has certain marital expectations for its women, but each individual woman must determine whether or not she will adopt society's views and *then* be willing to accept the consequences of her decision. In other words, marriage is not one size fits all; all women interpret it differently. As is made apparent through Louisa, Edna, and Elizabeth, a woman's unique social and societal circumstances influence her view of marriage. All three women feel pressure from society to cave into its standards, but they each react differently: One woman withstands and rises above the pressure, one falls victim to it, and one, after a long fight, succumbs to it.

In "A New England Nun," Freeman creates a female character who is entirely self-sufficient in a family-oriented world: Louisa. The title's use of the word "nun" is "a powerful indicator of Louisa's

unconventionality" because "a nun must give up society in order to pursue a higher purpose" (Couch 188). Louisa's "higher purpose" is autonomy (Couch 188). Although she has been engaged to Joe Daggett for fourteen years, "she [has] fallen into a way of placing [marriage] so far in the future that it [is] almost equal to placing it over the boundaries of another life" (Freeman 4). Marriage is not part of her reality, because, unlike most women of her walk of life, she has already cultivated her own world.

Louisa's independence can only be accounted to sheer luck. In her early life, "she had seen marriage ahead as a reasonable feature and probable desirability of life" (Freeman 3), mostly on account of her mother's encouragement to marry. She accepted Joe's proposal "with no hesitation" (Freeman 3), viewing marriage as a natural part of her future. However, as her life progressed, her situation changed. Joe left Louisa to make his fortune in Australia (Freeman 3), and Louisa's mother and brother died, leaving her "all alone in the world" (Freeman 3). Despite her isolation, Louisa does not feel lonely, at least not after realizing the positive effects of her solitude. The absence of Joe and her family allowed her the opportunity for self-creation.

Unlike most of the women around her, Louisa is granted the gift of time: time to determine who she is and what she wants. It does not take her long to discover her passion for the upkeep of her home. While she views her marriage to Joe as "the inevitable conclusion of things" (Freeman 4), her life is one "full of a pleasant peace" (Freeman 4) centered in the domestic realm. Since it was more her mother's choice than her own, she does not want to marry Joe; she wants to continue the life she has built for herself, the life she discovered while he was gone. In marrying him, she will lose her place of prominence by moving into an environment that is not her own—his mother's "old homestead" (Freeman 4). However, after being "faithful to him all these years" (Freeman 4), Louisa feels obligated to finish what she started and do

what is expected of her as a woman, that is, until fate intervenes in her life yet again.

When Louisa overhears Joe and Lily's conversation about their romance (Freeman 6), she receives her third free pass in life. Lily is the opposite of Louisa: She is "beautiful and socially accepted and admired" (Couch 191). She is sure to be an involved wife (Freeman 2), so Louisa knows Joe will be happier with her, just as she, Louisa, will be happier alone. In an exercise of the independence Joe allowed her to create, she voices her desires to him (Freeman 6) and lets him off the hook. Her tears over the break-up (Freeman 7) are a slight indication of sadness, perhaps over the fact that society will judge her for her singleness. So far, her community has accepted her because of her betrothal, but "[b]y remaining unmarried... [she] removes herself from society" (Couch 192). However, Louisa recovers from her fear of being ostracized, realizing her "domain... firmly insured in her possession" (Freeman 7). Her independence is more important to her than the neighbors' opinion of her, for they already "whisper" about her daily use of china (Freeman 1). She does not care what society thinks of her, because she is comforted and empowered upon realizing her life is not going to change.

Louisa knows her purpose in life because she had the chance to discover it before she became anyone else's dependent. Her entire life is a matter of chance, but the "haps" give her the opportunity to recognize her true self, which leaves "no room for any one at her side" (Freeman 3). While marriage was always part of Louisa's life plan, her position allowed her to create a life of her own, and a happy accident relieved her of what she considered the responsibility of marriage. However, Louisa's situation is an exceptional one; most women do not have the chance to live alone for roughly fourteen years. Edna Pontellier certainly did not.

Edna lives a perfect life with a perfect husband who expects her to be a perfect wife (Chopin 1257). Naturally, since her life externally appears so perfect, it must be falling apart. It is. Edna's first mistake was marrying her husband, which was an act of rebellion, not love (Chopin 1267). Therefore, she has no passion for him or her children (Chopin 1267). Marriage is not right for Edna; she is even described as "not a mother-woman" (Chopin 1259). However, she did not have much of a choice in the matter. In what Doctor Mandelet describes as "a decoy to secure mothers for the race" (Chopin 1341), society expected Edna to marry, so she did, for unmarried women like Mademoiselle Reisz are held to a lesser regard than domestic goddesses like Adele Ratignolle.

The novella is titled *The Awakening* for a reason; when Edna's awakening starts, her entire life changes. She does not understand her feelings at first, only describing them as "[a]n indescribable oppression" (Chopin 1257). However, she begins to realize her desires, and with them, the foreboding fact that she will no longer feel satisfied or content. In fact, her fate is foreshadowed early on when Chopin writes "[a] certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, — the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (Chopin 1263). The future is both bright and dark for Edna: She is sure to learn much about herself and her wants and needs, but her realizations will not result in happiness.

Adele is ultimately who Edna *should* be. Every aspect of Adele's life is devoted to her husband and children; she is "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm" (Chopin 1259). Since she is a natural mother, she thinks everyone else is too, so she is concerned when Edna begins acting peculiar and overly thoughtful (Chopin 1265). She and her husband attempt to model a perfect relationship for Edna to follow, but Edna is uninspired and repulsed; she can respect other peoples' marriages, but it is "not a condition of life which [fits] her" (Chopin 1297). Edna is not cut out for marriage and motherhood, and, while she understands it, society cannot accept it.

The root of Edna's problem is that she is quickly discovering herself but also her limitations, a paradox illustrated when she first learns to swim (Chopin 1274). She desperately wants to break free and "[reach] out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (Chopin 1274). But she cannot lose herself, for she is a wife and mother. Even though her family is pretty self-sufficient (Chopin 1258), according to society and Adele (1290), they need her. However, Edna does not *want* them.

As her awakening grows, Edna begins to resent her marriage, toward which she formerly only felt indifference. Her resentment is understandable, for her husband considers her to be his "personal property" (Chopin 1254); no wonder she considers a wedding to be the most "lamentable spectacl[e] on earth" (1305). She will never be able to realize her full potential if she is not even her husband's equal. However, it is fortunate that, because of her husband's wealth, she has the means and position to create a new home in which she can feel "freedom and independence" (1316) not unlike Louisa's, even if it hurts her family's reputation. She is no longer concerned with social standards and appearances, because the external "impedes her from finding and fully living as her true self" (McConnell 42); she has moved onto the internal—her wants, needs, and desires—and it leads to her demise.

In her "pigeon house" (Chopin 1326), Edna is able to break more of society's rules, even consummating her relationship with Alcée Arobin. Naturally, Adele grows more concerned. In her final attempt to lead Edna by example, Adele invites her to the birth of her latest child (Chopin 1339). However, observing the birthing process is what sends Edna over the edge. In watching Adele renounce all of her independence to a "little new life" (Chopin 1340), Edna is "seized with a vague dread" (1340). Once again, she realizes the lack of control she holds over her own life: She will never be a happy wife and mother, and, in turn, she will never please society. She is only beginning to

realize her capabilities, but pursuing them is pointless.

When she concludes that she will never feel satisfied in her present situation, Edna walks into the sea as a selfish creature, not thinking about her husband or children (Chopin 1343). Before she kills herself, she “stand[s] naked under the sky... like some new-born creature” (Chopin 1344), empowered by her final instance of choice. Since she is unwilling to “dedicat[e] herself to any of the available social roles,” she chooses to enter into the “ever-elusive freedom” (Ramos 147) of death. She lives out her own words, dying for her family but not sacrificing herself; she chooses death as Edna over life as Mrs. Pontellier.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s journey is quite the opposite of Edna’s. At the beginning of the novel, Elizabeth is bent on either marrying into happiness and equality, or not marrying at all. However, society – and what it can offer her – eventually changes her mind.

The first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* reads: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 3). From the start, readers understand this is a man’s world, and Elizabeth is just living in it. Of course, she is not living in it correctly. Her mother’s sole goal in life is to marry off all of her daughters (Austen 4), and for good reason: Since the family has no male heir, after Mr. Bennet dies, the estate will go to Mr. Collins, leaving the Bennet girls without a roof over their heads (Austen 42). Marriage is not an option for women of Elizabeth’s class; it is vital to survival. So, it is a problem when she refuses not one but two marriage proposals.

Elizabeth’s main fault is not really her prejudice but rather her idealism. Her friend, Charlotte, pragmatically points out that, when dealing with suitors, a woman “had better shew *more* affection than she feels” (Austen 15). Elizabeth finds this point to be ridiculous, telling Charlotte her “plan is a good one... where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married” (Austen 15). Elizabeth does not want to be

well married; she wants to be happily married. Unfortunately, Elizabeth's goal is impractical for her family's low social status.

When Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth, she should say yes, for it would allow her to stay in the family home, Longbourn. Instead, she tells him "[y]ou could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so" (Austen 73). According to society, Elizabeth should view the proposal as an opportunity to lighten the load for her family—the chance to move from a difficult situation to a slightly better one. However, Elizabeth is too preoccupied with happiness, which Charlotte knows to be trivial.

As Lily is to Louisa, Adele is to Edna, and Charlotte is to Elizabeth. Charlotte does exactly what society prescribes, and she benefits from the deal. Although she is his third choice after Jane and Elizabeth, Charlotte is not offended when Mr. Collins proposes to her. As an "older" woman of twenty-seven, "without having ever been handsome" (Austen 84), Charlotte is content with her situation, for her future is ensured, even if she has to live it out alongside Mr. Collins.

In the privilege of her youth and beauty, Elizabeth cannot recognize Charlotte's desperation, because she does not yet feel it herself. She is contemporarily minded and wants love and equality in marriage. When Mr. Darcy proposes to Elizabeth for the first time, he does so out of love, but he definitely cannot guarantee equality, a point he makes quite clear when he laments "the inferiority of [Elizabeth's] connections" and "condition in life... so decidedly beneath [his] own" (Austen 127). He admires her for what he later calls her "liveliness of... mind" (Austen 248), but he resents her social position. However, he is willing to accept her low rank because he is so attracted to her. Since Elizabeth already dislikes Darcy based on his insults to her vanity (Austen 9) and supposedly dark history with her friend, Mr. Wickham (54), she rejects him without a "thank you" (125) and interrogates him about his meddling in Jane's relationship with his friend, Mr. Bingley.

However, after the fact, her vanity is fed when she notes how gratifying it is “to have inspired unconsciously so strong an affection” (Austen 128). Of course, she thinks she will never be able to get past his “abominable pride” (Austen 128) among his many perceived flaws, so she is confident in her rejection.

After receiving Darcy’s letter (Austen 129), Elizabeth begins to reconsider her negative opinion of him. In his explanations, she realizes that she misjudged him, and she is “ashamed of herself” (Austen 137). The letter is a turning point for Elizabeth in that it causes her “to develop in her own self-understanding” (Stanford 158). Elizabeth changes after reading the letter, even claiming “[t]ill this moment, I never knew myself” (Austen 137). She understands that, as the novel’s title suggests, she has been prideful and prejudiced toward both Darcy and marriage, and it has gotten her nowhere in life. As an idealist, she will never be satisfied with any marriage situation, so she must change her way of thinking about marriage. Since she can no longer trust her own judgment, she becomes more open to society’s standards; after all, they did work for Charlotte. However, even after this change of heart, Elizabeth is still unsure of Darcy (Austen 140). It is his social status that seals the deal on her new, socially accepted, view of marriage.

When Elizabeth tours Darcy’s estate, Pemberley, her perception of him—and marriage—flips upside down; according to one of her conversations with Jane, this is where she first realizes she loves Darcy (Austen 244), because she sees “what he would be giving her in marriage” (Stanford 159). With her newly opened mind processing Darcy’s home and grounds, she remarks “that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!” (Austen 159) She is impressed by his estate and even more impressed that he admired her enough to ask her to be its mistress. The new Elizabeth is charmed by the elegance of Darcy—his home, his material belongings (Austen 159), and his respectful behavior (163)—all of which must be attributed to his high

social status. She realizes there is much to be gained living in Darcy's society.

While the old Elizabeth never gave Darcy a chance, the new one actually starts to like him, and her attraction is more than just an admiration of his wealth. Based on his housekeeper's praise of his "many virtues," Elizabeth starts to see Darcy for who he really is: a surprisingly good person (Stanford 159). Her new view of him is supported by his kind behavior at Pemberley. So, when Darcy proposes to her a second time, the open-minded Elizabeth says yes (Austen 239). Her answer comes not only out of her attraction to him and desire to move higher in society but also gratitude, for she is indebted to Darcy for saving her family name by discovering Lydia and Wickham after their running away together (Austen 238). Ultimately, she *owes* him her hand in marriage, so it is rather convenient that she also *wants* to marry him.

Based on Elizabeth and Darcy's rhetoric, their marriage is sure to be a happy one (Austen 244). However, marriage equality is a different subject. After she agrees to marry Darcy, Elizabeth is unable to "encounter his eye" (Austen 239), thus physically displaying her position of inferiority. Darcy himself is never fully comfortable with Elizabeth's lowly origins, making her eager to "be removed from society so little pleasing to [them]" (Austen 251), which is her family. There is a sense that some of Elizabeth's spunk is gone, and, in conforming to society, she has matured out of her bold ways. However, she must maintain aspects of her "impertinence" (Austen 248), for it is what attracts Darcy to her. Austen assures her audience Elizabeth does not totally desert her former self: While living at Pemberley, she continues her "lively, sportive, manner of talking" to Darcy (253). Elizabeth might betray her own idealism, but she does so to better her position in society. Darcy has so much to offer her, and she *likes* him; her circumstances could only be improved by total equality.

Elizabeth's, like Louisa's and Edna's, view of marriage changes over time. At some point in their lives, all three women aim to please society; Louisa and Edna begin their lives in such a way, and Elizabeth does so when she marries Darcy. However, since they do not consistently follow society's rules, it is evident that there are flaws in the system. Alice Hall Petry argues "a woman is to accept whatever state seems to be her lot in life" (70), but it is difficult for a woman to follow her heart when she feels threatened by society's standards. All three women married—or almost married—because they felt it was their natural fate. Society tells these women what to do, but it is up to them to decide whether or not they will follow its rules. While breaking said rules is dangerous, for Louisa and Edna, it is necessary. However, Elizabeth benefits from following the rules. Within the worlds created by Freeman, Chopin, and Austen, the women make the best decisions possible under their own unique circumstances, because they stay as true to themselves as they can in the fight against blindly following society's standards.

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