

First and Last Name

Professor

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Charlotte and Elizabeth's Contrasting Views on Marriage

While Elizabeth Bennet has romantic notions of finding true love, Charlotte Lucas has a more practical view. Charlotte believes that marriage is necessary for financial stability, as evidenced by her attitude toward romantic relationships. When discussing Jane's relationship with Mr. Bingley, Charlotte says, "When she is secure of him, there will be more leisure for falling in love as much as she chooses" (Austen 13). The implication is that it is better for a woman to marry a wealthy man who can provide for her needs than it is to marry a poor man who loves her. These contrasting views persist throughout the novel.

Elizabeth's view of marriage is surprising when one considers the historical context of *Pride and Prejudice*. When Austen penned the novel, women did not live on their own or delay marriage to build rewarding careers. As a woman, Elizabeth could not inherit her father's business, so marrying a well-off man was the only way she could be assured of financial security. Despite these dire circumstances, Elizabeth still approached courtship and marriage as adventures to be enjoyed. She imagined Jane settling into married life "in all the felicity which a marriage of true affection would bestow," indicating her desire to marry for love instead of money (Austen 59).

In contrast, Charlotte takes a logical approach to marriage. At the age of 27, she knows time is running out for her to find a well-off man to support her for the rest of her life. Marriage is her only chance to move away from her parents and enjoy a little independence. In fact, she

only married Mr. Collins because she had a “pure and disinterested desire of an establishment” (Austen 73). Charlotte’s own mother focused more on Collins’s wealth than she did on deciding if Collins was a suitable match for her daughter.

Austen also makes it clear that Charlotte believes marriage is not always a happy adventure. When discussing Jane’s relationship with Mr. Bingley, Charlotte tells Elizabeth that “a woman had better show more affection than she feels” (Austen 13). She also says that “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” (Austen 14). Charlotte seems to realize that courting someone for a few weeks or a few months is not enough to determine if that person is a suitable mate, so she is willing to marry Mr. Collins based solely on his financial status. When she tells Elizabeth about accepting Collins’s proposal, however, Charlotte has the wisdom to know that she might be perceived as foolish. She explains that she is not a romantic and that she is only looking for a comfortable home (Austen 75).

When one examines the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, it’s rather surprising that Elizabeth clings to the notion of true love. The Bennets may be physically attracted to one another, but their personalities seem incompatible. While Mr. Bennet enjoys intellectual pursuits, Mrs. Bennet spends most of her time trying to find a husband for each of her daughters. After years of observing such a marriage, it would be understandable if Elizabeth wanted to marry for money or physical attraction rather than true love. Although Elizabeth and Charlotte have completely different views on marriage, Austen does not take the position that marriage is good or bad. Instead, she uses Elizabeth and Charlotte to show readers what life was like for women in the early 19th century. With no career prospects or hope of inheriting vast sums, women had two options: get married or live as old maids. Elizabeth was fortunate enough to find love, but Charlotte secured her future by marrying the first suitable prospect.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Bantam Classics, 2003. Print.

