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# Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Notion of Feminism in *Pride and Prejudice*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Jane Austen is one of the most well-known British authoresses and one of the main representatives of English literature. Her works deal with topics such as love, marriage and social classism, in the English society at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The primary aim of this Undergraduate Dissertation is to analyze the role of women in one of her most famous novels, *Pride and Prejudice*. Its protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, is examined from the perspective of liberal feminism. This dissertation will tackle how the novel questions the unequal position of women and their education in this era.

## **RESUMEN**

Jane Austen es una de las escritoras británicas más conocidas en la actualidad y una de las principales representantes de la literatura inglesa. Su obra trata temas como el amor, el matrimonio y el clasismo social dentro de la sociedad inglesa de principios del XIX.

El objetivo principal de este Trabajo de Fin de Grado es analizar el papel de la mujer en una de sus novelas más famosas, *Orgullo y prejuicio*. Su protagonista, Elizabeth Bennet, es estudiada desde el punto de vista del feminismo liberal. Este trabajo abordará cómo la novela cuestiona la educación de las mujeres y su desigual posición dentro de esta época.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen is one of the most renowned novelists in English literature. She was born on December 16, 1775 at the Parsonage House of Steventon, a small village in a winding valley in Hampshire (Smith 8).

Her father, George Austen, was the clergyman of an Anglican church and her mother belonged to a higher social class, the gentry. The Austen family belonged to the middle class, specifically the high Church, the most conservative branch of the Anglican church. Austen and her siblings had access to literary texts and were educated in the art of reading aloud, which was regarded as a highly valuable professional skill. Besides, Jane Austen was the seventh of eight children. Her brother James was fond of reading English literature and Henry, another of her oldest brothers, helped her with the publishers. The two youngest, Francis and Charles, served within The Great War and Cassandra, named after her mother, spent much time with her, sharing the same bed until death separated them (Smith 16).

Austen devoted her time to writing and performing the ordinary duties of life. In 1816, after having written *Persuasion*, she started suffering from Addison's disease (Smith, 42). She died in 1817 at the age of 41. One of her brothers published two of her novels, namely *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, after her death in 1818 (Smith 44).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, publishing novels was a way of risking both a woman's reputation and social position. This is why Austen had to publish all of her works anonymously. Although she just published six novels, which include *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Persuasion* (1818) and *Northanger Abbey* (1818), she continues captivating modern readers.

Jane Austen belonged to the group of female novelists of manners. That is to say, she portrayed the customs, habits or ways of behaving of the social classes of her time. That is why, as pointed out by Smith (14), Steventon and its society constitute the basis of her work.

Although Austen's *First Impressions*, the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*, had been refused by a publisher fifteen years earlier, Jane Austen continued believing in it (Copeland and McMaster 31, 67). *Pride and Prejudice* was first published at the end of January 1813, and it supposed the rise of Austen's popularity within the literary world. Janet Todd asserts that "the publication affirmed her professional status by appearing as by the author of *Sense Sensibility*. *Pride and Prejudice* turned out to be Austen's most popular novel and the one that would have brought her most profit if published on commission" (25).

Despite being published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Pride and Prejudice* can be considered to be timeless. Throughout two centuries, it has survived as a well-known novel and it has become a compulsory reading in English literature courses. Generations of readers have enjoyed it and, nowadays, everybody knows Jane Austen and, most importantly, *Pride and Prejudice*. All this can be connected to the simplicity of its plot, though at the same time, Austen discusses a variety of themes typical of her period, which shows the reader the contrast between the ideals of that time and those of the present.

Many writers, such as the Romantic novelist Sir Walter Scott, have praised Austen's works for the portrayal of her characters. He confessed that the authoress is very talented due to how she presents the feelings of her characters. But he was also fascinated by Austen's descriptions of ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting (Scott 14).

Nevertheless, Jane Austen also received some negative reviews. For instance, writers such as Charlotte Brönte, who after reading *Pride and Prejudice* declared that Austen only focuses on the lives of English ladies and gentlemen

and what did I find? An accurate, daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully-fenced, high-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 ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses. (in Rodriguez 1)

*Pride and Prejudice*, which is the work selected for this dissertation, constitutes a masterpiece of English literature. The novel has always been both acclaimed and criticized. It revolves around the Bennet family, especially Elizabeth Bennet and her relationship with Mr Darcy. Both of them will overcome their biased judgements to accept each other. As its title suggests, “pride” and “prejudice” constitute the main themes of Austen’s second novel. Both nouns describe the personality of the majority of the characters within the novel, specifically those of Darcy and Elizabeth, and how these two qualities lead them to misjudge each other. Elizabeth is presented as prejudiced because she bases her opinion of Darcy on the comments she is told. But Darcy also demonstrates his prejudice by judging everyone he meets, especially Elizabeth’s elder sister. Besides, one of the reasons why Lizzy hates Mr Darcy is because of his pride. Throughout the novel, we can notice how Darcy looks down on everybody belonging to a lower class.

The novel also focuses on a variety of issues which conditioned the lives of people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The theme of marriage demonstrates how every character is dependant on it. A man’s estate and money are scrutinized to classify him into a specific

class and, consequently, this is taken into account to marry properly and be able to move to a higher class. Love also constitutes a central theme by presenting a couple which will marry for love and not for money. In addition, women also play a central role in the novel. The reader is able to observe the development of the Bennet girls and how they settle down. Some of them will comply with the strict rules of a society ruled by men. Others, such as Elizabeth Bennet, will follow her own feelings, leaving aside and not worrying about what people could think of her.

The main aim of this dissertation is to analyse the role of women in *Pride and Prejudice*, especially that of its central character, Elizabeth Bennet, under the framework of feminist theory. It seeks to demonstrate how she is represented as an independent woman who stands against a male-dominated society. In this sense, she can be read as a feminist character. For this purpose, the notion of feminism that will be taken into account is that which states that women should be granted the same rights and opportunities as men, specifically the concept of liberal feminism, as defined by Kristina Wolff or Jurnal Ilmiah, and which emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The dissertation consists of three chapters. Firstly, Austen's historical context will be explained by connecting it to *Pride and Prejudice*. Following this, it will study the notion of feminism, together with its different trends, and the situation of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, the last chapter, which comprises the analysis of the novel, will contain a summary about *Pride and Prejudice*, and after that, the novel will be examined by discussing themes such as the role of women in the novel, women's education and marriage and finally, the feminist values exposed in *Pride and Prejudice*.

## 1. PART ONE: CONTEXTS

### 2.1 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Before beginning with the analysis of feminism within *Pride and Prejudice*, it is important to introduce both the historical and cultural contexts in which Jane Austen wrote.

Although her life was not too long, it covered significant events. She lived within the period of transition between the Augustan 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, her period of publishing, between 1811 and 1817, coincides with the Regency era, in which King George IV became Prince Regent because his father was considered to be unfit to rule the country (Todd 27).

The Augustan period, known as The Age of Enlightenment or The Age of Reason, stressed liberal ideas, reason and judgement as important guiding principles. It was a literary epoch characterized by the development of the novel, the evolution of drama into melodrama, and the themes of town and city life (Aperto 1). Jonathan Swift or Alexander Pope were major writers of the Augustan period. In the context of politics, The Acts of Union were approved in 1707, giving rise to the formation of the kingdom of Great Britain. Additionally, there were significant wars such as the Seven Years' War (BBC).

The Romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century was known for its emphasis on personal emotions, nature and its idealizations. It is worth stressing William Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, which constituted the beginning of romanticism in Great Britain. The Romantic emerged as a movement against the ideas defended by the Enlightenment and against the Industrial Revolution, which was transforming Great Britain. As transports



improved, people could travel faster because of the introduction of the first passenger railway. Other significant events of this century include The French Revolution (1789-91), which constituted the rise of the middle classes. During this time, Britain was an enemy of France and it contributed to Napoleon's fall. Finally, the American war of Independence took place in 1775, which coincides with the year in which Austen was born. This war concluded with the independence of the thirteen colonies established in America from the British government (Mcdowall 112-130).

Austen's works, especially *Pride and Prejudice*, are filled with characteristics of both Romantic and Augustan periods. This work deals with the ideals of liberty and judgement: Elizabeth is free to marry the man she wants and she misjudges Mr Darcy's personality, which guides her not to love him at first. It also contains Romantic elements such as the treatment of personal emotions, one of the major themes of the novel, in which the reader can appreciate the development of the feelings of every character. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the novel's introduction of the militia soldiers, who were the ones who fought in the Napoleonic Wars. All these elements are employed as a strategy to provide realism to the reader.

British Literature Wiki explains that society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was divided hierarchically. That is to say, there were different social classes, which may be divided into three major groups: the Upper Class (wealthy landowners), the Middle Class (doctors, merchants) and the Lower class (peasantry). As was mentioned above, Austen was the daughter of a clergyman, who belonged to the Landed Gentry, an influential social class characteristic of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This means they were landowners who belonged to the upper class. Austen's novels tend to portray families belonging to this group, such as the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice*. Meredith

Paige Luze argues that Austen viewed the landed gentry as old-fashioned and the authoress used her female protagonist to criticize this social class:

to illustrate how the landed gentry's morals have fallen, Austen consistently utilizes the heroine's viewpoint, providing an insider's insight which allows the reader to see clearly what needs to be rectified. The courtship process pinpoints how the gentry needs to and can be rejuvenated, and it enables Austen and her heroines to determine who is and is not a suitable match. (4)

This issue is related to the focus of this dissertation, which is to analyze society in the era of Austen's novels, taking into account how it affected women's position and their role in it, by exploring the feminist values expressed on *Pride and Prejudice*.

## **2.2 WOMEN'S CONTEXT AND FEMINISM**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were granted more opportunities than before. Some of the jobs that women could achieve were those of actresses or nurses. However, actresses were regarded as prostitutes because they had the ability to move from one position of the social ladder to another, which was not seen as moral because according to the idea of “scala naturae”, people only belonged to a specific class by birth. Due to the influence of the Industrial Revolution, women were able to work at factories, specifically textile factories. Nevertheless, as McDowall remarks, there were still many restrictions, “an increasing number of women found their sole economic and social usefulness ended when their children grew up, a problem that continued into the twentieth century” (142). They worked under miserable conditions for many hours and received a low income.

Some of the tasks women had to accomplish included taking care of the household or the garden and cooking. They had to follow the rules of decorum, which means that they had to behave politely and appropriately in society. Those that belonged to the upper classes received a proper education, though such was rather superficial. Whereas girls were taught how to play the piano, painting or writing, boys learned business affairs or Greek and Latin. Men supported the family financially and were thus regarded as the head of the family and the owners of their households. In contrast, women could not own their property. Besides, the propriety and the land had to be passed to the next generation, specifically, the one who inherited had to be a man. This is known as “primogeniture” a system of inheritance that stated that the land was acquired by the eldest son (Copeland and McMaster 137).

Therefore, in order to enhance their position, women had to marry a man from a higher status. Goldwin claims

women in those days evidently did consider a happy marriage as the best thing that destiny could have in store for them. They desired it for themselves and they sought it for their daughters. Other views had not opened out to them; they had not thought of professions or public life. (54)

Although women could improve their position by marrying someone from a higher class, they could not marry a man from a lower class. This could be frowned upon by society and could thus harm the family name. Marriages were arranged by the parents so that it would benefit the family. This fact explains why couples did not tend to marry for love but financial motives. At private dances, it was the fashion that any man asked any girl he fancied to become his partner without previous introduction; and at public balls, it was the Master of the Ceremonies who did the introducing (Mitton 51).

Apart from being moved away from social and political life, women were also isolated from the literary world. The beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be considered to be a starting point in the history of feminism in British literature. Many women became writers and they were able to earn their living by means of their writings. However, they were forced to publish their work anonymously or to replace their names with a masculine one. For example, Luisa May Alcott had to change her name to A.M Barnard. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in which she explained the injustices suffered by women and stated that women deserved the same rights as men. Significantly enough, Jane Austen's work was also written during this time. This is why she can be considered part of that feminist tradition in England. Following Wollstonecraft's ideas, Austen focused on Victorian women who stood up

against a male-dominated society. As this dissertation will further explore, Austen reflected her feminist values on her female characters by focusing on themes, such as marriage and love, in order to criticize the patriarchal society of her time and advocate for the equality of rights between men and women.

Nevertheless, there are some critics who do not consider Jane Austen as a feminist writer. Brownstein presents some arguments which claim that we could not contemplate Austen as such: “Jane Austen never did declare herself as a feminist and she lived a conventional life, following the rules that a woman of her time and position was supposed to follow” (20). As Brownstein claims, this shows that Austen conformed to the decorum of her context. Furthermore, Brownstein adds another argument to support the mentioned idea:

although she creates female characters who made their own decisions in life rather than doing what society expected them to do, they inevitably end up fitting in what the patriarchal society expected them to be: women who marry a wealthy man of position and take their places as good wives. (20)

The term “feminism” first appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has its origins in the French word “feminisme”. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines the word feminism as “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state”. Jurnal Ilmiah mentions a series of feminist movements along history, starting with liberal feminism, which began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and continued until the first feminist wave of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and advocated “for the equality rights in occupation or education” (4). After this movement, others emerged. Radical feminism was the one which asserted that “both women and men must be educated to see the tradition as one

of oppression and be encouraged to create a new one based on a female perspective”, marxist feminism, which examined how women were exploited as a result of capitalism, and socialist feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claiming that “feminism’s purpose is to construct the society in order to get equality in gender (4). Nowadays, the feminist movement continues to fight to achieve equal rights for women.

*Pride and Prejudice* reflects Jane Austen’s beliefs on feminism. As Jurnal Ilmiah argues, this novel deals with the limitations on women’s rights imposed by Austen’s society. Apart from that, and contrary to Brownstein’s claims, Austen presents young women who rebel against society’s rules, ahead of their age and who do not conform to the established status quo. Thus, it can be argued that Jane Austen explores the issue of feminism throughout her work, specifically in *Pride and Prejudice*, which is the focus of this dissertation.

## 2. PART TWO: ANALYSIS OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

### 3.1 SUMMARY OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

*Pride and Prejudice* centres on the love story between Elizabeth Bennet, the second of five daughters of a country gentleman living in Longbourn, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a rich aristocrat.

The first chapter in *Pride and Prejudice* introduces the reader both the setting and the Bennet family. None of the Bennet girls are married and they will be expelled from their house when their father dies. Persuaded by his wife, Mr Bennet visits Mr Bingley, a rich single man who has moved to Netherfield. This supposes an opportunity for Mrs Bennet to marry one of her daughters to Mr Bingley. This is followed by an invitation to a ball, where Mr Bingley and Jane (the Bennet eldest daughter) seem to be attracted to each other. Mr Darcy, who is Bingley's friend and a wealthy man, refuses to dance with Elizabeth, by claiming that she is not attractive enough. Mr Bingley is falling in love with Jane but Jane hides her feelings and, surprisingly, Mr Darcy is attracted to Elizabeth. Chapter 10 ends showing Mr Darcy asking Elizabeth to dance. Lizzy answers she does not give him the pleasure of mocking her, so she will not dance with him.

Chapter 13 introduces Mr. Collins, Elizabeth's distant cousin who will inherit the Bennet's estate. The two youngest Bennet sisters (Mary and Lydia) spend their time attempting to flirt with any military officer surrounding them, as they do with Wickham, who befriends Elizabeth and tells her how Darcy ruined his life. Some days later, Mr Collins proposes Elizabeth to marry him but she refuses. Despite the possibility of inheriting her family's home, Lizzy does not want to marry without love. Charlotte Lucas (Lizzy's best friend) shows up claiming that Collins has proposed her instead and that she has accepted because it would provide her with a comfortable home. This

provokes Elizabeth's disillusionment with Charlotte because she marries only to improve her social position.

Chapters 28 to 36 are set in the spring. They cover Elizabeth's visit to Mrs and Mr Collins. Darcy is coming to visit his aunt, Lady Catherine, who results to be Mr Collins boss. Darcy seems to be glad to see Elizabeth. However, Lizzy feels quite disappointed when she learns from Colonel Fitzwilliam (Mr Darcy's friend) that Bingley was going to propose to Jane but Darcy broke the engagement. Following that, Darcy proposes to Elizabeth. This supposes the climax of the novel, which paves the way for the novel's denouement. Lizzy rejects him by asserting she could never love a man who has provoked such unhappiness to her sister and accuses him of treating Wickham wrongly. This rejection is the result of Elizabeth's proud and prejudiced character towards Darcy. After that, Darcy gives Elizabeth a letter, in which he explains that Wickham wanted to take advantage of him after wasting the money which he had inherited from Darcy's father. In the letter, Darcy also recognises he separated Jane and Bingley because of Jane attitude and because of the lack of propriety of her family. This makes Elizabeth realize she had misjudged Darcy.

Chapter 43 shows the trip to Derbyshire by Elizabeth and her aunt and her uncle (the Gardiners). They decide to visit Darcy's estate. When Mr Darcy returns unexpectedly, he invites Mr Gardiner to go fishing, and Elizabeth and the Gardiners to meet his sister. Elizabeth is surprised by his treatment. Then, she receives a letter informing her that her sister Lydia has ruined the family's good reputation by running away with Wickham. She tells Mr Darcy and departs. Wickham agrees to marry Lydia. With the reputation restored, Lydia visits the family and tells Elizabeth that Mr Darcy was at her wedding. Mrs Gardiner informs Elizabeth he arranged the marriage by giving



Wickham money. By doing this, Lizzy suspects Darcy may have had another reason for having done so.

The remaining chapters expose Mr Bingley's and Mr Darcy's return to Netherfield, followed by Bingley's proposal to Jane, who accepts. Lady Catherine, having heard rumours that Elizabeth is engaged to Mr Darcy, decides to visit her and orders Elizabeth not to marry him. Elizabeth refuses. Knowing Elizabeth's response to his aunt, Darcy proposes to her, and, he is finally accepted. Although Elizabeth has some difficulties in convincing her father that she is marrying for love and not for economic reasons, Mr Bennet is finally convinced. The novel concludes with a happy ending. The equilibrium is restored: Elizabeth and Darcy overcome their pride and prejudice and finally acknowledge the love they feel for each other. Therefore, pride results to be modest and prejudice is overcome.

### 3.2 THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE NOVEL

Through *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen presents a woman-centred story written by an authoress. Austen never shows what a man is thinking about. Instead, she offers both the thoughts and the feelings of a woman, namely, those of Elizabeth Bennet. The female characters are used to show Austen's disapproval of the treatment of women at that time. There are a variety of female characters: the snobbish Lady Catherine, the superficial Caroline Bingley, or the desperate Charlotte Lucas. The portrayal of these characters constitutes a way of questioning and criticizing society. For instance, Caroline Bingley represents what society expects from women: the fact that they should conform to the decorum and receive proper education on music or languages. Due to her social status, she has received a proper education. This also makes her think that she is superior to women like Elizabeth. In this quotation, Caroline explains what women are expected to have knowledge of in order to marry properly:

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, *Pride and Prejudice* 27)

Lady Catherine constitutes the personification of wealth and social norms. She criticizes the Bennet family when she discovers that the five Bennet sisters have not been educated by a governess. This makes her assume that they have not been instructed in drawing or playing an instrument. Besides, to make social norms be accomplished, she attempts to separate Elizabeth from Darcy: a marriage between two persons from

different social classes is not viewed as proper by society. Instead, she wants Darcy to marry her daughter. In other words, she desires to arrange a convenience marriage, which was typical of that era.

Charlotte Lucas also fulfils what society expects from her: she marries Mr Collins because, apart from improving her living conditions, she has reached an age which forces her to marry someone. In this quotation, she explains to Elizabeth why she will marry her cousin, admitting that she cannot marry for love but for economic reasons:

I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr Collins's character, connection, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state. (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 88)

Thus, the mentioned female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are employed to show women's accomplishment of the norms within the Regency era but their portrayal is also utilised to question that society.

Some of the strategies which Jane Austen employs to expose her opinions about her society and to laugh at it, is the verbal irony, presented within the descriptions and dialogues of her female characters. *Pride and Prejudice* is replete with this type of irony, which is set at the beginning of the novel, specifically within the famous first line, which will be analyzed later. This irony can create a humorous effect on the reader. Austen's description of Mrs Bennet is very ironic because she focuses on Mrs Bennet's obsession with marriage or gossiping as the most important feature of her

personality: “She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 3). This ironic tone is employed to laugh about society’s norms and values: Mrs Bennet symbolizes society’s pressure on women to be married, which is the same as Mrs Bennet’s puts on her own daughters.

The most significant characteristic which highlights Elizabeth’s character is her ironic wit. She is the only woman who uses it, which makes a difference between her and the rest of the women. Sometimes, she employs the irony to say something she did not really mean to or to treat the absurd norms of social life with mockery. In this quotation, while she is dancing with Darcy, she mentions ironically the manners in which someone must establish a conversation during a ball: “It is your turn to say something now, Mr Darcy—I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 64). Moreover, when talking with Caroline at Netherfield, Elizabeth claims with an ironic tone that Darcy “has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 41). By doing this, she implies that Mr Darcy has many defects such as his pride.

Furthermore, Elizabeth also uses the irony as a tool of defence. When she is talking with Lady Catherine, a woman aware of class differences, Elizabeth does not give a direct answer to her. That is because Elizabeth does not want Lady Catherine to put her down due to their class differences. For instance, when Lady Catherine tells Elizabeth that “you cannot be more than twenty” Elizabeth replies that “I am not one-and-twenty”

(Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 114). Thus, by doing this, Elizabeth is trying to defend herself from being criticized.

All in all, the verbal irony in *Pride and Prejudice* is not only a tool to express humour but to criticize the absurd norms that society exercises over people, especially women.

### 3.3 WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND MARRIAGE

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were little opportunities for women. As a result, many of them felt neglected when entering society. The absence of advanced educational opportunities for women gave them little option in life (Guney and Ertug 7). Women's education depended on their social class. Women from a higher class were very lucky because they could be instructed at home by a governess and they were taught issues related to languages, reading, and how they had to behave in social life.

The Bennet sisters do not have the privilege to receive a proper education. Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* criticizes women's education because it does not provide them critical thinking. Ajda Guney and Mehmet Ertug support this idea by asserting that:

Mary Bennet believes herself superior to her sisters because of her reading hobby, but this hobby has given her a false pride. Although Mary reads a lot she received inadequate education to make logic decisions. As a feminist novelist, Austen gives the message that all women should get formal education. (7)

Another member of the Bennet family, Lydia Bennet, stains her family name by running away with Wickham. Besides, she behaves in an improperly way when the family attends balls. Her behaviour reflects the lack of proper education. Jenna DeForte confirms that:

Mary Wollstonecraft would argue that Lydia's is a representation of how the lack of education provokes morality issues. Austen and Wollstonecraft seem to suggest that if Lydia had received a proper education, then she might not have fallen as far as she did. Both writers defend the idea that women must have the right to be educated. (9)

Thence, Jane Austen criticizes women who behave improperly as a result of their lack of education, to claim the necessity of proper education for every woman. This was the ideal which Jurnal Ilmiah and Kristina Wolff defended about liberal feminism: the right of every woman to receive an adequate education, the same as men.

As mentioned before, women's education was different to that of men's. Whereas men were instructed to become the head of the household, women received an education linked to domestic tasks and how to behave appropriately in public. The ultimate goal of women's education was that of marriage: the more they were instructed in this issue, the more possibilities they had to attract a man. Public balls were the perfect place where single women were introduced to society, especially, to men.

The famous first sentence which opens the plot in *Pride and Prejudice* establishes one of the major themes around which the novel revolves: marriage: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 2). This sentence immediately establishes the importance of an advantageous marriage, which as argued earlier, was fundamental in Austen's Regency Era. However, this opening line is very ironic since that rich man already had a settled life so he did not need to worry about searching for a wife. Thence, the ones who are truly searching for a husband are not men but single women.

As mentioned in the summary, the story opens with Mr Bingley, a man in possession of a good fortune, who moves into Netherfield. This is viewed by Mrs Bennet as an opportunity to marry one of her daughters to a wealthy husband. Mrs Bennet's ambition is to marry all her daughters. She even makes her daughter Jane travel to Netherfield on horseback while it is raining. This quotation presents Mr Bennet's use of irony to express his wife's obsession with marriage and lack of interest

in her eldest daughter: "If your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, if she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr Bingley, and under your orders" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 22).

This shows how she is not interested in her daughters' own happiness or comfort. She is also disappointed when Elizabeth, who wants to marry for love, rejects Mr Collins. This has to do with the idea that the majority of women could not marry for love. Elizabeth and Jane Bennet are the exceptions. Both Mr Darcy and Mr Collins expected Elizabeth to accept their proposals because apart from providing her with a more comfortable life because of their fortunes, marriage is what all women want for their lives. However, she rejects them at first because she does not love them and marriage without love is not enough. This proves that Elizabeth is indifferent to society's norms and that she can be also an independent woman who is happy to marry only a man whom she truly loves.

Hence, Jane Austen wanted her readers to draw some moral conclusions: women deserve an education, it does not matter whether they belong to a lower class or not. Women have to marry someone whom they truly love. She is questioning and criticizing again her society through her female characters.



### 3.4 FEMINIST VALUES IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

In an era where women's rights were limited and were regarded as inferior to men, a way of demanding their equality and showing a position against the established patriarchal society was through literature. As stated in the section of women's context and feminism, whereas some writers claimed that they considered themselves as feminists, others did not explicitly admit it. However, they nonetheless focused their work on women's role in society. As Mary Eagleton has stated, in the 1700s, Mary Astell urged women to be treated as equal to men. By the 1790s, Mary Wollstonecraft claimed that femininity was a cultural construct, negatively influenced by women's limitation to access to education. Much feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries centred on women's rights as independent beings and on how sexual difference and femininity affected women's status as subjects (124).

Although there are people such as Adja Güney and Mehmet Ertug, who affirm that Jane Austen's cannot be considered as feminist, others support the idea that she could be called feminist. Nevertheless, it is undeniable the fact that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* support the feminist struggle by presenting a central female character who owns the term feminism: Elizabeth Bennet. Austen was a significant step in the evolution of the feminist movement. Austen wanted women to be equal to men in every aspect of life. According to Marija Reiff, Austen employed her female protagonists to defend the belief that a woman can be independent, moralistic, and virtuous all at the same time, which was the kind of feminist ideal that Mary Wollstonecraft described in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" (16).

*Pride and Prejudice* deals with a society where men held all the power and women's rights were limited. Through the characterization of her female characters,

Austen represents the values of liberal feminism, which was the trend that characterized the Regency Era. In this novel, she depicts with accuracy her context by presenting a female protagonist who rebels against society's rules.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was believed that if a woman presented herself as independent, she would appear less appealing to men (DeForte 4). Nevertheless, what attracts Mr Darcy from Elizabeth Bennet is her independence and the fact that she transcends her expected role as a woman. Sheehan claims that "Elizabeth is not financially independent, and in fact depends upon an advantageous marriage for her future survival. Yet throughout the novel, she asserts an intellectual and moral independence" (32).

Elizabeth's unconventional ideas are manifested when she decides to ignore society's rules about marriage despite Mrs Bennet's pressure on her to marry Mr Collins. By marrying her cousin, she would only be happy materially. In section 3.2 the comparison between Elizabeth and Charlotte was established. In the following quotation, apart from rejecting her cousin, Elizabeth shows her ideals by explaining to Mr Collins what society expects about women, which is to marry a rich man:

Your hope is a rather extraordinary one after my declaration. I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. You could not make ME happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who could make you so. (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 75)

The fact that Elizabeth prefers personal independence rather than financial security proofs her feminist views.

Another instance which demonstrates Elizabeth's feminist values is shown in chapter seven, at the moment she has to go to Netherfield to visit her sister Jane, who is sick. Even though it was regarded as inappropriate for a woman to travel alone, Elizabeth chooses to go alone on foot. In this quotation, Caroline Bingley criticizes her for travelling alone and wearing a dirty dress. She even mentions that Elizabeth does not care about being decorous:

To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum. (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 25)

This quotation expresses Elizabeth Bennet's rebellion against the decorum and the necessity to achieve women's freedom to do whatever they want.

Therefore, Elizabeth Bennet can be read as a feminist woman because her values set her apart from the figure of the traditional woman in the Victorian Age. Her liberal feminist values are manifested in *Pride and Prejudice* to demonstrate that women deserve the same rights as men and to question the context to which Jane Austen belonged.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Although Jane Austen never declared herself a feminist authoress, she used both her novels and her female protagonists to show her disapproval of the values of the society she belonged to. Her novels cannot be considered as simple love stories because they hide implicit meanings.

*Pride and Prejudice* explores the role of women in the Regency era by presenting a female protagonist who opposes both the norms and the values of her society. Elizabeth Bennet could be read as a feminist character due to her unconventional values: she is not constraint by social norms, she resist the pressure that society exercises over her, she follows her own will and she does not care about what people could think about her. All these values represent the ideals of the feminism movement which took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: liberal feminism.

Within her novel, Austen criticizes the patriarchal system which oppresses her female characters by questioning the primogeniture system or the marriages based on economic purposes. Apart from demonstrating that women should marry whomever they want, Austen also supports the mentioned feminist movement by stressing the importance of education for every young woman, a belief that was defended by the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft.

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