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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Elizabeth Bennet and Hester Prynne from a proto-feminist perspective

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is to show two instances of female literary characters that possess feminist personalities. In order to do so, it is necessary, previously, to know the origins of feminism and the role of women throughout history. Right after, the characters of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* will be analysed to demonstrate why their behaviours correspond to a feminist attitude. Finally, both characters will be briefly compared with the purpose of presenting similarities and differences between them.

Key words: Feminism, Elizabeth Bennet, Hester Prynne, oppression, women, inequality, empowerment.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es el de mostrar dos ejemplos de personajes femeninos de la literatura que posean personalidades feministas. Para llevarlo a cabo, es necesario, previamente, conocer los orígenes del feminismo y el rol de la mujer a lo largo de la historia. Acto seguido, los personajes de Elizabeth Bennet en *Orgullo y Prejuicio* y Hester Prynne en *La Letra Escarlata* serán analizados para demostrar por qué sus comportamientos corresponden con una actitud feminista. Por último, ambos personajes serán comparados brevemente con la finalidad de presentar similitudes y diferencias entre ellos.

Palabras clave: Feminismo, Elizabeth Bennet, Hestery Prynne, opresión, mujeres, desigualdad, empoderamiento.

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1. Introduction

It is universally known that women have undergone enormous difficulties to achieve an equal position to men in society. In fact, that fight to accomplish equality has not ended yet. It is a daily struggle in which many of us have to face innumerable facts that place us in a minor status than men. When people, including men and women, deny the necessity of feminism, most of them do that because of ignorance. It is not an invention when we talk about facts such as: the wage gap, sexualisation and objectification of women's body, the huge number of harassments and abuses or the categorization of works, among many others.

For all those reasons, it is essential to have feminist icons that can show humanity that things can change. That is why it is wonderful that literature can provide examples of feminist icons. Although at the beginning of history, literature was inaccessible to women because they were ignored and marginalized, nowadays we can be proud of having so many women writers that have contributed in the creation of the literary canon. Not only we have women writing literature, but women and men writing about feminist characters showing rebel women that behave as it is not expected by society.

Therefore, it is so important to be grateful to literature because it has made readers learn about feminism thanks to famous characters such as Elisabeth Bennet and Hester Prynne, the ones that are going to be dealt with in this work.

Having said that, it is time to go directly into the core of the work and develop all these ideas in a deep manner.

2. PART ONE: Theoretical framework

2.1. Portrait of women throughout history

The position of women has gone through many different stages according to the different periods in history. They have gained more power, little by little, with respect to their position in society. Today, it is shocking to know that there were women in the past who were crowned as Queens of a whole country or empire, whereas there were others who were not allowed even to express their opinions in political matters by means of the vote. Another example is the existence of female leaders, for example in religion, that were named bishops equally powerful to male bishops, or even, in some cultures, women who participated in battles as warriors next to men.

These equalities, of course, changed and there was a moment in time in which women became inferior to men, but fortunately, throughout the years, they have been acquiring their rights again. Below, there are some of the most interesting instances of rights that women have achieved not so a long time ago. They have been taken from the website called History and, precisely, from the article named *Milestones in Women's History: A Timeline* in which it is provided a detailed timeline of prominent events related to women in the United States. They appear together with the date in which they occurred. The examples are the following:

- Aug. 18, 1920: Ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is completed, declaring “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”
- Dec. 1, 1955: Black seamstress Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Ala. The move helps launch the civil rights movement.
- June 10, 1963: President John F. Kennedy signs into law the Equal Pay Act, prohibiting sex-based wage discrimination between men and women performing the same job in the same workplace.
- Jan. 22, 1973: In its landmark 7-2 *Roe v. Wade* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court declares that the Constitution protects a woman's legal right to an abortion.
- Sept. 13, 1994: Clinton signs the Violence Against Women Act as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, providing funding for programs that help victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, stalking and other gender-related violence.

(History.com Editors, 2019)

Those are some of the long list of examples that show how women have not had an easy role in the world. They have been subdued during so many years and, as we can

see, those changes have taken place not so long time ago and, indeed, they are still taking place nowadays.

2.1.1. Women and gender roles

Dealing with gender roles, it is important, first of all, to define what gender roles are. Provided by the dictionary *Lexico*, ‘gender role’ can be defined as: “The role or behaviour learned by a person as appropriate to their gender, determined by the prevailing cultural norms”. By looking at the definition, it is enough to realize that gender roles are something negative for society. Since we all human beings are free to behave as we want, regarding to our own personalities and ways of being, gender roles are limiting us to something that, maybe, we do not belong to. Hence, gender roles could be equated to the term ‘sexism’ because they provoke prejudices and stereotypes against people. Gender roles categorize people but, actually, people do not belong to any category.

Before continuing, I think it is appropriate to incorporate in this part the issue of gender. What is gender? Does it really exist? Taking into account, again, the definition from the dictionary *Lexico*, the term ‘gender’ refers to:

“Either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female.” (*Lexico*)

So, we are dealing with something that has been imposed by society. It is interesting to see other views of what gender is. According to Judith Butler, an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at George Washington University, the issue of gender has to do with performative acts. She says that philosophers tend always to think about the fact that acts are directly associated to a particular semantic meaning. As a consequence, Butler claims that it is “an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988: 519). Therefore, gender would not be something stable that is related to sex, but something established by a series of acts that directly influence people. As a result, Butler suggests that, for instance, gender transformation would have to do with the breaking or changing of those particular acts. This idea is shown in the next paragraph:

Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or sub- versive repetition of that style. (Butler: 520)

Coming back to the issue of gender roles and stereotypes, in the book *Gender: Stereotypes and roles*, Susan A. Basow shows a long list of the very many examples of stereotypes that we can find in women and men. For instance, feminine stereotypes represent people who are dependent, emotional, talkative, submissive, home-oriented, who express their tender feelings easily... Whereas masculine stereotypes represent people who are independent, not emotional, not talkative, dominant, worldly and who do not express tender feelings so easily (Basow, 1992). This list could insinuate that stereotypes are, somehow, opposites in men and women because of the way in which they are represented, but it is not like that. As a matter of fact, it does not represent reality at all. We can find as many different people as many traits exist because, as it was mentioned at the beginning, people are not something that can be categorized.

But, if stereotypes do not reflect the reality, what are the reasons why they exist? Basow suggests the existence of two main theories that claim to explain the origin of gender roles and stereotypes. One of them would be the “kernel of the truth” theory. It is based on the presumption that gender stereotypes have been defined empirically, that is to say, they have been verified throughout experience. This directly suggests that differences between sexes exist beyond the obvious physical differences. The “kernel of the truth” claims that, firstly, the differences exist and, then, what stereotypes do is just exaggerate them. They would be simply exaggerations and generalizations of the differences found between men and women (Basow, 1992). On the other hand, the second main theory regarding the origin of stereotypes is the “social-role theory”. It claims that stereotypes arise from differences in social roles which are typically associated to women and men. This is a citation by Basow that, at the same time, includes another citation by Eagly and Steffen (1984):

Males are likely to play with guns, know how to change a flat tire, mow the lawn well, and be employed when they are adults. Females are likely to bake well, change diapers, play with baby dolls, and be homemakers as well as employed when they are adults. Eagly and Steffen (1984, 1986b) argue that it

is *because* men and women typically do different things that people make assumptions about men's and women's innate traits and abilities. These researchers found that people's beliefs that females possess more communal (concerned with others) and fewer agentic (masterful) qualities than men are as a result of perceiving women as homemakers and men as fulltime employees. [...] Therefore, it is the division of labor and tasks between women and men that accounts for the content of gender stereotypes. Even when both women and men are employed, they tend to be employed in different types of jobs. (Basow: 9, 10).

From my point of view, I would coincide better with the second theory. I do not consider that there are differences between sexes but that they are imposed by society. For example, if there exist some defined features that are associated to me because I am a woman, I am going to grow up surrounded by those features that are very probable to influence on me and that may condition my way of behaving. So, it is not a case of generalization. If we all were free to choose our own decisions since we are children, maybe, too many things would be different about us.

To conclude this point, it has to be said that all these assumptions have consequences. If we pay attention to stereotypes and gender roles, this will lead to behavioural differences. They are far from representing reality. If gender stereotyping is bounded to sex role expectations, people will be influenced by them. They directly persuade us to have a pre-established impression of people. This means that people will tend to present themselves in the way that has been established as the accepted one by society. (Basow, 1992). So, they delimit our behaviour, restricting us to do what we as expected to do.

The solution to all this would be: not paying attention to gender stereotypes, not acquiescing in them, simply act as if they did not exist. The consequences would be, progressively, less and less significant and, maybe, someday, they could disappear. I would like to end this point with a quote by Basow that represents clearly this final idea:

“In sum, gender stereotypes, which are based on few real sex differences, are powerful forces of social control. People can either conform to them and be socially acceptable but restricted, or they can rebel and face the consequences of being socially unacceptable.” (Basow: 12)

2.2. Role of women in literature

Together with all the difficulties that have been mentioned at the beginning, women had to suffer oppression in literature as well. The vast majority were denied to enjoy one of the basic living needs as it is the right to education. Education is essential to develop our abilities and face different episodes in our lives. Education can give us the means and the security to confront difficulties, and injustices. As it is said in the article *Empowerment of Women through Education in Twenty First Century*, written by Sheykhjan, Rajeswari and Jabari (2014), education can be useful as an instrument to fight against gender discrimination. The need of literacy is so important due to the fact that if we do not know the rights that belong to us or we are not able to distinguish a situation in which we are being discriminated, we will not be able to fight for it. It usually occurs when women, that are so used to deal with some situations in which they are being treated unfairly, are not conscious that they are being discriminated because it is what they have experienced throughout their whole lives and for them it is natural. This is a fragment of that text:

Empowerment of women through education in 21st century is the most important tool that can help break the pattern of gender discrimination and bring lasting change for women in developing countries. Educated women are essential to ending gender bias, starting by reducing the poverty that makes discrimination even worse in the developing world. No longer is gender equality viewed solely as a social justice issue. Ensuring that women have the same opportunity to rights, resources and voice within a society is widely recognized as essential to that society's growth and development.(Sheykhjan, et al., 2014: 44).

Regarding to the role of women in literature, we have to say that, in the past, they were practically ignored and, sometimes, they tended to hide themselves under the name of a man in order to publish their writings. But, as it is known, literature is the representation of reality. In this way, taking into account that, at the beginning of history, women were not allowed to write but, nowadays, they are totally free to do it, it can be seen how this fact represents the evolution and empowerment of women along history. Literature has witnessed that evolution.

And now, a general view to the portrait of women in literature to know the roles they have had is going to be explained. During the Victorian era, because the presence of women in the previous periods was almost insignificant, the rights of women were very limited and they were expected to stay and home, be married and deliver their

rights to their husbands, who were the one who were in charge of the money and properties. In terms of literature, male writers wrote about women representing them mainly as innocent, weak, and, homely. It was a mere reflect of how they saw women at those times. As women were expected to dedicate their lives doing housework, for the rest it looked useless that they devoted their time to acquire a good education. However, we can find writers such as the Brontë sisters (Emily, Anne, and Charlotte), who were able to write great works during this period. Thank to them, it was possible to express the view of women of that era through literature. They wrote works such as *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily, *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, by Anne. In these works it could be appreciated, at least, the reality through the eyes of women, how they questioned gender, and started to introduce traits of feminism. As a matter of fact, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has been considered as one of the first feminist novels.

The Victorian period ended with the death of Queen Victoria and it was followed by the Edwardian era. Here, there was a change, initiated the writer George Bernard Shaw. He used literature to question politics and society, but he also tried to give voice to women. In Edwardian poetry it was already possible to find writings dealing with the rights of women as well as the promotion of feminist attitudes. In sum, there were being introduced aspects that had never been seen before. The same happened in the period of Modernism; there was a reaction against the established rules in society. Although, it has to be said, that the change from the male chauvinist world to a feminist one is not easy at all. It is very difficult to forget about the old and strong tradition that has always accompanied us. This idea is developed by Heike Wrenn in his article *The woman in Modernism*. He is dealing with the idea of this difficult movement to change the view of people about women and not going backwards to old customs. He states:

Although many changes are seen in the way women are portrayed in modernist literature—and the “new woman” can certainly be detected page after page—many male writers were unable to let go of the old, established, feminine view of female characters. Tradition was still too strong and the “womanly woman” remained an important literary figure alongside this “new woman.” [...] It is practically impossible to read “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and not notice the influence that modernism has had on Hemingway and his work. He clearly acknowledges the rapid changes that have taken place in society and the way these changes have affected women and their status. (Wrenn, 2010: 10, 11).

Most of this has been left behind and nowadays we can see even female writers winning the Nobel Prize as Alice Munro, who was the first Canadian woman to win the

prize. In her stories she shows the lives of women and their fight to face a world dominated by men. Eleanor Catton became in 2013 the youngest Booker prize winner at the age of 28 with her book *The Luminaires*. She also fights against literary sexism. Furthermore, also in 2013, 4 out of 5 *New York Times* best fiction books were written by women. Among them, we can find for instance *Americanah!* by the African writer Chimamanda Adichie (Jin, 2014).

All this information serves to show us how the role of women in literature has moved from a marginalized and oppressed position to a completely liberated, empowered and feminist one. This does not mean that the struggle has ended, but it does mean that the change is possible.

2.3. Origin of feminism

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term feminism is a late 19th century borrowing from French *féminisme*. Feminism is defined as “The advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.” (Lexico). It relies on the idea of complete equality in all matters, independently of the sex of the person. Feminism has taken place thanks to a series of movements which have led us to be given many rights that were forbidden for women in the past. These movements are what are going to be explained in this section.

The activism of women to obtain legal rights as men started with the introduction of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments in Congress, in the year 1866. They expected to be allowed to vote but it only granted the right to all male citizens. The feminist movements have been divided into three main waves which had different purposes to achieve different goals and objectives. The 1st wave of feminism took place during the 19th and early 20th century and it had the mission to obtain the right to vote for women, although it has to be mentioned that, at the beginning, it was more focused on facing the marital life in which women were totally ownership of their husbands. Through the American first wave of feminism, it was achieved the 19th Amendment of the Bill of Rights which implied the right to vote for women. Two instances of important women who were key to this fight were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. They were the creators of a newspaper called *Revolution* in which they expressed their claim for the women having the right to vote. In addition to that, they

also claimed for “equality with respect to education, property rights, employment, social status, and societal responsibilities, as well as freedom from men’s violence” (Basow: 333). Besides, there existed different organizations of women who were more focused on the fight for the right for education or other different aims, but most of them considered the right to vote as the most important one. Besides, in 1869, it had been created the *National Woman Suffrage Association* and it started to acquire more relevance during this struggle to stand up for the rights of women. Apart from that association, there was the *American Woman Suffrage Association* who worked separately from the other group but, by 1890 these two associations merged into just one and they created the *National American Woman Suffrage Association*. It was in 1920 when the right to vote for women became legal in the United States after years of struggling. This act was controversial enough and there were many people who disagree on it since they considered unconstitutional that women could vote. Fortunately, there was an ongoing acceptance of women as voters and today it is completely assumed. Nevertheless, as a consequence of this achievement, many feminist groups disappeared with the impression of having accomplished their mission. Luckily, some others kept on the fight for inequality (Basow, 1992).

The second 2nd wave of feminism arose after World War II. It lasted from 1950 until 1980, approximately. The main goal of this movement was to finish with discrimination and achieve complete social equality. The reason for its development was caused by the fact that women were called during the war to join the labour force to help male soldiers. The thing is that, when the war ended, women were sent again to their homes to continue working in the household chores and take care of their husbands. The fact that they were part of the war made them feel useful, as men were considered. Thus, this made them reflect about why they cannot have equal rights to men and their roles were limited to stay at home simply being a mother or a wife. (Basow, 1992).

During this period, two main groups of feminists were created. They were, on the one hand, the younger New Left women and, on the other hand, the Older career women. They both fought separately and with different aims. The older one was concentrated on legal, political and economic matters, which was named “liberal feminism”. Whereas the younger group, divided into radical and socialist feminists, focused interest on the rejection to gender stereotypes and, also, “the view that sexism

exists as institutionalized discrimination, sometimes beyond conscious awareness” (Basow: 334). Besides the existence of these two main groups, it has to be mentioned the importance of the presence of Betty Friedan during this “second wave” (Druker, 2018). She, together with her book *The Feminine Mystique*, played a key role in this stage of the feminist movement. Friedan was the founder of the *National Organization for Women*, in 1966, which is considered as one of the more important basis for the feminist movement. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, she criticizes the assumption that women should be mothers, housewives and dedicate their lives to housework. She took a stance against this belief that do not take into account women who do not feel satisfied with that role and what Friedan did was to give voice to all those women who were not happy and did not feel fulfilled only with their husbands, children and home. This idea is developed in the chapter called *The problem that has no name* of her book, and, by “the problem” she is referring to that feeling of unhappiness and incompleteness of women to which no one paid attention to. The very first paragraph is shown in the following quote:

“The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – “Is this all?”.” (Friedan, 1963 : 15)

It is for that reason that she is considered so important for the feminist movement, because she was able to recognize and give a name to that problem, something that had been never questioned before. Her work is quite interesting since it includes interviews to real women who felt this dissatisfaction.

Before continuing with the 3rd wave of feminism, it has to be mentioned the importance of another writer, Simone de Beauvoir, who also contributed to the feminist movement with her book *The Second Sex*, in which she claimed the famous statement “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. She wanted to show that lives of women were limited to what gender roles require (Sandvick, Altaweel & Lambrecht, 2019). Therefore, her purpose of de Beauvoir was to go beyond these gender roles and display that women were as valid as men, as it was demonstrated during World War II. For some, she is considered the “mother of feminism”. During this “second wave”,

women got attainments such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 by which they were assured equal pay for the same jobs done by men or the introduction of the contraceptive pill who allowed them to avoid pregnancy (Sandvick, et al., 2019). But, summarizing, they were able to start questioning and talking about social inequality.

By last, the 3rd wave of feminism started by the 1990s. It includes women from all cultures, ethnicities and colours (Drucker, 2018). It does not matter where they come from. This movement was promoted by many of the daughters of women belonging to the 2nd wave. The main issues of this movement were sexual liberation, reproductive rights to decide whether or not having a baby because every woman should be free to make decisions about her body, and the struggle against the end of women suffering rapes, sexual abuses and assassinations. Besides, they fought to change the rooted notions of the feminine, masculine, sexuality... And, also, they described the issue of gender not as a series of traits that categorizes people masculine or feminine but as a gender continuum (Basow, 1992). One of the main objectives is to overcome the patriarchal ideology.

This movement emerged with the Riot Grrrl (Schilt, n.d.), a punk group of women that stated they were tired of boy bands. They used their lyrics to express feminist and anti-racists points of view. They were able to rise against rapists and abusers and, probably, this is the main concern currently, something that has been called by some as the 4th wave of feminism.

Although a huge progress has been achieved in equality for women and among all the human beings in the world, there is still a long way until it, hopefully, will be completely eliminated. Old habits and unshakeable ways of thinking are difficult to eliminate but we will keep on fighting.

2.4. Approach to feminist criticism

Feminist criticism, or feminist literary criticism, can be described as the way in which issues related to political, economical and social oppression of women are supported through literature. The ultimate objective of literary critics is “to change the world by promoting women’s equality” (Tyson, 2006: 83). Feminist literary criticism is about showing through literary texts how the patriarchal society in which we have to live reflect sexist attitudes and behaviours. Likewise, it examines literature with patriarchal ideology and criticizes it or, even, invites the reader to criticize it.

The following words stated by Tyson summarize perfectly the idea of feminist criticism and the importance that it possesses:

“Because feminist issues range so widely across cultural, social, political, and psychological categories, feminist literary criticism is wide ranging, too. Whatever kind of analysis is undertaken, however, the ultimate goal of feminist criticism is to increase our understanding of women’s experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women’s value in the world.” (Tyson: 119)

Through literary texts such as *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Scarlet Letter* but, mainly, through the analysis of the behaviour of their main female characters (Elizabeth Bennet, and Hester Prynne) in the following part of this work, I am going to look for that feminist attitudes that show us a feminist vision of women who rebel and run against patriarchal ideology.

3. PART TWO: Proto-feminist characters in Literature

3.1. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen

In this part of the work, various examples of feminist attitudes in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* are going to be developed, carried out by the character of Elizabeth Bennet. At the same time, I will be making allusions to her author, Jane Austen, with the aim of trying to reflect her intentions when she wrote this novel.

To begin with, a short biography of Jane Austen is going to be provided in order to know basic details about the author of the novel that is going to be dealt with, *Pride and Prejudice*. According to the foreword of her work *Sense and Sensibility* (Plutón Ediciones X, 2018), Jane Austen was born in 1775 in Hampshire, England. She was the penultimate of eight brethren. She grew up in the rectory of her father, who was pastor of the Steventon Rectory, where her passion for literature and writing was developed. Her livings in that place and the rural life by which she was surrounded would be reflected, then, in her works. Although she went one year to the Oxford school, her literary background belonged to the time she spent at the library of her father, where she was focused on reading English authors. Her beginnings writing literature started when she wrote about twenty-nine stories for her brothers, between 1787 and 1795. *Pride and Prejudice* was the first novel she wrote, initially with the name of *First Impressions* or *False Impressions*. Nevertheless, this work, together with others such as *Sense and Sensibility* or *Northanger Abbey*, was not published until much time after, few years before her death. Jane Austen died in 1817 because of a bone disease. In her novels, she focuses on everyday aspects and real life situations, providing detailed descriptions of realistic characters and, through this, she manages to transmit an educational and moral message. Austen is considered an essential writer for universal literature who was able to create female characters that challenged the society by which they were surrounded, and, above all, in a period in which the life of women ended in the doorway of their homes.

It is about those rebellious female characters that I am going to exploit this section, where the focus is going to be on Elizabeth Bennet. The story of *Pride and Prejudice* is about the life of five sisters of the Bennet family whose mother is willing to marry them, especially, to marry them with a rich husband. At the beginning of the story we can read this in the description of Mrs. Bennet, their mother: “The business of

her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (Austen, 1813: 5). So, that was her ultimate objective in life. The five sisters are Lydia, Catherine, Mary, Jane, and, Elisabeth, the protagonist of the story. In the novel four marriages take place and it is necessary to know about them since they are going to be mentioned afterwards. Lydia weds with Wickham, a militia soldier; Jane weds with Bingley, a young man of large fortune; Charlotte, friend of Elizabeth, weds with Collins, a cousin of the Bennet sisters; and, finally, Elizabeth weds with Darcy, a wealthy man and close friend of Bingley.

It is convenient to start by mentioning, briefly, an important feature of the period of Jane Austen because it really differs from the current situation. Marriage is one of the essential elements in *Pride and Prejudice* and it has to be said that, in the times of Jane Austen, when a woman marries, she becomes a legal property of her husband. But, in general, as it can be seen in the section “Role of women in literature”, it was a time of great inequality. So, although it was explained in other sections, I considered important to remember that detail concerning marriage in order to understand the story and the behaviour of Elizabeth in a better way.

Focusing on the character of Elizabeth Bennet, it is necessary to start by describing her, and, then, to proceed to look for those feminist attitudes that make her to be considered a proto-feminist character. According to the descriptions and the opinion that her father and her mother, separately, have about Elizabeth, she can be described rather differently. If we pay attention to the comments of her mother, Mrs Bennet, Elizabeth compared with her sisters, is not as beautiful and good-humoured as the rest. Generally, she does not have her in the same esteem as her other daughters. On the other hand, for her father, Mr Bennet, Elizabeth, or Lizzy, as they call her affectionately, is her favourite daughter. For him, Elizabeth is the most intelligent of the sisters, and the rest are simply “all silly and ignorant” (Austen: 4). But, paying attention to the actions and behaviours throughout the whole novel, Elizabeth can be described as intelligent, astute, cunning, prejudiced, coherent, polite, talented and, self-confident, among many other adjectives that form her peculiar personality and strong character, which make her different from her sisters. But, in brief, “Elizabeth Bennet is a strong-willed and intelligent young woman” (Pandey, 2014: 64).

Regarding to feminist thoughts and attitudes that can be appreciated in the novel, we can start by looking at the next quotation:

‘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.’ [...]

‘I am no longer surprised at your knowing ONLY six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing ANY.’

‘Are you so severe upon your own sex as to doubt the possibility of all this?’

‘I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe united.’ (Austen: 47, 48)

During this conversation, Charles Bingley, her sister, Darcy and Elizabeth are dealing with the concept of the perfect and complete woman. As we can see, Elizabeth rejects completely that concept of the ideal woman and she is the only one in that position. The others are able to do a list of traits that a woman ‘must have’ in order to be completely accomplished. There is a clear opposition between the thoughts of the group and Elizabeth. She is against the typical standards that are present in society. That fragment serves as a way of criticizing society and the high expectations that are expected from women. And, as we have seen above mentioned, those expectations go from knowledge of arts in general to manners, including, for instance, the manner of walking. We can understand why Elizabeth says that she wonders how they can know women like that. Women are different from each other and they possess different qualities that make them accomplished, but there is not a definition of accomplished woman. It does not exist. This same idea is supported by Hui-Chun Chang in his work entitled *The Impact of the Feminist Heroine: Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice*:

Elizabeth’s feminist view on female achievement reflects the understanding that a woman’s sense of accomplishment should not rest on the standards determined by Caroline and Mr. Darcy. Education for women at the time was dependent upon social class and wealth, and thus an unfair standard by which to judge all women. Elizabeth expresses her opposition to Mr. Darcy’s standards for women by mocking him, expressing her feminist attitude. (Chang, 2014: 79)

In addition to that, it is interesting to mention that there is a part in the story in which the character of Mary is described as plain. She “had neither genius nor taste” (Austen: 30). Plain can be taken as simple, but also it can be taken as “unattractive”. So,

probably, the fact that she was not as beautiful as the rest of her sisters provoked her to make an extra effort in order to be considered an accomplished woman. “In consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments, was always impatient for display” (Austen: 30). The desire to try to be the most accomplished woman was imposed in such a way, that one of the main goals in the life of many women was to be able to become one of them. But, in general, physical appearance and being good-looking was really valued in the time of *Pride and Prejudice*, especially in women. A clear example of the importance it had is the criticism to Elizabeth when she walks three miles to visit her sister Jane, who is ill in the house of Bingley, and arrives dirty and muddy. Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst felt repulsion and disgust towards her. It is shown above:

‘Miss Bingley began abusing her as soon as she was out of the room. Her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence; she had no conversation, no style, no beauty.’ [...]

‘She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker. I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She really looked almost wild.’ [...]

‘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: 43)

It is also essential to deal with the issue of marriage. We are going to see what marriage is not only for Elizabeth but for other characters as well since there are different views about it. Marriage is very present in the whole novel because, as it has been said before, there are four weddings in the story. At the beginning of the novel we can read: ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.’ (Austen: 2). That very first sentence suggests us the importance of marriage at the times of Austen. It was not an option but better it was a kind of duty. *Pride and Prejudice* shows men and women looking for a partner to be married as soon as they can. Paying attention to the attitude of Mrs Bennet, marriage was merely a union of economic purposes. As she wanted the better for her daughters, she expected them to marry with men belonging to the high-class and with enough quantities of money to maintain them. She says ‘But it is very likely that he MAY fall in love with one of them’ (Austen: 3). What she means is that the important thing is, firstly, to marry any of the daughters, and, then, the man may fall in love. Therefore,

love is something without significance for her and what matters is to find a husband placed in a good position. Along the story, her attitudes show that she does not care neither about the happiness of her daughters, nor about their opinions. It coincides with this idea expressed in the work called *Jane Austen's reflection on her characters*, written by Treball de Recerca where he states: "She also pushes Elizabeth to make her marry Mr. Collins, showing her insensitivity in front of her daughter's aversion to a loveless marriage." (De Recerca: 31).

Besides, when Mr. Collins hoped to marry with Jane, Mrs. Bennet advised him that Jane was near to an engagement with Bingley and he had to choose a different one. So, she was the one who took decisions about the future husband of her daughters: "Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done—done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire. Elizabeth, equally next to Jane in birth and beauty, succeeded her of course." (Austen: 88)

Since love was, basically, not relevant in the notion they have about marriage, it was just a matter of change the woman he had chosen by a different one. Feelings were not present at all. Oppositely, Elizabeth Bennet had a complete different perception of marriage. De Recerca explains:

She shows a clearly different vision on the topic than the one that was common at that time: she does not think of marriage as a contract only based on money, situation and interest so that both of the parts can make sure they will have a stable future. She is not interested in financial security or in being acquainted to the high society if this means she has to live an unhappy marriage. (De Recerca: 25, 26)

During a conversation between Jane and Elizabeth, Jane is hesitating about marrying with Bingley because she suspects that his sisters and friends do not want him to do that. The following quotation shows that scene:

'But, my dear sister, can I be happy, even supposing the best, in accepting a man whose sisters and friends are all wishing him to marry elsewhere?'

'You must decide for yourself,' said Elizabeth; 'and if, upon mature deliberation, you find that the misery of disobliging his two sisters is more than equivalent to the happiness of being his wife, I advise you by all means to refuse him.' (Austen: 151)

The ultimate aim of Elizabeth is the happiness of her sister and that she takes her own decisions. Austen is transmitting through this conversation that the power is on the woman and she had to decide if she wants to marry or not. She is giving voice to

women who are expected to be quiet and accept the proposal of a man. “Elizabeth expresses her feeling directly and has a sharp tongue, which frequently stuns those who trust that women can't be permitted such freedom” (Kumari, 2017: 69). In fact, what Elizabeth did was to reject not only one but two proposals of marriage, the one of Mr. Collins and the first proposal of Darcy.

Together with this idea, it is convenient to mention a different part of the story in which Charlotte and Elizabeth are talking about the expression of emotions by Jane. Charlotte thinks that Jane should take advantage of every situation in which she is with Bingley to make a scene and draw attention to herself. But that does not coincide with the opinion of Elizabeth. She states that Jane has a special character and she should express what she feels in the way she wants to do it. She is defending the ways of being of her sister, as she would do with any other person. This could be related with the idea of the ‘accomplished woman’ that was mentioned at the beginning. It is not necessary to change, try to be the better one or behave in a different way you are just for trying to like a different person. And, as it has been already mentioned, Elizabeth does not share the believing of her mother who sees marriage as the management of a rich husband. She defends the importance of feelings and refuses the general notion of being marriage by interest or for money. That is why she disagrees with the opinion of Charlotte:

‘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. But these are not Jane’s feelings; she is not acting by design. As yet, she cannot even be certain of the degree of her own regard nor of its reasonableness. She has known him only a fortnight. [...] This is not quite enough to make her understand his character.’ (Austen: 27)

All these features make Elizabeth a different character. Jane Austen is presenting the readers a woman that does not follow the rules, who goes against society if necessary, and whose main purpose is the pursuit of happiness. Charlotte says: “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. [...] and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life.” (Austen: 27). These different conceptions of marriage are explained as well in a paper written by Dr. Divya Pandey, published in the *The Criterion* journal:

Faced with identical economic constraints, Elizabeth protects her autonomy almost aggressively whereas Charlotte scarifies her personal happiness to procure economic security for herself and great

relief from burden for her parents. In her opinion, a girl should be demonstrative in her love. (Pandey, 2014: 67)

But, as we have seen, for Elizabeth it is not like that. She and the people around her have opposite conceptions about marriage, but Elizabeth shows a more rational and sentimental perspective. According to Bernard J. Paris , “She must find a man who is at least her equal in intelligence and sensitivity, who can give her an appropriate social and economic position, and who does not object to making a disadvantageous alliance.” (Paris, 1978: 98).

Apart from that, regarding to the attitudes of Elizabeth, she shows great courage when she is able to reject the marriage petition of her cousin Collins. Pandey argues:

In this kind of atmosphere Elizabeth shows her courage by declining two marriage proposals - both undesirable but attractive in their own way. She is a young, unprovided girl. [...]In these situations, it needed great moral and spiritual courage to reject these proposals. But Elizabeth did not want to marry where there was no love. (Pandey : 65)

At that time, it was not common to find a woman who was brave enough to opt for her own desires and interests. She did not think nor about the riches of her proponent, neither about the conveniences and benefits of that marriage. Her answer was:

‘You are too hasty, sir,’ she cried. ‘You forget that I have made no answer. Let me do it without further loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than to decline them.’ (Austen: 134)

So, kindly and with good manners, she rejects the proposal of her cousin, that at no time took into account the preferences of Elizabeth but just his own. Again, we can say that Jane Austen is defending the right of women to take their own decisions and to be self-sufficient. She is showing through the character of Elizabeth that there is no necessity of getting scared or feeling intimidated in front of a man. Self-assurance and bravery are key elements to face a society ruled by men.

Apart from that, I would not like ending this section without dealing with another element in the novel that seems really worth mentioning to me. In the novel, there is also reference to the fact that the feelings of men are neither taken into account. I have considered it is relevant to mention to make explicit that Jane Austen kept men in mind as well. In the first page of the novel, it is said:

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (Austen: 1)

Austen is recognizing that there are cases in which men are treated as mere properties as well. Although the majority of them are looking for a good match, there exist situations in which their feelings are also implied. That would be the case of Darcy when he falls in love with Elizabeth. However, we have the example of the aunt of Darcy, Lady Catherine, who dared to go to the house of Elizabeth just to advert and, indeed, to prohibit her, the possible marriage with her nephew. Lady Catherine was imposing her desire to Elizabeth and Darcy, and she only cared about the benefits she would obtain if he married with her daughter, which was what was planned since they were children. She even insults her because of being in an inferior status and treats her in very bad manners, assuring that she would ruin their marriage. Once more, Elizabeth mustered up courage and faced her by saying:

‘I have said no such thing. I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to YOU, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me.’ Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude,’ replied Elizabeth, ‘have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy. And with regard to the resentment of his family, or the indignation of the world, if the former WERE excited by his marrying me, it would not give me one moment’s concern—and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn.’ (Austen: 441)

So that, the character of Elizabeth is brave enough to confront Lady Catherine, without caring about her higher position at all. She only concerns about her own happiness that is what really matters.

To conclude this part, it has to be said that thanks to Jane Austen and the existence of characters such as Elizabeth Bennet, literature has the tools to teach the readers what feminism is and how it is possible to fight against the injustices of a patriarchal society.

3.2. Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The analysis of this novel is going to be made by following the same pattern that the previous one. Examples of feminist behaviours will be given and they will be supported by different quotations. Besides, as in the prior case, allusions to the author and his intentions will be provided.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, the only male writer that is going to be considered in this work, was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. Hawthorne was puritan and pertaining to the first generation of puritan settlers who emigrated from England to America in 1630. He is one of the most important authors belonging to the North-American romantic novel, as well as Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe. At the beginning, he was mainly known as a writer of short stories. For example, he wrote *My Kinsman, Major Molineux*, *Roger Malvin's Burial*, and the collection, *Twice Told Tales* in 1837. But, in fact, the work that made Hawthorne famous was the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, in 1850. This novel was the first one in the United States which was massively produced. It had so impact because it dealt with the conflict between patriarchal authority and the limitations of freedom. Another peculiarity of this author is the use of symbolism, as it is the 'scarlet letter' in that novel, meaning adultery, sin, or disgrace, but also some others such as a 'black veil' or a 'red cross' in other works. The publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, *the House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) made him turn into a considerable writer of his days. Nathaniel Hawthorne left some romances uncompleted and dead in 1864 (Hawthorne and Harding, 2018). Critics consider him as proto-feminist who served as a support for the suffragist movement of women, as well as the reproductive freedom.

The novel of *The Scarlet Letter* is about the punishment of a Hester Prynne for being adulterous. She commits an infidelity when her husband is far away and gets pregnant of her lover. For that reason, she is imprisoned and when she gets out of jail, she is condemned to wear an embroidered scarlet "A" on the breast of her gown. This entails continuous vexations, hateful looks, and exclusion by the Puritan society that she belongs to. Despite everything, she swears not to tell who her lover was and, in the meanwhile, her husband, who everyone thought was dead, comes back to the city and discovers what had happened. From that moment onwards, the mission of the husband was to discover and torture the lover, Dimmesdale, the clergyman of the city.

Before starting with the analysis, it is necessary to know the role of women in the context in which the novel is situated, in order to help us to understand it better. The general context in this case is the Puritan society. Roles were different depending on the sex of the person and they were bounded to religious beliefs. Women were submissive and the subjects of men. Intelligence and freedom of expression were matters that were considered only for men. In short, women were completely dominated and oppressed by men (Jahan, 2016).

The search for the feminist attitudes in this novel will be focused on the character of the protagonist, Hester Prynne. The first situation to which we are going to pay attention to is to the beginning of the novel, when Hester goes out from prison. Many people expected in the door of the jail to witness this moment and, almost all of them, were there to humiliate and criticize the ‘crime’ of Hester. Facing that situation, Hester did not show herself ashamed, just the other way round, she opted for going out in a determined and dignified manner: “she took the baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours.” (Hawthorne, 1850: 80). The author is showing a character who behaves bravely before a hard situation in which she is being hated by everyone around her. Yamin Wang, the author of the article *A Representative of the New Female Image*, agrees on that and states: “When she walked to the scaffold from the prison, she holds her head high and remains in full public view without shedding a tear.” (Wang, 2010: 894). So, she also presents this fact as a feature of a woman with rebellious spirit. Hester represents a rebel and strong woman that hides her distress and fear in order not to seem weak. It is a very hard situation in which she is being pointed out as adulterous by all her neighbours. The “A” that she wears on her breast is supposed to be a symbol of shame but, ironically, it reinforces her self-reliance. In the article *Shame Conflicts and Tragedy in the Scarlet Letter*, it is said “However, armed with her “A,” Hester can feel protected, haughty, unabashed, and quite capable of looking back sharply at those who accuse her.” (Kilborne, 2005: 470). Therefore, we could say that the embroidered “A” had the opposite effect. Hester Prynne, instead of falling apart, becomes stronger.

In addition to that, it is also important to pay attention to the behaviour of the women of the town towards Hester. The narrator describes their attitude as something extremely cruel. They even have a conversation in which they wish her death. For those

women, adultery was one of the worst sins that can be committed. It goes against the most sacred quality of humanity. The following quotation shows that conversation:

‘The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch—that is a truth,’ added a third autumnal matron. ‘At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead. Madame Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she—the naughty baggage—little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown. [...]

‘This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die’. (Hawthorne: 78, 79)

They are women who have lived near to Hester and that know her. But, now, they are completely ashamed of her offense. For them, Hester is a sinner and she should pay for that. They do not care at all about her and do not feel compassion at any time. As they were Puritan, a sin against the Puritan rules is considered the worst thing that can be ever done. Therefore, they cannot forgive that sin. Yaming Wang argues: “The ideal society of Puritanism is “Holy Community”, so everyone of the community must comply with rules of Puritanism. The rulers do not allow anyway breaking away with the “Holy Community”, let alone to revolt it.” (Wang: 894)

However, those women were not the only who felt ashamed of Hester. When her husband discovers the infidelity, he demands Hester to remain silent and not reveal to anyone that he was her husband because it was a shame for him to be the husband of an unfaithful wife. So, we find a character that lacks the support of each and every one person she knows. Those women are not able to neither recognize that people can make mistakes nor even walk a mile in her shoes. The fight for feminism for the achievement of liberties for women can start by defending other women who have made use of their freedom. And, that was precisely what Hester Prynne did. As Wang states:

With this noble character, new women dare to defy power and put up tenacious fights against the unfair rules that determine their lower status in the society. It is the feminist consciousness awakening that enables women does things that they have never done before; moreover, this feminist consciousness embodies the inherent dignity of femaleness and highlights the worth of women. (Wang: 894).

She was considered the symbol of feminine fragility but, indeed, she was quite the opposite. Hester Prynne served as an example for other women that were afraid of rebelling. Her attitude shows that she is aware that Puritans want to punish her, but it does not imply her regrets. She accepts that.

It is important to mention the use of silence by Hester Prynne when she denies telling who the father of her child is. “This again shows Hester as a strong willed woman who is in complete control of her thoughts and actions. No external force, not even her estranged husband Prynne alias Roger Chillingworth could get the secret out of her.” (Bharat, 2017: 65). This refusal to reveal the name is another example of her rebellious and brave attitude. As Leland S. Person Jr. indicates in his article *Hester's Revenge: The Power of Silence in The Scarlet Letter*:

It is both fitting and ironic that Hester's revenge should take a "silent" form: fitting because of Dimmesdale's own silence; ironic because, as feminist critics have argued, women are customarily "silenced" in male-authored texts in order to be rendered powerless. (Person: 470).

So, the use of silence instead of being sign of submission or fear, in this case is a sign of empowerment and courage.

Another example of the vigour and strength of Hester is her struggle not to lose Pearl, her daughter. Pearl was the only thing she had and there is a moment in the story in which the Governor wants to snatch the child. The endless courage of Hester was enough not to allow that. She was prepared to do whatever for her little Pearl. The next quote represents her defense:

Hester caught hold of Pearl, and drew her forcibly into her arms, confronting the old Puritan magistrate with almost a fierce expression. Alone in the world, cast off by it, and with this sole treasure to keep her heart alive, she felt that she possessed indefeasible rights against the world, and was ready to defend them to the death.

‘God gave me the child!’ cried she. ‘He gave her in requital of all things else which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness—she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me, too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million fold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not take her! I will die first!’ (Hawthorne: 168)

As we can see, the author presents a woman fighting for her rights. The fact that she has been ostracized does not influence at all in her unstoppable strength. She is aware that she has to pay for the crime she has committed, but she will not permit the loss of her daughter. Once more, Wang deals with the same idea and, besides, he rightly suggests that apart from fighting for her rights, she is challenging the church again:

This is her first time to rebel and challenge the church and the secular ruler in public. Although Hester is isolated and cut off from help, and so conscious that it seems scarcely an unequal match between the puritanical magistrates, she still set forth and is ready to defend them to the death [...]

Clearly, Hester, as an ordinary woman, cries out for nothing else, but for her indefeasible rights, which shows her extraordinary courage and rebellious spirit. With Dimmesdale's interference, Hester succeeds in keeping her Pearl with her. (Wang: 895, 896).

Consequently, Hawthorne is, somehow, using the character of Hester to represent the idea of female independence as well because since she was condemned, she has had to take care of herself and her child. So, apart from maintaining herself, if she wanted to get something, she had to fight for it on her own. She is the opposite example of what a Puritan woman is. Mursalin Jahan argues:

In puritan society, women are regarded as dependent upon men, which results into the tragic life of women. Hester revolts against this social order of puritan society tenaciously and gains self-reliance in economy by serving her daughter and herself by her uncommon talent in the needlework. (Jahan, 2016: 103).

In spite of everything, Hester Prynne knew how to take advantage of the sentence and reclusion she suffered. She learnt from the punishment of wearing the scarlet A in her chest forever because it was "her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (Hawthorne: 300). She was the representation of a strong woman who possessed the good sense and serenity not to respond to the continuous attacks she received. After all, her goodness and assistance to everyone who needed them, made that many people changed their perception about Hester. Afterwards, the original signification of the "A" changed, and people said that it meant "Able".

3.3. A comparison between the characters

It is clear that the two novels that have just been commented share, a priori, the presence of a strong, determined and independent female characters that can be considered as proto-feminists. In this part of the work, both characters, Elizabeth Bennet and Hester Prynne, are going to be briefly compared in order to look for similarities and differences between them.

Taking into account the great importance of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, this commentary is going to start by focusing on that matter. As we know, for Elizabeth Bennet, matrimony is directly related to love. She does not conceive the fact of being married to a man without loving him and that is why she does not marry anyone until she finds the man she really loves. This conception of marriage bounded to love is also shared by Hester Prynne. Although it has not been mentioned in the previous analysis of the character, when Hester marries with her husband, she does it without being in love with him. This can seem a difference if we think that Elizabeth never married until she felt love but, the thing is that Hester was obliged to get married. In the novel, she says: “‘Thou knowest,’ said Hester—for, depressed as she was, she could not endure this last quiet stab at the token of her shame—‘thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any.’” (Hawthorne: 112). Hester Prynne got married under pressure and her husband recognizes that it was his craving, and that he feels sorry about that. It changed her life and converted her in a different woman from that she was before. Wang states: “She is the representative who suffers from irrational marriage. Prior to her marriage, Hester was a strong-willed and impetuous young woman—she remembers her parents as loving parents who frequently has to retain her incautious behavior.” (Wang: 895).

The difference in their attitudes would be that Elizabeth was able to reject a proposal of marriage, whereas Hester accepted it and, then, regretted about that. Maybe, she did not have another choice. Although “In the puritan society, a woman must cling to her husband, even she has not a bit love for him. [...] However, Hester does not follow this rule at all.” (Ahmad, 2015: 27). After all, Hester does not find happiness in marriage because it lacks sincere love that is, precisely, the idea of marriage that Elizabeth Bennet defends.

Another difference that can be spotted, and that has been treated throughout the analysis, is that Hester Prynne disobeyed the public law since in the Puritan society, as it has been mentioned before, adultery was considered as one of the worst sins that can be committed. That is the reason why Hester is taken to prison. The sexual affair she had with Dimmesdale is implying, at the same time, a crime because he is a clergyman. However, in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, the “law” that Elizabeth is disobeying is related to the social norms. She does not commit any “crime” as in the case of Hester, she is simply brave enough to face the pre-established social conventions. Or, another instance would be the escape of Lydia with Wickham. As de Recerca explains: “Her personality combined with irresponsible parents results in Lydia running away with Wickham. This brings disrespect for the whole family in front of society, but Lydia is not aware of it.” (De Recerca: 32). As we can see, it caused disrespect for the whole family, that is to say, her behaviour was shameful because, since she is escaping with a man without being married with him, she is behaving oppositely to the established rules. Despite that, she is not committing any crime.

To conclude, it is essential to name their similarities as feminist characters. According to their personalities, Elizabeth represents an intelligent, prudent and self-confident woman. On the other hand, Hester is an independent, kind-hearted and affectionate woman. But, indisputably, what they have in common is the strength to fight for their rights in a world dominated by men. They are moved by love and the pursuit of happiness is their ultimate aim. They have shown the readers how women are dominated by a patriarchal society but, also, how women know how to face the inequalities that it imposes. Both refuses to be defined by society and do not follow its rules. They are the owners of their own lives and the only ones who decide on them.

4. Conclusions

At this point, it is necessary to stress some of the issues that have been addressed throughout this work. One of the most important points that have been dealt with is the evolution of the social status of women during history. There has been always the belief that women are inferior to men and the concept of 'gender role' has contributed to that belief. As we have seen in the first section of this project, gender and stereotypes are social creations and they have, mainly, negative repercussions since their only function is to create false standards and differences between sexes. But the empowerment that women have witnessed is a reality. All the achievements have been possible thanks to the feminist movements that were created with the aim of ending the inequality between men and women. Thanks to all of them, we have gained many rights, although there are still many things to achieve.

As we have observed through the analysis of the characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Hester Prynne, the female figure has always been required to accomplish a list of qualities that should be met in order to be socially accepted. Besides, they were usually treated with inferiority not only by men but also by other women. But of the main basis of feminism is the union and support between women. Nevertheless, the fact that a woman had a rebellious behaviour was enough to criticize and reject her. Therefore, the objective of this work is to show that literature is a very useful weapon to manifest inequalities and, in the same way, to show how literature tries to overcome those inequalities. Elizabeth Bennet and Hestery Prynne have, fortunately, belonged to novels that have had an enormous impact in society and, consequently, they have served as clear examples of women who dare to change a world immersed in the patriarchal ideology. Finally, I can conclude that their actions and attitudes in the novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Scarlet Letter* have served as evidence to consider them as proto-feminist characters. Both are promoting feminism, perhaps unconsciously, encouraging other women to fight for a decent and egalitarian life.

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