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Multi-Dimensional Feminism: Elizabeth Bennet and the Representation of Women in the Media

Depictions of women in the media have historically been less representative of actual people than of idealized, single-faceted characters. Women on television and in books are too often defined by a single trait or belief; they are either beautiful or ugly, foolish or intelligent, strong or weak, inspirational or malevolent. Seldom are women depicted as complex people with conflicting thoughts and feelings wholly their own. Understanding this, one can perceive the importance of Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. She was a strong – though faulted – female character who understood and advocated for her values, undermining contemporary stereotypes with her outspokenness.

Elizabeth's world is typical of middle-class Caucasian families of the 1790s, when the book was originally written. She and the other women in the story are defined and confined by romantic-era, cult of sensibility stereotypes: women are frail, hypersensitive creatures whose only worth is in their marriage prospects. Her mother is prone to fainting. All of Elizabeth's sisters are encouraged to find men to marry as soon as possible to secure themselves futures. However, Austen breaks with this conventional image in how she portrays Elizabeth. Elizabeth Bennet, by the end of the novel, is a fully-formed human being with feminist opinions on the world around her and the intelligence to back them up with. She is just as much a complex human as any of the men in the story, in spite of being a woman. Elizabeth insists on her rights as a person, not as a set of categories.

For a novel written at a time when women were valued largely for their beauty and marriageability, having such a well-fleshed-out female character was subversive. It created a relatable role model for women of an era where female literary representation was often confined to fainting episodes, hysterics, or minor and simplistic foil characters. Elizabeth had such a positive impact that she is still relevant today; *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations are still made every few years to refresh the narrative. From a television series, to a movie starring the inimitable Kiera Knightley, to a web series called *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, *Pride and Prejudice* continues to speak to the hearts of women today. She won't be silenced. She won't be demure. She is a multi-dimensional role model in a world of single-faceted female representation in the media. There is power in reading about characters - especially women, who are so often stereotyped in novels – with fully-formed, flawed personalities. It normalizes the view that women are equal people deserving of equal rights and representation. Women grow and change just as men do. Women have valid, elaborate personalities outside of marriage – they are more than participants in a cult of sensibility. Multi-dimensional characters like Elizabeth Bennet create necessary role models for girls surrounded by idealized depictions of women, undermining unhealthy, unproductive stereotypes.