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The Marriage Politics in Jane Austen's Novels: *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*

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Abstract: This research analyzes marriage and the social status of women in some of the most important novels by Jane Austen: *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The aim is to determine the types of marriages of that period on account of the social status, age or even love. Jane Austen creates a female character involved in the marriage plot as a heroine and she includes courtship in her novels. The novels chosen show the different types of marriages extant in Austen's social context. The historical, social, economic and cultural context of the novels has been studied in order to show the manners of Austen's time, the division of the social classes, gender roles and the importance of marriage for social organization. Finally, this research proves that Jane Austen gives her readers a lesson by using satire and comedy.

Key words: courtship, irony, Jane Austen, love, marriage, nineteenth-century, satire.

Resumen: Esta investigación analiza el matrimonio y el estatus social de las mujeres en algunas de las novelas más importantes de Jane Austen: *Emma*, *Orgullo y prejuicio* y *Sentido y sensibilidad*. El objetivo es determinar los tipos de matrimonios de ese período en función del estado social, la edad o incluso el amor. Jane Austen crea un personaje femenino involucrado en la cuestión del matrimonio como heroína e incluye el tema del cortejo en sus novelas. Las novelas elegidas muestran los distintos tipos de matrimonio que podían darse en el entorno de la autora. El contexto histórico, social, económico y cultural de las novelas ha sido estudiado para mostrar las costumbres de la época, la división de las clases sociales, los roles de género y la importancia del matrimonio para la organización social. Además, se demuestra cómo Jane Austen le da a la audiencia una lección a través del uso de la sátira y la comedia.

Palabras clave: cortejo, ironía, Jane Austen, amor, matrimonio, siglo diecinueve, sátira.

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen is one of the first higher women novelists of the English literature of the nineteenth century. Her novels have been read for academic purposes, but also simply for pleasure. People enjoy her novels because of the love stories, but they also appreciate the social criticism that exists in them. She made an impact on the development of the novel because she moves away from the canon of the time and creates novels based on her contemporary society. However, for female writers it was difficult to progress and to gain popularity because, at that time, women were excluded from public life. Austen's books were published at a time when in England women did not enjoy equality with men. According to Kirkham, there were many difficulties associated with the period and women were not well accepted as writers (161). Looser has argued that many of the authors, male and female, published anonymously or used pseudonyms (15). Jane Austen's lifetime coincided with several changes that made possible the production and distribution of books to booksellers, libraries and readers. Eberle confirms that Jane Austen had this difficulty by herself and all the correspondence with publishers was handled by her brother Henry Austen (2). As Fergus points out, the numbers and proportions of women novelists increased greatly at this time (41). Jane Austen published her first work, *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811 as "by a lady".

According to Dobošiová, Austen's novels are in many cases criticized because they do not reflect the political events of her time such as the French Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars. She rather reflects the social life and her novels represent the situation and the difficulties that women had to struggle with in order to find their position in society, particularly regarding the issue of marriage (Dobošiová 5).

In order to understand Austen's way of writing, we first have to understand the mentality of the nineteenth century and the cultural situation. In the nineteenth century, it was important for women to establish a romantic relationship, but the need to get married prevailed. Women in that period seek protection and economic stability in their fathers or husbands. Because of economic changes, many women have to find a new position in society. For Austen, there are more important topics than the themes of Romanticism such as love, emotional landscapes, religion, melancholy or death. Instead of this, Austen wants to reflect the social, economic and familiar problems of her time.

Many readers and critics say that the imperfections in Jane Austen's novels show

her life. However, she tries to avoid involving her life in the plots, and thus leaves free interpretation to her readers. Many critics and writers have analyzed her life and her works from the point of view of Jane Austen as a feminist writer. Kirkham has said that in the nineteenth century women's suffrage became an active political issue related to feminist ideas and their relation to literature and politics (161). Kirkham considers Austen a "feminist moralist, who shared the common line of feminist concern and interest..." (11). But, as Looser states, "feminist and cultural critical approaches both to Austen's work and to her immediate context" have made her a defender of the political and cultural status (5). She tried to show all the various issues in her novels which refer to her society in order to defend or criticize the political and cultural situation. There are other critics that argue that Austen did not understand the concept of feminism, but she was perfectly familiar with the concept of the individual rights of women. As Jones has said, she is considered a feminist writer (282-283).

The main themes in Austen's novels are love, marriage and how that reflects her contemporary society in terms of the economic situation of women. She creates a female character that she herself called heroine and she introduces her in her novels. The description she gives us in the novel *Emma* is included in many of the editions of *Emma*: "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (*Emma* 1). She advertises us that the female character is going to be a different type of character from those we are used to seeing. Austen does not delve into the issue of what women can or cannot do, but she rather shows how they are determined by their social status and the need to get married. In her novels there are women of a low social status, without an education and without financial stability looking for a rich husband; on the other hand, there are female characters that have financial stability and an education who do not seek to get married without love, but to fall in love. Because of the economic differences between men and women in her novels, the writer creates a plot based on the social position of the characters and how they face this problem. Austen's novels reflect change and progression in society and in the mentality of the population. If we compare *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, the subject of marriage loses importance, and that is because of women's progression in society. The necessity to marry is in some cases for female characters a struggle for a social status, something that others in later novels already have.

The main topic of this research is to analyze marriage and the social status of women in Jane Austen's novels. For this analysis I have chosen three of her most

famous works- *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*- in order to study the types of marriages and the marriage plot in them. My choice has been based on the fact that *Sense and Sensibility* was the first novel she wrote and *Emma* one of the last. For that reason I am going to analyze the importance of marriage in Jane Austen's novels instead of whether she is or not a feminist writer, as critics usually do. I will try to demonstrate that there is an evolution in her three novels regarding the subject of marriage and the position of women in nineteenth-century society. I will base my research on the cultural, economical, historical and social background of Austen's times.

From a narrative perspective, it is important also to consider that Austen creates a new manner of writing in which criticism, comedy and irony are blended. By using irony, satire and comedy Austen shows us what she considers important by representing society in an ironic way. I will consider that point an important point of my work because through her peculiar way of writing she describes the way in which marriage in that period is seen.

I consider that the analyses of the marriage plot related to the context of the period and Austen's style are important because there is a progression of the society reflected in her novels and also women progress over the years in terms of their rights and obligations that are related to family and marriage. Through the novels we can observe some changes related to male and female relationships and their social roles.

The first important point I will be analyzing is the social and economic background of Austen's novels in relation to marriage and the status of women. I will consider the financial problems of women in that society, their education, and the relationships between men and women. I will also discuss family aspects such as marriage, being a daughter, having a father or not, which are also influential on the social position of women.

Austen's style of writing is going to be my second point because I consider that her style of writing changes through the time. I will consider the satire and the social criticism visible in the novels, besides the comedy and irony that she uses.

In the next point I will analyze the marriage plot in the three novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. The order of the novels is that of their composition and publication. In each novel I will survey the main topics related to the marriage plot: marriage and social status, the age of characters and marriage, courtship and the issue of financial stability related to marriage.

Finally I will draw my conclusions on the analyses of the social status of women, its

evolution and the types of marriages taking into account the novels and according to the background of the early nineteenth century.

1. WOMEN AND MARRIAGE: HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Jane Austen is one of the most important female writers of the romantic period in Britain, although many critics consider her a realistic writer. Harry Shaw has called Austen's writings "historicist realism, because it placed human beings in their full social and historical settings" as she placed her characters in the society they live (206). She avoided all kinds of writings about political issues and instead she described nineteenth-century manners and society.

Regarding the social hierarchy of the time, it is important to note that a new social class, the gentry, was born: "people of good social position, specifically the class of people next below the nobility in position and birth" ("Gentry"). Most of the character in Austen's novels are, like Jane Austen herself, members of upper middle class known as the gentry or the landed gentry.

Regarding the position of women, it was very important from which family they came, since they were the ones who suffered the most when a father or a husband died. Testaments were created to give a social position. Women in that period become relevant when they marry have children and they take care of their household. Women who are married have greater social status than single women. As to marriages, they had a clear use that was to preserve the social level or to improve the economic situation of the woman. Marriage was the main objective of women and their only way to survive and to have a recognized social position. According to Mullan, women who did not have economic resources opted even for an unfavourable marriage, but enough to subsist (1).

Women had to try to get married because that allowed them to become mothers, but not necessarily to be sexually or emotionally satisfied. Hughes affirms: "Women were assumed to desire marriage because it allowed them to become mothers rather than to pursue sexual or emotional satisfaction" (6). Many women knew that they had to marry without romantic love because they had to survive. Women who did not find a husband lived in difficult economic situations. According to Stone, and this is also mentioned by Dobošiová, there are several reasons why it is necessary for a woman to find a husband. The most important reason was the economic, social or political consolidation between two families. Families agreed on the marriage of their children for their sake, in order to obtain economic benefits or prestige. The second reason was

personal affection, which includes courtship; this refers to a personal admiration for how a future wife or husband behaves and their virtues. The third option was physical attraction, that is, people fall in love with the physical appearance, thus giving importance to the exterior beauty and without caring about anything else, not even the economic status. The fourth reason was romantic love, in some cases even rejecting the money or the properties they had (Stone 181-183). In Austen's patriarchal society, the life of a young woman of the gentry and upper middle class was difficult. Once women married, their properties passed legally to their husbands (Smith 20). However, Smith says "the message that Austen want to give us is that of happiness and freedom" (9). The meaning of freedom is related to love, be free when you select your husband and be free of the parental control and rules which they impose you. Austen represents this issue in the novels using different female characters.

Social events in that period were very important because there were needed places where people could meet, talk, and even dance, as, for example, balls. Balls were very important for relationships and marriages because many people attended to them. Other instruments for courtship were romantic letters and marriage proposals.

On other plane, it is relevant to consider that in the nineteenth-century English society in which Jane Austen lived, men were given more educational opportunities than women, who usually learned at boarding schools, with their mothers or with a resident governess. Austen highlights this in *Pride and Prejudice* in which the characters of upper classes as Darcy's sister receive an education by a governess, or the Bennets who educate their daughters at home. In the case of *Emma*, at the beginning of the first chapter, Miss Taylor is presented as the governess of Emma and she studied at home. However, Harriet studied in Mrs. Goddard's boarding school.

Mullan points out that because of financial problems many women had to look for a job and at that time one of the few jobs that women could choose was that of a governess (1). Married women did not work; they only had to dedicate themselves to their families. Financial problems in the most of the cases, in exception of minor characters and I agree with Hall that are *Emma's* Jane Fairfax, *Sense and Sensibility's* Lucy Steele, and *Emma's* Miss Bates (Hall 109), are solved. Most of the women were married with husbands that protected them and gave them stability.

Jane Austen uses the situation of her characters to teach the cultural and economic changes of the time. Heroines have the protection of their fathers if they are not married yet, then they marry and their husbands have to protect them. They are

completely controlled by their fathers, brothers or husbands. Women are under the protection of their fathers or husbands, and if that did not occur, there would not be found a romantic end in the novel (Kirkham 161), that means that women who are not under the protection of any man risk their lives to an unfortunate end.

2. STYLE OF WRITING: PARODY, IRONY AND COMEDY

For a clear analysis and better understanding of the main theme of Austen's novels, we must know how she writes and what she intends to teach us with that. The language used by Jane Austen represents the society she portrayed in her works and the society in which she lived. Her literary style is a combination of parody, comedy and irony. Austen rejected the issue of love and marriage, so she tried to undermine it by the use of irony and satire, criticizing her society. She uses satire against characters with defects and with distrust in themselves.

Satire is defined as “The use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.” (“Satire” ref. [1]) According to McMaster, there is literary satire in Austen’s novels: “Austen’s technique in parodying a long and tragic novel is to double the heroines and distresses, and telescope the action“ (84). In that way she expresses the satire in her writings.

In Austen's novels, women are represented as they are, with their manners, customs, relationships, marriages and familiar problems. The marriage plot is used to teach a lesson about cultural problems. Austen writes about what her characters think and how they feel, describing with detail everything, but including a parody. Hall wrote: “although Jane Austen’s novels might not let us in on the actual lives lived by women of her class and time, the dramatization of her fictional characters’ lives gives us a glimpse into what she saw as important enough to ironize and on which to confer meaning” (17). Jane Austen shows to the readers what issues were important in the nineteenth century and what that entails.

In Austen’s novels we also have comic irony. Irony may exist in a situation or in a dialogue or thought which a character has. Jane Austen is famous for her perfect use of irony and it is important because it is peculiar in her writings and catches the attention of the readers. She used irony while describing people and showing the manners of that period, and also to show the immaturity of her characters.

In the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, the irony is based on Elinor and Marianne, who change their positions in the novel. Elinor symbolizes sense and Marianne represents sensibility. Later in the novel Marianne gains sense whereas Elinor profits from sensibility. Those are the two main concepts of the novel as the title of the novel indicates. We can also see a satire in Mrs. Ferrars’s plans to marry her son Edward with

Miss Morton, but when she knew about the engagement of Lucy and Edward, she decided to marry her other son, Robert, to Miss Morton, the daughter of an affluent man and owner of 30,000 pounds. As we can see, parents matching their children still remained a common practice at that time, so they could choose with whom their children should marry. Elinor's comment about it is this: "The lady, I suppose, has no choice in the affair... I only mean, that I suppose from your manner of speaking, it must be the same to Miss Morton whether she marry Edward or Robert" (*Sense and Sensibility* 289).

Emma is a novel which deals with comedy of manners and it is considered a comedy of Emma's errors. Jane Austen criticizes the social classes of her time. There is satire in the representation of the contradictory attitudes of Emma towards Harriet. Emma, the heroine, is the best example because she shows the contradiction between reality and appearance. She thinks that she is always right but in fact she, in most cases, is wrong. Jane Austen starts her novel by saying that "Emma Woodhouse is handsome, clever, and rich..." (*Emma* 1) and the writer shows Emma as Emma thinks she is. Actually, Emma is young, rich and beautiful, but she is a snob and an egoist. Regarding irony, at the very beginning of the novel, Emma says that the marriage between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston has taken place thanks to her, but Mr. Knightley rejects that. It is ironic upon Emma's self-reliance. There is also irony regarding her ideas about the match between Harriet and Mr. Elton because she thinks that it is going to be a happy marriage, but it is actually impossible.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, there is satire in the representation of Darcy's feelings for Elizabeth. He says that Elizabeth is tolerable, but "not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (*Pride and Prejudice* 13). In the novel great importance to outer beauty is given, which we can interpret as a satire or criticism of society. Darcy remarks about Elizabeth that she cannot seduce him. There is also irony in the presentation of the character of Darcy, who:

...drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man; the ladies declared that he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley. (*Pride and Prejudice* 12)

Women consider him handsome because his income is handsome as well.

At the beginning of the novel it is pointed out that “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (*Pride and Prejudice* 5), but that is not the case because it was rather women who had to be in search for a husband. In the same line, Mr. Bennet does not care about his daughters’ marriages because they have his protection. However, what Mrs. Bennet intended was to marry all of them, and in a conversation with her husband, she says: “A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year... What a fine thing for our girls!” She tried to highlight that the financial position of the man is the most important issue, but her husband replied to her: “How so? How can it affect them? How can you be so tiresome!” He cannot understand how that influences their daughters. And Mrs. Bennet answers: “You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them” (*Pride and Prejudice* 6). Mrs. Bennet is the person, who chooses the husbands for her daughters regarding the economic position, but, in the end, her daughters have the right to decide. For example, Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins and Lydia, the small sister, married without the permission of her parents (Dobošiová 13).

Kirkham points out that when Jane Austen uses comedy she wants to show readers, by using a heroine under a formal or a comic role, how people were (81). Kirkham also sees in Austen’s use of irony a kind of personal defense regarding her love situation, marriage or social position (161). Austen criticized through satire and irony the approach to marriage of her time.

Irony is the most characteristic and most discussed literary technique by many critics of Austen’s novels. Satire is used to highlight social hypocrisy, but it also criticizes the marriage market. According to Hall, “the term ‘marriage market’ is understood as the process by which gentry and upper-middle class men and women would be matched, often for financial gain for at least one of the parties involved” (3).

3. THE MARRIAGE PLOT IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

Marriage is the main topic of Jane Austen's novels because of all the conflicts and difficulties that couples have to face in order to marry. Austen did not follow any guidelines when she wrote about the subject of marriage; she mainly criticized the society of that moment. The way in which Jane Austen demonstrates social criticism and cultural progression is with the marriage plot, as Eberle says: "One of the main ways that Austen functions as a social critic and a proponent of cultural progression is through her use of the marriage plot" (4). According to Eberle, "the marriage plot is used to confer a lesson" (6). Smith said that Austen does not avoid the subject of sex, which includes sexuality, gender separation and marriage, but she is able to make a separation between genders, men and women, love or interest and marriage because of love or because of social position (19).

At the end of the eighteenth-century, women need to be saved by men. Men were responsible for providing a sufficient income for the household. The husband is the one who has to protect his wife and support her, never the other way round; if a man married for economic reasons, his reputation suffered the consequences. Money is the key issue in Austen's fiction. To form a family, you need money, a social position and a marriage. In Austen's novels, the economic value of the girls who want to get married is constantly referred to. The marriages of that time are based on money and the social status of characters is the most important feature in marriages. This also had repercussions on women who are unmarried or divorced. According to Dobošiová, "One of the most plentiful assemblages of unmarried women in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is the collection of five Bennet sisters- Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty and Lydia" (12). Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have five daughters and all of them begin the novel unmarried, in the end of the novel only some of them, as Jane, Elizabeth and Lydia, get married.

Women without an income from their families had few opportunities to work, so the most significant job for women with an education was to be a governess. The only female vocation addressed by Jane Austen in her novels is that of the governess. This happens to the Dashwood women in *Sense and Sensibility* and to Jane Fairfax in *Emma*. Jane Fairfax will be a private governess if she does not marry Frank. In these lines of the novel: "The plan was that she should be brought up for educating others; the very few hundred pounds which she inherited from her father making independence

impossible” (*Emma* 123), it is made clear that Jane Fairfax has to be a governess in order to earn money and survive if she remains unmarried and nobody protects her. Education was therefore very important; for that reason, in *Pride and Prejudice* Caroline Bingley explains what skills a woman must have: “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and modern languages, to deserve the word” (*Pride and Prejudice* 39). All women must be educated in a feminine manner, but also in a way that facilitates a certain prospect for their future.

Once a woman and a man decide to get married, the woman stops being a charge for her family, despite the fact that the father is responsible for ensuring the future of his daughters if he is still alive and his daughters live with him. In *Emma*, we can read:

...but she knows how much the marriage is to Miss Taylor's advantage; she knows how very acceptable it must be, at Miss Taylor's time of life, to be settled in a home of her own, and how important to her to be secure of a comfortable provision, and therefore cannot allow herself to feel so much pain as pleasure. Every friend of Miss Taylor must be glad to have her so happily married. (*Emma* 10)

As we can see, Miss Taylor finally finds a meaning for her life in a happy marriage.

A marriage proposal has rules; if a man proposes marriage and the woman accepts the proposal, then he should ask permission to her father. Once the couple marries, a woman can not divorce her husband.

There are marriages that are planned by the family without taking into account the opinion of their children. As we can see in the case of *Pride and Prejudice* when Lady Catherine says: “The engagement between them is a peculiar kind. From their infancy, they have been intended for each other“ (*Pride and Prejudice* 335-336). Or in the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, where Elinor says: “The lady I suppose has no choice in the affair“ (*Sense and Sensibility* 289). These mean that the families had certainly a word about the marriages of their children.

We can find several types of marriages, i. e., marriage for love, social status, sympathy, beauty or economic power. But even when there is love, we know that money and the social status are the most important things to consider. Cambell has pointed out that marrying into both class and money was effectively impossible (25). Beauty and money do not go together in the novels either. In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr. and Mrs. Bennet married because he gave much more importance to her youth and beauty, but

later he was much disappointed by it: “respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown” (*Pride and Prejudice* 228), and it was too late because he could not separate from her. In *Sense and Sensibility* we have a similar case:

Did you ever see her? A smart stylish girl they say, but not handsome... but when a young man, be who he will, comes and makes love to a pretty girl, and promises marriage, he has no business to fly off from his word only because he grows poor, and a richer girl is ready to have him. (*Sense and Sensibility* 187)

The outer beauty interests them a lot and with that we can see that there is a progression in the novels when choosing a husband or wife, because, even when there is a material interest, they also look for physical attraction.

Austen avoids the main theme of traditional marriage, where the heroine marries the ideal man and their story has a happy end, and for that reason she is considered an anti-romantic writer.

An important issue that Jane Austen adds in her novels is courtship. It was an almost public act because in few occasions could a boy and a girl be alone. Men and women attend balls and while they dance they talk and start their relationships. These places were essential to find a good husband or wife. The young people attended them accompanied by their parents so that they could be controlled. Besides, since it was not permitted to a young man and a young woman being alone, balls were the correct place to have conversations and get to know each other. Lady Catherine de Bourgh questions Elizabeth Bennet about her sisters and discovers that they are all in age to find a husband. The age of which a girl is in age to be courted is between fifteen and nineteen years old and it was mainly then when women could experiment the courtship by a man (Mullan 4).

There is no age stipulated in the novels to marry, but it is given importance to age in terms of the maturity of characters, the dependence on the family and the rules that have to be followed. However, Hughes confirms that women used to marry in their early to mid twenties (3). The men with whom the women marry are usually older than them, but this was not necessarily a norm. A fact related to Austen’s life is that three of her brothers married older women.

3.1 *Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice and Emma. A Brief Presentation*

I will make a brief summary of each novel. First of all, *Sense and Sensibility* is Jane Austen's first novel, published in 1811. The plot of the novel revolves around a widowed woman and her three children. The two daughters, Marianne and Elinor Dashwood, are involved in the search for a husband to ensure their future. The protagonists experience great changes in the novel while they seek their happiness. According to Eberle, this novel is full of satire and irony: “Austen uses irony to highlight the economics of marriage” (18).

Jane Austen published *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813 and with it she remains on the same line, criticizing the society of the moment. The major themes are marriage, money and the social classes. The novel is based on the Bennet family and their daughters. To get out of the poverty through which the family is living, their daughters have to marry a rich man.

Finally, *Emma* was first published in 1816. It is a novel full of comedy and irony. The main female character is the opposite of the other heroines because of her social status, but she also falls in love. The novel deals with marriages, social status and it includes a great criticism of that period.

3.2 Marriage and Social Status

Dealing with marriage and social status in *Sense and Sensibility*, it is important to say that love is the main topic in the novel, as Marianne and Elinor fall in love and both find a man to marry. Marriage was considered an alliance without love or affection, but through the words of Jane Austen we can see that it does not have to be that way. The most important marriages in the novel are those of Elinor and Edward, and Marianne and Colonel Brandon. Apart from the fact that women gain social status thanks to their husbands, it can be considered that their marriages are not for convenience, but for love.

In relation to *Pride and Prejudice*, marriage is one of the most important decisions that the Bennet sisters are going to make. At the end of the novel, three of the five sisters have married, choosing their partners because of true love, economic security, affinities or beauty. As Dobošiová confirms, the only goal of the Bennet sisters is marriage because they are in a difficult financial situation: “they are members of rural

gentry but they have no sufficient income, so their only goal in the novel is to marry” (12).

Regarding *Emma*, social status is the most relevant issue in this novel. According to Eberle, the main female character of the novel, Emma, is the center of everything. She does not care about marriages, she helps everyone around her to marry, but finally she marries to a man intellectually superior to her and he tries to transform her into an ideal woman while he tries to educate her (5). Emma has a father who is very much dependent on her, and she does not want to marry because her financial position is high and because of her duty to her invalid father. This is related to what I have said previously about the family dependence and parental love and protection. Kirkham has suggested that “in *Emma* the sentimental stereotype of the devoted daughter whose love of her father is an obstacle to her marriage is subjected to realistic treatment” (122). Emma first rejects marriage, as she explains to Harriet:

But I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's. (*Emma* 66-67)

Emma says to Harriet that she has never been in love, and her only love is her father. Also, she demonstrates that she is economically and socially independent, so she does not need someone to protect her and give her financial stability.

Harriet's marriage is the most realistic type of marriage in Austen's novel because she marries without thinking about the social status. Harriet and Mr. Martin are from the same class and, although Emma tries to marry her to men socially above her, finally love and common sense prevail. What Emma tries to do is to engage Harriet with men who are from a high social position, as Elton or Churchill, instead of someone like Robert Martin who is of the same social status as her.

As Dobošiová has explained, since we have listed the different cases of female characters that get married, there is also the case of characters who do not marry. The best representation of unmarried poor women in that period is Miss Bates. Miss Bates has never married and she lives with her old mother in the village (Dobošiová 17). When Emma and Harriet speak each other about marriage, Harriet tries to say to Emma

that she would be like Miss Bates if she does not marry: "But then, to be an old maid at last, like Miss Bates!" (*Emma* 67), to which Emma replies that she is not a common person, her status is much above Miss Bates's, and she is rich, that is the great difference between them.

As social status is very important, Jane Fairfax has to overcome many difficulties because of her low economic status. Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill have difficulties regarding their marriage because Mrs. Churchill, Frank Churchill's aunt, opposes to it since Jane is not from the aristocracy. That only has a solution when Mrs. Churchill dies. We can also appreciate another example of opposition because of financial problems between Mr. Weston and his first wife. Mr. Weston was outlawed by her aristocratic family because he did not have the social status they expected.

3.3 Age and Marriage

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Colonel Brandon is thirty-five years old: "His appearance however was not unpleasing, in spite of his being in the opinion of Marianne and Margaret an absolute old bachelor, for he was on the wrong side of five and thirty" (*Sense and Sensibility* 32). Marianne is eighteen years younger than him; she is between sixteen and seventeen years old: "Marianne began now to perceive that the desperation which had seized her at sixteen and a half, of ever seeing a man who could satisfy her ideas of perfection, had been rash and unjustifiable" (*Sense and Sensibility* 47).

Nevertheless, the age of women is important in the novel because a woman of twenty-seven years who wants to marry at that age is because of convenience, not for love, and Marianne points out this in the novel:

A woman of seven and twenty can never hope to feel or inspire affection again (...) in his marrying such a woman therefore there would be nothing unsuitable. It would be a compact of convenience, and the world would be satisfied. In my eyes it would be no marriage at all, but that would be nothing (...) to me it would seem only a commercial exchange, in which each wished to be benefited at the expense of the other. (*Sense and Sensibility* 36)

Women over twenty-seven who marry without love do it for their own benefits and for the sake of survival. According to Marianne, that is not considered a real marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice* we can find the only man in all of Austen's novels, Collins, who marries a woman older than him; he is twenty-five years old and his wife, Charlotte

Lucas, is twenty-seven years old. A woman over twenty-seven years old does not seek love in a relationship; at that time it was considered a pact to achieve social stability. Single women were thought to have failed in their duty to marry.

William Collins is described as “a tall, heavy looking young man of five and twenty“ (*Pride and Prejudice* 63). Fitzwilliam Darcy is described as follows: “Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth!“ (*Pride and Prejudice* 349). Another character in this novel is Lydia Bennet, who is sixteen years old when she marries. Being so young and inexperienced, Lydia could get to ruin the prestige of her family, so age was important either below or over the socially acceptable limits.

In *Emma*, the heroine is twenty-one years old and Mr. Knightley is around thirty-seven years old. But to her, age is not an important issue because she marries her social and economic equal (Campbell 7). A woman who is rich, intelligent and beautiful does not need a husband of a high social position, but Emma finds the love in Mr. Knightley, who is on the same social and economic level as her.

A conversation between Emma and Harriet about the age and physical appearance of Mr. Martin:

...He was four-and-twenty the 8th of last June, and my birthday is the 23rd—just a fortnight and a day's difference! which is very odd! (...) "Well, and that is as early as most men can afford to marry, who are not born to an independence. Mr. Martin, I imagine, has his fortune entirely to make—cannot be at all beforehand with the world. (*Emma* 23 and 24)

We can see that age is important for men, because it is more proper for them to be older than twenty-four years and in that way they could build themselves a better future.

3.4 Courtship

Regarding to *Sense and Sensibility*, the social norms of courtship and romance are represented by the two Dashwood sisters: Elinor, the older sister, who thinks that the courtship should follow rules, and Marianne, the younger, who is more open and passionate. As I have said previously, there were norms at that time before marrying.

Willoughby courts Marianne dancing in the balls, walking around his estate, giving her a horse as a gift - “Marianne told her, with the greatest delight, that Willoughby had given her a horse” (*Pride and Prejudice* 55) - and there also is the lock of hair which Marianne cuts from her hair for him; these ways of courtship show that Willoughby has made a formal proposal of marriage and they will soon be married. The acceptance of courtship at that time is expressed with a gift that the woman gives to the man, in this case a piece of hair, which reflects a deep feeling of love and a possible marriage. Margaret tells Elinor that Willoughby is trying to seduce or there is a courtship between him and her sister Marianne: "But indeed this is quite another thing. I am sure they will be married very soon, for he has got a lock of her hair" (*Sense and Sensibility* 58). In the following lines we can see how that happened: “...he took up her scissors and cut off a long lock of her hair, and he kissed it, and folded it up in a piece of white paper and put it into his pocket-book” (*Sense and Sensibility* 58).

Another type of courtship is directly through matchmaking. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice* Dobošiová describes the character of Mrs. Bennet as “a mother of five unmarried daughters at the right age for marriage,” becoming thus the best example in the novel of a matchmaker (24), and we can see this at the beginning of the novel: “The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (*Pride and Prejudice* 7). What Mrs. Bennet tries throughout the novel is to marry her daughters to rich men.

As I have said before, there are rules in the relationship between man and woman that must be met when marriage or courtship is proposed to a woman. In *Pride and Prejudice* we can find failed marriage proposals as in the case of Collins. While Mrs. Bennet tries to convince her daughter Elizabeth not to reject Mr. Collins's offer of marriage, Mr. Bennet tries to give her courage and shows that he is also against that marriage (*Pride and Prejudice* 109). When a man is courting a woman, that must be done following some rules and then courtship leads to marriage if the proposal is accepted by the woman, but, in this case, Elizabeth rejects the proposal, and her father, instead of forcing her, gives her freedom to choose.

The courtship in the novel is carried out through a series of social events that take place in the Bennets' neighborhood. An important event is the ball in which Jane and Bingley, as well as Darcy and Elizabeth, meet for the first time. Those types of events are important because many women find husbands there: “The prospect of the Netherfield ball was extremely agreeable to every female of the family” (*Pride and Prejudice* 85).

While the couples dance, they know each other better and they also comply with the rules of courtship and marriage. It is an event desired by all women, above all, the unmarried ones because it is a great opportunity for them.

As to *Emma*, Emma and Mr. Knightley's courtship follows the societal norms of the time. Mr. Knightley is always gentlemanly and chivalrous with her. Also, in this novel we can find balls or events in which characters have to dance, but dancing is less significant than the ability to sing and play the piano, they are considered a musical society (*Emma* 144).

Parties and dances form an important issue in the novel. There are three dances in the novel, the first one is improvised, and then there is a planned dance and another given by Mr. Weston which facilitates the courtship in the novel. For example, in the case of Emma and Mr. Knightley, he proposes her to dance and she accepts: "Whom are you going to dance with?" asked Mr. Knightley. She hesitated a moment, and then replied, "With you, if you will ask me" (*Emma* 249).

Large walks in the gardens in order to speak to each other are also considered a form of courtship. Mr. Churchill writes in his letter: "I was late; I met her walking home by herself, and wanted to walk with her, but she would not suffer it. She absolutely refused to allow me, which I then thought most unreasonable..." (*Emma* 333). Letters are an important part in the courtship, marriage could be proposed in them, as it happens with Mr. Martin's letter to Harriet proposing her marriage (*Emma* 39). It was supposed that a woman who is courted or marriage proposal is asked, must accept because she marries to help her economical status, but not because of love, Jane Austen, through the words of Emma, is indirectly criticizing that: "A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her, and can write a tolerable letter" (*Emma* 42).

Emma is the matchmaker of the novel, she tries to engage all the couples in the novel, with the exception of herself, and she thinks that she is responsible for that. With that she always tries to get something; for example, in the case of Harriet's marriage, Emma pretends to marry her to a rich man in order to keep her in her same social high status and as a friend. The one who Emma selects for Harriet is Mr. Elton because she wants to keep Harriet close to her and not lose her as it happened with her former governess, Miss Taylor, when she latter got married.

3.5 Financial problems

In relation to *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood women relate to people of the middle class. Elinor and Edward fall in love, but his financial status is not high:

He has only two thousand pounds of his own; it would be madness to marry upon that, though for my own part, I could give up every prospect of more without a sigh. I have been always used to a very small income, and could struggle with any poverty for him; but I love him too well to be the selfish means of robbing him, perhaps, of all that his mother might give him if he married to please her. (*Sense and Sensibility* 140-141)

Edward had two thousand pounds to marry, but this is not enough. Having money, you have a settled life.

There were also great legal economic differences between the man and the woman. In *Sense and Sensibility*, when the old father dies, John Dashwood inherits the house of the Dashwood family. When John fails in his responsibility as caretaker of the Dashwood women, their situation turns desperate and they must consider the charity of a man like Sir John Middleton (*Sense and Sensibility* 1-5). Jane Austen reflects these problems very much in detail and with a deep but sober pathos.

The following quotation in *Pride and Prejudice*: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of wife” (*Pride and Prejudice* 5) is one of the most important sentences of the novel, said in an ironical way. This refers to the reality that a rich man seeks a woman, but in fact a rich man is wanted by women to marry him. Charlotte Lucas says that Jane Bennet first must secure her economic position with her husband and then think about love: “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” (*Pride and Prejudice* 24). What women had to think about was securing their financial situation and getting married, no matter whether with or without love.

As to *Emma*, the heroine is the first female character of Jane Austen’s novels that does not depend on a husband. While other Austen heroines view marriage as a financial necessity, Emma is not interested to marry until the end of the novel because she is very independent and she does not need a financial stability since she already has it. Emma is young, rich, intelligent and beautiful: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some

of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (*Emma* 5).

Emma is not a romantic character and she does not believe in love. With the sentence “Fortune I do not want” (*Emma* 67) what Emma tries to explain is that women marry because of money, something that she does not need.

On the opposite side, Harriet is a girl who must marry in order to survive. She needs to marry someone to get a financial stability. Mr. Martin proposes to her, but Emma convinces her to reject the proposal. She wants Harriet to marry to Mr. Elton because he will keep Harriet in the same social class as Emma (Eberle 14). As to Mr. Elton, he considers that marrying a rich woman will provide him a better life: “He only wanted to aggrandize and enrich himself” (*Emma* 104). Jane Fairfax, because of her financial instability, has to overcome if she does not marry Frank Churchill. In the worst case she has to become a governess in order to survive, and being a governess was seen with horror as we can see in Emma’s words: “... Jane actually on the point of going as governess! What could he mean by such horrible indelicacy? To suffer her to engage herself- to suffer her even to think of such a measure!” (*Emma* 301).

CONCLUSIONS

Jane Austen is one of the most important British writers of the nineteenth-century. In her main topics she avoided being like her contemporaries regarding political subjects or the Napoleonic wars. She writes about society, women's position, financial problems and social classes, and she criticizes all those situations in a satirical way. Many of her novels are full of irony and comedy, avoiding the expression of sentiments and melancholy. The marriage plot is used in her novels in order to show the social and cultural problems of the early nineteenth-century and the situation of women and marriages.

The major topics of her novels are the cultural, social and financial situation of women. Women at the time were judged according to the families they were born into and married to. In the nineteenth-century the only goal of women was the marriage in order to be able to survive in a patriarchal society. What Jane Austen tries to vindicate is that women should not have to marry to a rich man only to survive. A woman has to be in love with her husband and like his physical and inner appearance, besides his education, intelligence. In that century, women had no rights; they had to obey their family and then their husbands. The young women who married for money were not criticized; however the older women were criticized if they did not marry. For that reason, Austen through these works teaches us how that was lived by women through the female characters in her novels.

There were female characters from low, middle and high social status, each one pretending to marry for different purposes, but what they have in common is their financial problems, with the exception of Emma. She was the only heroine who does not need to marry for money. The women and men of that time only regarded to the financial status, without looking at beauty, love, intelligence, or behaviour, but Jane Austen knew how to express her discontent regarding that and shows us in her works how the characters evolve and look for love, beauty and, only finally, wealth. Financial status, social status, courtship and marriage are included in one simple category which is the marriage plot. It is about all the obligations and characteristics that surrounded the women of the time.

Regarding the three novels, we can conclude that in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and in *Emma* the major themes are money and marriage. Heroines have to overcome economic situations and difficulties through marriage, but the author

teaches us that it is better to marry for love. All the characters evolve and they go against the rules of the nineteenth-century. The rule of age has to do with the fact that there is a proper age for men and women to marry and in the case of men, they have to be older than women.

As to courtship, the rules are reflected and respected in the three novels, and thus social events, letters, gifts and balls are good reasons to start a relationship.

We can divide the different marriages of the novels into three large groups: marriages because of economic and social status, or better said marriages of convenience and social stability but without love; marriages of true love and same social position, and secondary marriages because of physical attraction, education or behaviour. This distinction in types of marriages revolutionizes the situation of women in the nineteenth-century and presents a past that has been progressing maybe partly thanks to the novels of authors such as Jane Austen, in which they criticize a situation with which not all of them agreed, and she does it in an ironic and comical way which has proved to be really effective in its satirical purposes.

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