

## THE ISSUE OF MARRIAGE IN JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA*

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the issue of marriage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Jane Austen's *Emma*. The article focuses on the issue of marriage in Victorian England in general illustrated with the marriages in the novel. Emma, the protagonist, gets involved in matchmaking while, at the same time, believing that she will never get married. Furthermore, the article aims to discuss the views, status and condition of the woman in family and marriage during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to show how Jane Austen represents these views in the novel.

**Keywords:** Austen; marriage; family; choice; dependency; Victorian England, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

## Introduction

Firstly, we could start with the fact that women in Victorian England were supposed to get married, obey their husbands, be in charge of their homes as well as take care of children besides being ideal women both on the inside and on the outside. All in all, they needed to be “an Angel in the House” (Showalter, 1978, p. 14). Domestic chores for women without servants meant a great deal of washing and cleaning. They would usually wash the clothes and sheets once a week, whereas the curtains, which would turn black because of coal smoke, would be washed every other week (Horowitz, 1982, pp. 177-179).

Secondly, many women did not have a choice about a partner because it would meet the disapproval of the family, and it meant financial insecurity (since, naturally, the partner chosen by the family was “the best choice” for their daughter, and for the family as well – mainly financially). What is also important to emphasize here is that the young women of that time could not get a proper education, putting them in an inferior position and forcing them to obey men all their lives (fathers, brothers, husbands, etc.) because they did not have an independent financial means, among other things. A wealthy widow or spinster was a lucky exception. A woman who stayed single had to face social disapproval and pity. It was socially unacceptable as well to have a partner, let alone children, outside of marriage. All in all, as we can see, the woman’s only purpose in life was to marry and have children.

Thirdly, a woman could not obtain a divorce, even if she lived in the worst possible marriage, while men could get it – which clearly indicates the moral inequality of that time. What is more, if women had showed any signs of self-awareness, they would have been harshly sanctioned by the male members of the family. Divorce was difficult to obtain; the only acceptable reason for divorce was adultery, and even then it was a valid reason only for

a man. A woman could use adultery as an excuse to divorce her husband; however, she had to supplement it with evidence proving her husband engaged in incest, bigamy, or excessive cruelty. Even though this was a clear double standard, the reason for something like this was as follows: men were supposed to take care of their wives, and thus their fidelity was not as important and as terrible as that of a woman; if women, on the other hand, had been caught cheating, this would have been interpreted as them not respecting the care they were provided with by their husbands. However, things started to change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in terms of giving women more rights to get a divorce as well as to gain custody of their children, especially with the introduction of the *Custody of Infants Act* (1838 and 1873) as well as the *Matrimonial Causes Act* (1890) (Hurvitz, "Women and Divorce in the Victorian Era", n.d.).

As we can see, the woman in the nineteenth century was clearly dependent on her father and, logically, on her husband once she got married. Getting married was also a necessity for a woman to survive at all since women were deprived of proper education. Consequently, they could not have careers as such, and would not have been able to provide for themselves, had they stayed single, or without any male members of their families. Another point worth mentioning here is how women were not equal to men in the eyes of the law of that time. It was much more difficult for a woman to get divorced than for a man. What is more, even when she did decide to get divorced, the consequences of such an act were extremely harsh on her.

Fernando (1977), when talking about George Eliot, states that she makes some nice distinctions. The woman is not all feeling; she herself must find a union of the two perceptions within her. Women, by virtue of their sex, can play an important role in the progress of the human race, since they are naturally gifted with more feelings and emotions, which have been thought to be more intellectually and morally valuable. Eliot never believed that

men's and women's interests and pursuits needed to be similar, or that women needed to change their personalities to fit the male pattern. At the same time, Eliot was aware of the difficulties of setting out a conception of a woman's place in such a way and of giving it such importance (pp. 30-31). Furthermore, the woman had to accept all the baggage of her marriage, even if it meant that she would be unhappy for the rest of her life, and getting divorced was not going to make her feel happy again (p. 51).

## Discussion

When it comes to *Emma*, it is interesting to consider to what extent Austen accepts or questions the idea that marriage represents a woman's maturity and fulfilment of identity in life – the same identity that men have in a patriarchal society. *Emma* revolves around a number of marriages, which are all recently anticipated or consummated, and in which the participants' social status is definitely more important than their mutual affection and relationship. In Austen's time, marriage was one of the main ways by which one could climb the social ladder. Marriage was determined by a combination of family background, reputation, and wealth. Women were denied a chance of improving their social status through their hard work or personal achievements, so marriage was the method of social advancement that was of the utmost significance to women.

Although the novel is narrated by the third person narrator, Austen often lets us see things from Emma's point of view and describes them in the language used by Emma. The result of this kind of narration is a complex mixture of the sympathy for Emma and the ironic judgement of her behaviour. The reader does not always find it easy to share Emma's points of view or to disagree with them. It is also not clear whether Austen expects us to judge Emma's behaviour at all. Even though the reader may be faced with some problems of interpretation, the style of narration makes Emma a

richly multi-dimensional character. It becomes even more obvious thanks to the implicit distinctions made between her and the other women in the novel and the context of the novel as well. Jane Fairfax and Emma are very similar to each other in many ways; they are intelligent, educated and very dedicated to their families, but Jane Fairfax is not financially independent or privileged like Emma. Mrs. Elton, just like Emma, is independent and imposes her will upon her friends, but her crudeness and vanity reinforce our sense of Emma's refinement and fundamentally good heart. Emma's sister, Isabella, is a typical young woman of her time – feminine, gentle, completely devoted to her family, dependant, and not very bright. The novel clearly favors Emma's independence and intelligence over her sister's more traditional manners and behaviour, but the paradox still remains that though Emma is clever, she is almost always mistaken. Emma is eventually "ashamed of every sensation but the one revealed to her – her affection for Mr. Knightley. Every other part of her is disgusting" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 159).

Austen does not have any problems pointing out all the great characteristics of her heroines as well as all their weaknesses. She likes her heroines, but she does not make them perfect because she is aware of the fact that nobody is perfect and neither are her heroines. This is what makes Austen's characters so realistic. Another equally important point is that Austen allows her main female characters to regret some of their decisions, to feel sorry for making the mistakes they make, and in doing so, she makes them human with all their imperfections. So, Austen allows them to learn from their mistakes, to try to polish their imperfections, and to seek the ideal of perfection. Austen knows it is not an easy task, especially because her heroines live in a world dominated by men, and to achieve something, anything for that matter, they have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts. Mr. Knightley nicely explains the difference between Emma and her sister Isabella, but also, and more importantly, tells us more about Emma herself when he says the following:

[...] Emma is spoilt by being the cleverest in her family. At ten years old, she had the misfortune of being able to answer questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen. She was always quick and assured; Isabella slow and diffident. And ever since she was twelve, Emma has been mistress of the house and of you all. In her mother, she lost the only person able to cope with her. She inherits her mother's talents, and must have been under subjection to her. (Austen, 1993, p. 629)

What we witness here is the way Mr. Knightley admires Emma, her intelligence, talent, and skills, but, at the same time, by putting her mother forward as Emma's role model and influence in life, he admires Mrs. Woodhouse as well. When talking about these two ladies, he actually admires capable and strong women in general. The strongest influence on Emma could easily be her father, but Austen chooses Mrs. Woodhouse on purpose to show us the importance of the female influence and strength.

Despite the fact that Emma gets involved in matchmaking all the time, she neither has nor shows any intentions of wanting to get married. Mr. Knightley makes a good observation:

She always declares she will never marry, which, of course, means nothing at all. But I have no idea that she has yet ever seen a man she cared for. It would not be a bad thing for her to be very much in love with a proper object. I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her good. But there is nobody hereabouts to attach her, and she goes so seldom from house. (p. 631)

The novel suggests that marrying too far above oneself leads to difficulties and troubles. For instance, Mr. Weston's first marriage to Miss Churchill is a good move for him because she comes from a wealthy, well-connected

family. Mr. Weston is a tradesman who becomes engaged in trade after he quits his job in the militia of his country, but the inequality of the relationship is hard for both of them.

Captain Weston was a general favourite; and then his military life had introduced him to Miss Churchill, of a great Yorkshire family, and Miss Churchill fell in love with him, nobody was surprised, except her brother and his wife, who had never seen him, and who were full of pride and importance, which the connection would offend. Miss Churchill, however, being of age, and with the full command of her fortune – though her fortune bore no proportion to the family estate, was not to be dissuaded from the marriage, and it took place, to the infinite mortification of Mr. and Mrs. Churchill, who threw her off with due decorum. It was an unsuitable connection, and did not produce much happiness. (p. 618)

Mr. Weston marries Mrs. Weston just before the end of the novel, and this second marriage is happier because their social statuses are more equal. Mrs. Weston is a governess, and as such is very fortunate because she does not have to work any longer thanks to her marriage.

The other characters, especially Mr. Knightley, also find Emma's attempt to match Harriet with Mr. Elton inappropriate. Since Harriet's parentage is unknown, Emma believes that Harriet may have noble blood and encourages her to reject Robert Martin, who turns out to be a more appropriate match for her in the end. Mr. Knightley's objection to the match of Harriet and Mr. Elton is loud and clear. He states that Harriet is inferior to Mr. Elton, bearing in mind the fact that nobody knows who her parents are, she is not extremely intelligent and has not learnt anything useful nor gained any important experience. The only thing that can be considered an advantage

of hers is the fact that she is pretty and good-tempered and nothing else. Hence, in Mr. Knightley's opinion, it is Harriet who will benefit from this match, not Mr. Elton, and this is exactly why Robert Martin is a perfect match for Harriet.

The advantage of the match I felt to be all on her side, and had not the smallest doubt (nor have I now) that there would be a general cry out upon her extreme good luck. Even your satisfaction I made sure of. It crossed my mind immediately that you would regret your friend's leaving Highbury, for the sake of her being settled so well. I remember saying to myself: "Even Emma, with all her partiality for Harriet, will think this a good match" (p. 641).

When the truth is revealed that Harriet is a tradesman's daughter, Emma has to admit that Mr. Martin is definitely a more suitable match for her friend. The relationship between marriage and social status is complicated for some other characters as well. Frank Churchill must not announce his engagement to the orphan Jane Fairfax, knowing that his rich aunt will disagree with his decision. As a result, Jane is forced to consider taking the position of a governess. Mr. Weston makes a fine observation of Frank Churchill's aunt's character:

Mr. Churchill has pride; but his pride is nothing to his wife's; he is a quiet, indolent, gentlemanlike sort of pride, that would harm nobody, and only make himself a little helpless and tiresome; but her pride is arrogance and insolence. And what inclines one less to bear, she has no fair pretence of family or blood. She was nobody when he married her, barely the daughter of a gentleman, but ever since her being turned into a Churchill, she has out-Churchill'd them all in high and mighty claims; but in herself, I assure you, she is an upstart. (pp. 765-766).



From the quotation, we can understand that Mrs. Churchill has to thank her marriage for everything she has. She has benefited from getting married to Mr. Churchill since she does not have any special family background. However, what is of significance to us here is that she feels free to order people around and to say who is to do what and how especially in terms of getting married. She has no right to forbid Frank to marry Jane Fairfax, especially to object to it because of Jane's background, since she is not in a better position herself. What makes it even worse is the fact that Jane Fairfax is an educated, smart, young woman with good manners, who would make a perfect wife for Frank Churchill. Another point worth looking at is how Mrs. Churchill becomes "a bigger and better Churchill" than all the other members of the family, which makes us realize how important this marriage is to her and her social status.

In the Victorian era, on the other hand, life was not easy for an unmarried girl. She was forced to marry because marriage was considered a means that not only gave her identity but also enabled her to manage financially in life. An unmarried middle or lower-class girl, who did not inherit anything nor had any financial means to support herself, could only become a nun or prostitute later in life. In *Emma*, the unmarried Miss Bates has to face the threat of living in poverty without a husband who would take care of her and her mother. Mrs. Bates is an elderly lady who is the widow of the former vicar of Highbury. She lives with a daughter who is "neither young, handsome, rich, nor married" (p. 621). She is taking care of her old mother, and due to her good nature, nobody speaks badly about her. Miss Bates is interested in everybody's happiness and does not pay too much attention to people's weaknesses. She simply loves people. "The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to everybody, and a mind of felicity to herself. She was a great talker upon little matters, which exactly suited Mr. Woodhouse, full of trivial communications and harmless gossip" (p. 621).

However, the conversation between Emma and Harriet clearly shows Emma's views on Miss Bates in particular, and marriage in general, with a special reference to the difference between poor girls or young women who stay single and unmarried and wealthy girls or young women who stay single or unmarried in the Victorian society. The latter, of course, have a choice, as Emma nicely explains, due to the fact *per se* that their wealth enables them to lead a normal life, without being looked at as outcasts, while those poor, unmarried young women are usually rejected by society as being outcasts, considered to be "not normal", simply because they are not fortunate enough to find suitable husbands for themselves. Emma says:

Never mind, Harriet. I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid – the proper sport of boys and girls, but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else! And the distinction is not quite so much against the candour and common-sense of the world as appears at first; for a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. Those who can barely live, and who live perforce in a very small and, generally, very inferior society, may well be illiberal and cross. This does not apply, however, to Miss Bates: she's only too good-natured and too silly to suit me; but, in general, she is very much to the taste of everybody, though single and though poor. Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind: I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give sixpence of it; and nobody is afraid of her; that is a great charm. (p. 654)

Finally, the match between Emma and Mr. Knightley is considered a good one, not only because her characters are similar, but also, and maybe even more importantly because they come from the same social class. The very descriptions of Emma and Mr. Knightley give us an insight into many of their similarities both in terms of their characters as well as their social class. In the novel, Austen describes Emma as follows: “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” (p. 613).

Austen describes Mr. Knightley in the following way:

Mr. Knightley, a sensible man about seven or eight and thirty, was not only a very old and intimate friend of the family, but particularly connected with it, as the older brother of Isabella's husband. He lived about a mile from Highbury, was a frequent visitor, and always welcome, and at this time more welcome than usual, as coming directly from their mutual connections in London. He had returned to a late dinner after some days' absence, and now walked up to Hartfield to say that all were well in Brunswick Square. It was a happy circumstance, and animated Mr. Woodhouse for some time. Mr. Knightley had a cheerful manner, which always did him good; and his many inquires after “poor Isabella” and her children were answered most satisfactorily. (p. 615)

As it can be observed and concluded from the two descriptions, Emma and Mr. Knightley indeed share a lot of similarities. Both of them are clever, good-looking and rich. They also have mutual relatives, friends, and connections. Isabella, Emma's sister, is married to Mr. Knightley's brother,

which makes them even closer friends and more attached to each other because of Mr. Knightley's frequent visits to the Woodhouse mansion. All these previously mentioned things make the match between Emma and Mr. Knightley seem naturally suitable and absolutely logical.

Moffat (1991) discusses the issue of marriage and the genre of *Emma* and states the following: "Our difficulties with *Emma* reside in part in the resolution of the plot, her marriage to Knightley. These really comprise two problems: marriage itself and marriage specifically to Knightley" (p. 51). She argues that Knightley's suitability as a lover is an open-end question throughout the whole novel and that it is comical to observe his shift from mentor to lover. Bearing in mind the age difference between Emma and him, we also recognize the incest taboo in the novel, acknowledging that Knightley could be Emma's father in terms of the age difference between the two of them (pp. 53-54).

Furthermore, Moffat (1991) asks if Emma had to get married, or if her correction could have happened in some other way. The issue at hand here is that Austen usually has a male counterpart to her main female character, and all the flaws of the main female character are pointed out to her or to the reader by her male counterpart in the novel. Interestingly enough, in *Emma*, Austen not only lets Mr. Knightley criticize Emma, but the narrator does it as well. As a result, it feels like Emma needs to be criticized or preached to twice as much as any other Austen's heroine. The narrator in *Emma* is used to direct readers to come to conclusions that might affect their actions in the real world. The power that the narrator possesses is translated from the fictional world to our world. So, it can be argued that *Emma*, in terms of its structure, is written in the form of *bildungsroman* (pp. 53-55).

Apart from the issue of marriage, the novel also describes the nature of a woman's existence in eighteenth-century rural England, Emma is highly intelligent and full of energy, but she uses her intelligence and energy to guide the marital destinies of her friends. This project of hers gets her into a lot of trouble. Isabella is the only mother the story focuses on, and her description suggests that the life of a mother gives a woman little use of her intellect. For example, Mr. Knightley refers to her as "poor Isabella", most probably because her life revolves only around her children and family. The novel is focused on marriage because marriage offers women a chance to exert their power, even if only occasionally and to some extent, and to affect their own lives and destinies without having to adopt the work and efforts, or even the lifestyle, of the working class. Accepting or rejecting proposals of marriage is perhaps the most active role women are allowed to play in Emma's world. To illustrate what has been said, let's look at the following conversation between Emma and Mr. Woodhouse about Miss Taylor:

(Mr. Woodhouse) "Poor Miss Taylor! I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!"

(Emma) "I cannot agree with you, papa; you know I cannot. Mr. Weston is such a good-humoured, pleasant, excellent man, that he thoroughly deserves a good wife; and you would not have had Miss Taylor live with us forever, and bear all my odd humour, when she might have a house of her own?" (p. 614).

Unlike Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, Emma Woodhouse's problems in *Emma* mostly lie in the fact that she is unable to understand her own personal flaws. During her matchmaking debacle between Mr. Elton and Harriet, Emma does not understand – or even accept – the fact that she is not the right person to completely understand the human personality; she does not even understand her personality

and is blind to her own mistakes for that matter. This leads to Mr. Elton admitting that he is actually in love with Emma, not Harriet. However, this does not change Emma at all. The moment that completely changes Emma occurs when Mr. Knightley expresses his discontent with Emma's cruelty that she expresses towards Miss Bates. This moment of self-discovery is followed by Emma's continuous efforts to change herself in all the ways possible.

The misunderstandings in the novel are all the result of the conventions of social propriety to which all the characters are subjected. The characters are unable to express their feelings directly and openly because of the social pressure, norms and moral values, which construct Victorian society and its culture, and, as a result, their feelings are misunderstood. Austen seems to prefer Knightley and Martin's tactfulness to the sometimes ironic, cynical and sarcastic comments of Emma, Mr. Elton and Frank. However, they have a major influence on the story as a whole. The conversation between Emma and Mr. Knightley seems to be a valid example of what has just been stated:

“Pray Mr. Knightley,” said Emma who had been smiling to herself through a great part of this speech, “how do you know that Mr. Martin did not speak yesterday?”

“Certainly,” replied he, surprised, “I do not absolutely know it, but it may be inferred. Was not she the whole day with you?”  
(p. 640)

Obviously, Emma enjoys knowing more or being better informed than her male counterparts. This gives her the joy of feeling superior to them by showing them that they do not possess the knowledge she does, and she feels needed at the same time, which generally makes her feel good about herself.

In Victorian England, men were dominant and were in charge of all important work, while the role of the woman was quite minor, and was mostly concentrated on doing housework and ensuring the right upbringing of children. Thus, women would get married very young, mostly by the choice of their parents, or sometimes and rarely to the man of their own choice, if they were lucky enough.

Austen's most important works are about young women who want to marry and go through a lot of troubles on their journey to achieving their goals. However, she herself never got married. Her relationship with Tom Lefroy broke up due to the circumstances in her life which were beyond her control, such as her finances, family background, and many other things. She also decided to reject her only potential suitor, and the one that proposed to her, Harris Bigg-Wither, because she would not ignore her feelings (Tomalin, 1997). What is also important is that she, as an early feminist, paid much more attention to one's personal independence, as it can be seen in all her works; all her protagonists are women who have dominant roles in her novels, and Austen conveys all her important messages by using different satirical devices (irony, humor, exaggeration, to name just a few), which are all the tools used by feminist writers.

Brown (1969) states that the didactic and sentimental tradition of eighteenth-century fiction has been well documented, and so has Jane Austen's parody of that tradition. Given Austen's preference for the realistic possibilities of fiction, and given the opposing standards of some reviewers and readers, she is left with the problem of how to conclude her story without sacrificing her comic view of reality to the rigid canons of poetic justice. She solves the problem by applying her moral judgement so that the characters and narrative details convey the relevant moral values as much as they embody a vision of life and reality. In *Emma*, for example, the resolution of the plot and themes does not depend on the celebration of marriage.

The crucial resolution is the process of Emma's development. It is Austen's conclusion that we must look for her reaction to the didacticism and sentimentality of the "happy ending", since the mocking self-consciousness of these essentially comic conclusions evokes a contrast between a literary convention and a novelist's preoccupation with reality. Moreover, this parody of a "hackneyed artifice" is supplemented by Austen's insistence on the kind of ending that is logically consistent with her characters and narrative. In *Emma*, where this kind of formal and self-conscious conclusion is absent, there is an implied contrast between the actual outcome and the conclusion envisaged by Emma in her earlier misinterpretations of characters and situations (pp. 1582-1583).

Throughout the novel, Emma realizes her own self-centeredness and admits that it is wrong to take an active part in bringing any two people together. At the end, she feels ashamed and very worried about what she has done and decides to never do it again. What Austen does here is let us see the good qualities of being oneself, but also the bad qualities that come with it. She also lets Emma change the weakness of her character, but does not compromise her for who she really is.

When the reader reads *Emma* and compares the plot with Austen's life, it is very obvious that Austen put a part of herself into the character of Emma. Like Austen herself, Emma is absolutely sure she will never marry because of the issue of independence, which is very much blocked by husbands in traditional societies. In this respect, Emma becomes a spokeswoman for Austen's feelings. However, Austen stayed single all her life, while Emma gets married at the end of the novel (Tomalin, 1997).

Gilbert and Gubar (1979) describe Emma, or to be more precise Austen's "avatar" as they call her, as someone who "manipulates people as if they were characters in her own stories" (p. 158). Emma gets involved in match-



making and stories of romance that she smartly resists in her own life. However, Emma does it out of boredom, and it is understandable why she does it – since she is an intelligent and imaginative girl who is capable of changing and willing to transform her dull reality into something more entertaining. She is also capable of figuring out people's personalities quite fast, even without getting to know them too well.

Showalter (1978) states a very interesting thing about the “the dangerous woman” whose resemblance to Emma is striking: “The dangerous woman is not the rebel or the bluestocking, but “the pretty girl” whose indoctrination in the female role has taught her secrecy and deceitfulness, almost as secondary sex characteristics. She is particularly dangerous because she looks so innocent” (p. 165). This goes to show that being a rebel is not the only way to be dangerous, but that deceitfulness and secrecy of innocent-looking young girls are even more dangerous. It is because we know exactly what to expect from rebels and how to deal with them, but we are not usually careful enough and do not pay too much attention to people, in this case women, who look innocent and unable to hurt anyone or anything. These women can change themselves, people around them, and even whole societies, and their deceitfulness, secrecy, and innocent looks are the tools they use to achieve their goals.

As we mentioned earlier, marriage is the main theme in almost all of Austen's works. What we need to understand here is how Austen uses marriage as a theme and the tone in her works. Marriage is always seen through the main female character's point of view – Elizabeth Bennet's in *Pride and Prejudice*, Marianne Dashwood's in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Emma's in *Emma*.

What we also need to notice here is that Austen is very ironic in the way she wants to get her messages across as to the role, status and condition of the

woman in the Victorian era. This is exactly the reason why her works are so popular all around the world and have remained popular for so long after her death. So, the question is: why did she use irony? She used irony to convey messages to the people of her time. She would do this by introducing an unexpected event into the plot to direct her readers to the message she wanted to convey. By using irony, Austen chose to direct her readers to the main message in her stories because of the “controversial” topics she portrayed in her novels, such as the rejection of marriage, a girl not wanting to get married at all, or even the female dominance in general. Furthermore, she uses comedy of manners as another segment of the tone of the novel in order to describe different characters, and to portray people’s characteristics (usually those negative ones) through it (Bradbury, 1962, pp. 86-87).

Since Austen was not just an author but also a critic (she criticized the social hierarchies of the time, gender roles, marriage and/or the behaviour of the wealthy), she was able to present her point of view to the reader in a more appealing way. She managed to portray her female characters in a dominant position, and the public did not seem to mind, object or take offense. Or if so, it was at a very low level. Austen’s women are strong, independent and ambitious, and they still manage to keep their reputations spotless, just like Austen was and did during her own life.

Austen is often derided because of her reputation of only writing about young women whose sole interest in life is to get married. However, this is not true. She wrote about relationships between men and women, and different problems women faced in her day, and she included some scathing criticism of society – especially as it affected women.

Bradbury (1962), when talking about *Emma*, also states that the whole novel is centred around the social and family life of that time. Austen is the author whose novels are about common people and common life – the

people and life she knows well. Obviously, marriage plays a vital role in her novels, so a lot of commentaries and moral discussions are about trying to define a good marriage (or the conditions of a good marriage), and then contrasting it to all the other marriages in the novel. "But marriage is a social pact, and so must answer to the public dimension. The general expectations of this book are that people will make the marriages they deserve, and that the climax will be Emma's marriage, made when she has answered to her faults and resolved her dilemmas" (p. 83). This goes back to the fact that Emma is criticized twice as much as the other Austen's heroines and that she has to come to terms with, accept and acknowledge all her flaws before she marries Mr. Knightley. The end, indeed, puts an end to Emma's flaws and leads her to self-realization, and Austen, obviously, wants to finish her novel with a sort of a happy end; however, the question remains if this end is ideal for Emma herself.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that most of Austen's characters do want to marry, they always want to choose their own life partners and marry for love, which is something that was unthinkable (or hardly so) during Austen's lifetime. For example, Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) will stay dependent on her family or at the mercy of Mr. Collins, who will inherit the Bennet family house if she does not marry him, still decides not to marry him because she can only get married to someone she will love with all her heart and soul. Elizabeth is very intelligent; however, she is not the only smart female who has this strong feminine notion about marrying for love rather than for someone's wealth or inheritance.

What we can observe here is Austen breaking some ground rules of the laws and social norms and standards of her time and culture, which leads us to think that this can be interpreted as a sign of feminism in her works.

Although she criticized the social conduct of her time and culture, Austen was never an activist because she did not want to destroy the reputation and good name of her family. However, what perhaps can be looked at and discussed is the fact that maybe Austen was a forerunner of feminism, especially in terms of her literary corpus.

What we have to acknowledge is that without the Box Hill episode, in which Emma is severely and openly criticized by Mr. Knightley that helps her progress to her self-realization, this novel would not be as important today (Moore, 1969, p. 585). At the same time, the theme of dependency is depicted by using different characters, their lives and life stories. Frank Churchill and Harriet derive from the goodwill of others the status which is usually given or ensured by birth. Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse exemplify the reliance of age on youth. Mrs. Weston and Jane Fairfax must obtain the support of others to preserve their gentility. Finally, Emma, who believes to be independent of all dependent needs, cultivates a society of individuals of whom this is obviously not true.

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