

## **Single Women in *Emma*, by Jane Austen**

Trabajo de Fin de Grado en Estudios Ingleses

Presentado por

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project analyzes the condition of single women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century within Jane Austen's novel, *Emma*, specifically in the characters of Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax. It also describes the differences between both characters and how those differences are established by their fates. Emma, on the one hand, is an independent woman with a great fortune, who swears she will never marry. Jane Fairfax, on the other hand, does not possess Emma's wealth, so in order to survive on her own, she must get married or she must consider an employment as a governess.

The main objective of this project is to provide an inside look to the lives of spinsters in the 18<sup>th</sup> century based on the lives of Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax. Firstly, I have divided my project into different parts: the first one is the theoretical part, in which I shall describe and explain the lives of single women, giving examples of the different sources I used. The second part, is the main core of the project, which consists in the analysis of the novel *Emma*, and the theme of singleness presented in the analyzed characters.

For centuries women dedicated their lives to the happiness of others. How many women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were able to choose whether to marry or not? Some questions concerning single women arise when addressing this issue, but fortunately this project will also give us some answers.

### **Keywords:**

Emma, Jane Austen, single women.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This project is meant to understand better the lives of middle and upper class single women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the help of the novel *Emma* written by Jane Austen. The project is supported by written material, partly given by my tutor Aída Díaz Bild, which includes books, articles, novels and web pages.

I decided to choose this thematic line for my final degree project because it is quite interesting how single women had to struggle to find a place in society just to earn a living. Furthermore, Jane Austen is a fascinating novelist, I am fond of all her novels and how they are women-centred. Jane Austen is able to portrait the situation of women in a realistic and flawless way.

The purpose of this project is to demonstrate how even though the British Empire suffered several changes in society during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the condition of single women was still the same. Men were in a position of power over women, they were able to have a political and social voice, whereas women were relegated to a second position within society. Women were considered passionate and unstable creatures, which made them irresolute individuals and in need of a companion with a superior intellect and understanding of life, also known as men.

In the first part of my project, which consists in the theoretical part, mainly analyses the lives of single women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century depending on their social and familial condition. Many thoughts of the age consisted in seeing women as individuals with strict purposes in life according to their marital status. A daughter had to obey her father; a wife should accomplish her duties of love and fidelity towards her husband; a widow must look after her children and take care of their welfare, and finally, a single woman's purpose was yet to be found, although in the meantime society despised her as she was an enigma to the system, without procreation and a purposeful life, an unmarried woman was just a collateral damage in a controlled and planned social system.

The deprivation that women suffered in the 18<sup>th</sup> century condemned them to a life of imprisonment. Women were not able to conquer a life of their own, they always needed a man to do the "hard job", even if it was a legal transaction or any other issue, as women were considered incompetent, and completely deprived from any power. Those women who still remained free and single and did survive without a man, should be addressed as survivors in a generation that profoundly rejected them.

In the second part of the project, I shall make use of the compiled information gathered in the theory to analyze the novel *Emma* and explain the roles of Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax, both single women but with different possibilities in life.

Emma Woodhouse is a young woman with economic independence and the possibility to choose whether to marry or not, whereas Jane Fairfax is also a beautiful young woman, who could not have the luxury of staying single because otherwise she would not survive in society unless she becomes a governess. Jane needs to find a husband before considering a job as a governess, which is one of the few jobs available for middle class women with a good education. Nevertheless, working as a governess is a denigrating job for middle class single women, as they were not supposed to work. On the other hand, Emma is safe under her father's economic stability and as an expectant heir she does not need to worry about her fate because she has the advantage of choosing whether to stay single or to get married.

## 2. SINGLEWOMEN IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were considered silly and passionate creatures, many of their actions were criticized by society as they were considered scandals; women were not free from indecorous “sights”. Even the intellect in a woman could be considered by many people an undesirable quality in a woman. Thus, the 18<sup>th</sup> century woman had to project an adequate image following the canons of the society.

There were mainly three available roles for women: married, single and widowed. These three roles demanded certain qualities and they were also requested to fulfil stipulated purposes in life. Socially, women were demanded to have children and to take care of their future husbands. Marriage was the natural state and the objective of every woman. Matrimony was also seen as a means to an end, being the goal an economic stability in which women could carry a life without any problem. Nonetheless, if we take into account that many of the marriages that took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were due to economic reasons, matrimony was not necessarily intertwined with love. Subsequently, many wives ended up with tyrannical husbands and in dangerous situations.

During marriage a woman’s role is dedicated in its entirety to the service of others, specifically her husband and the upbringing of her children. In any 18<sup>th</sup> century marriage, the husband exercised a power over his wife, providing her a “safety net” as Elizabeth Bergen in her book *Women’s Lives and the 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Novel*, eloquently states: “The man’s greater strength of both body and mind provided a secure refuge for the weaker sex” (195). Consequently, women and men became one single person from a legal and civil point of view, and in a biblical perspective they became “one flesh”. This is one of the reasons why women could not manage any properties or lead any legal transaction, as “A married woman had no legal status” (Bergen 37). Women were again subdued not only socially, but also legally speaking to men.

Nevertheless, what about those women who were not able to find someone to marry or just decided not to marry?

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century society became aware of an important group of women who were living on their own without a husband, known as old maids, single women, spinsters... terms used just to denigrate the concept of unmarried women.

Singleness, despite of its meaning, did not involve an eternal state of spinsterhood. The conception of single women as women who would never married in their whole lives is completely wrong. On the contrary, single women were seen as “potential brides” (Bergen 199) looking for a husband. Nonetheless, unmarried women who have discarded marriage totally dismissed any marital proposal, choosing to remain single. This was the case of Mary Cowper, who decided to reject her future husband and lived a single life, stating that this status “[...]... that I was fully resolved to preserve that happiness and never to change that condition of life which was so agreeable to me” (Bergen 207). Many times women realized that it was better to remain single rather than marrying a tyrannical man, which was inconceivable for many, “it was often better for a woman to stay single than to marry badly” (Froide 172). Notwithstanding, it is relevant to take into account the efforts made by society to encourage women to marry by labelling them as “old maids”:

Why the blame? Because there was a recognition that some women might choose to never marry instead of being forced into singleness. If this was the case, what better way to ensure that more women did not choose to marry [...] than to characterize such women as “old maids”? (Froide 180)

The term “old maid” was used to denigrate women, as old maids were women who could not get married because they did not find a husband, not because they decided not to marry.

Single women had been rejected for centuries by society as they did not follow the pattern that the world at large indicated and required, which was, as it has already been mentioned, marriage. It was assumed that never-married women felt unhappy about their lives and their status. Single women were suffering due to the fact that they did not possess any conjugal relations nor children to take care of. Furthermore, they were considered “isolated and lonely individuals” (Froide 45) Nevertheless, they were also described as women who had “more of a sense of the individual self than married women or even some men” (Froide 183).

There were several pamphlets and works criticizing the role of single women in society and recognizing the concern of having women incapable of “producing the next generation” (Froide 166). Spinsters were portrayed in literature as a synonym of unhappiness, “one to be despised, pitied, and avoided as a sempiternal spoilsport in the orgy of life” (Hufton 356).

Literature also attempted to engage single women in matrimony. Novels proposed the elaboration of a lottery with marriage as the principal prize, in which men and women were able to participate, although those women had to be pretty, chaste, virgins under twenty- five

years old and without any disease or deformations, as ill women could not take care of their children and husbands. The point of view of the age allowed people to reject ill women and prevent them from getting married. Nevertheless, it was also literature that helped women to write about their aspirations, wishes and desires. In some of the 18<sup>th</sup> century novels, women were central to the plot, giving them an importance that they lacked in reality. Novels gave women the opportunity of having a voice in a manly world.

Spinsters had been mocked for several years in literature as well as in society. Unmarried women did not fit in British society; there was a negative response towards them. One of the main reasons why society rejected old maids was because they were not using their reproductive capacities as Froide points out: “Pro -natalism certainly affected popular perceptions of never-married women” (180). Given this point, the main concern of the nation was the need of keeping the birth rate at a stable level, thus singleness was a problem for the commonwealth. It is important to realize the important role of economy, as it is central to this project. In fact, economy did not only influenced spinsters, but even men used women as economic values, as many of them married elite women from a wealthy family, so they would later inherit their wives’ bequests.

In spite of the treatment unmarried women socially received, they were able to find a place where they could belong. The Church gave women an opportunity to have a social life, allowing them to participate in a Christian path following a life of celibacy and devotion:

Outside the family, spinster sociability, particularly in the village, focussed on the church. No society in the early modern period, and indeed few in the modern period, has permitted the respectable, spinster a tavern- based social life, whereas the church erected celibacy into a virtue and provided a framework within which the spinster could have a social existence- as much or as little as her time allowed. (Hufton 368)

Religion also played an important role in the lives of never- married women, as some of them chose to dedicate their lives to the Church. Nevertheless, unlike in France, England did not allow women to found convents or stay at home leading a life of celibacy and temperance. In a country like England, in which the Anglican Church had a great influence, women were only able to succeed in their attempts of giving up their lives to God.

Unmarried women, especially the ones who lived in rural areas, found shelter in the Church, because it was very difficult for them to have any kind of support outside their families. As a matter of fact, literature also portrayed the situation of rural spinsters, making clear that the Anglican Church was deeply involved in their lives.

Their main social relationships were, apart from their closest relatives, their nieces, aunts, uncles and cousins; and within the town single women could also developed a series of relationships with the pastors, servants, landladies...

Single women's relationships were based on their relatives and friends, as it has already been mentioned, and those relations were more important for spinsters than for a married woman, as she had a husband and children as her immediate family, while single women considered their parents, aunts, cousins and nieces their most direct relatives.

In fact, as family ties were indeed indispensable for never- married women, it was common for them to relinquish their wills to their closest relatives. According to the Table 1, the principal beneficiaries of single women's testators in different parts of England were their sisters, with whom they shared a special bond. Furthermore, it is fair to say that almost all the heirs of single women's bequests were women.

Table 1. Primary beneficiaries of single women testators<sup>1</sup>

Bristol	Oxford	Southampton	York	Hampshire
N = 40	N = 40	N = 35	N = 50	N = 45
Sister [7]	Sister [12]	Sister [11]	Sister [8]	Sister [14]
Nephew [7]	Niece [7]	Niece [6]	Brother [6]	Niece [9]
Brother [6]	Mother [4]	Brother [3]	Niece [6]	Nephew [8]
Niece [4]	Kinswoman [4]	Nephew [3]	Kinswoman [5]	Brother [6]
Man [3]	Brother [3]	Brother-in-law	Kinsman [5]	Male friend [6]
Kinswoman [3]	Kinsman [3]	[2]		
Sister's children	Female friend	Master [2]		
[3]	[3]	Male friend [2]		

In the light of this situation, it is legitimate to appreciate that single women enjoyed their role as aunts since the statistic shows that the others great inheritors were their nieces. Spinsters used to take care of other children, which positively helped them to lead a purposeful life by taking care of their nieces and nephews, in case they were orphaned or needed help.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Froide, Amy M. (2005) 2007. *Single But Not Alone: The Family History of Never- Married Women. In Never Married. Singlewomen in Early Modern England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 68.

A point often overlooked is the importance of single women for other people, especially for their relatives. In the case of never-married sisters, they played a crucial role in the lives of their brothers, especially if they were also single. In reality, sisters helped with their brother's household. The role of single women in the family was, on regular basis, relevant and indispensable to the point where we should be asking ourselves "why any family in the period would have let all its female members marry" (Froide 79).

Bearing all this in mind, what expectations did single women have? Firstly, their options to live freely and be able to be economically independent were very few. In fact, we can, broadly speaking, divide single women into two groups depending on their economy: expectant heirs and women who were not economically independent.

Single women as expectant heirs would inherit their parents' bequests in the case of not having any brothers or any elder sister, be that as it may: "In most cases, a woman became a substantial heiress only in the absence of male heirs" (Bergen 36). Nevertheless, in the case of having an older brother, the never-married woman was often dependent on him, as it would be the elder brother the one in charge of the situation and economic activity of his sister.

Parents were generally the principal giver of the capital that their daughters were going to inherit. Historically, parents would force their daughters into marriage if they wanted to receive their legitimate bequests. Although this may be true, historians have stated that this was not the only reason for parents to give their bequests to their daughters, as Table 2 will show:

Table 2. *Timed bequests to daughters of testators in the archdeaconry of Essex and in the deaneries of Evesham, Kidderminster and Powick in the diocese of Worcester.*<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Essex</i>	<i>Essex</i>	<i>Essex</i>	<i>Worcester</i>
<i>Type of clause</i>	<i>1558- 1565</i>	<i>1566- 1571</i>	<i>1558- 1571</i>	<i>1558-1570</i>
Age	73 45.3 %	38 38.8%	111 42.9%	14 32.6%
Marriage	33 20.5%	19 19.4%	52 20.1%	17 39.5%
Age/ Marriage	55 34.2%	41 41.8%	96 37.1%	12 27.9%
Total	161	98	259	43

<sup>2</sup> Source: F.G. Emmison ed., *Essex Wills* (National Genealogical Society, Washington DC, 1982), vols. 1-2. In Peters, Christine. 1997. "Single Women in Early Modern England: Attitudes and Expectations." *Continuity and Change* 12.3: 325-345. P. 333

As the table displays, in most cases parents would give their bequests to their daughters depending on their age not on their marital status, as a consequence, women could avoid marriage and be economically independent. Additionally, single women's relatives were prone to cede their bequests to them, allowing them to lead a life as unmarried women. The minimum age of inheritance for women was often between sixteen and twenty-one years old; what is important to realize is that if bequests were given to daughters from this young age, they had the opportunity of deciding whether to marry or not.

Women with economic independence did not need to work, and even if they wanted to, they were not prepared to earn a living, after all their education did not consist in accomplishing any kind of tough tasks. The role of education in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was basically to make women more appealing to men, while it made them totally oblivious to the real issues of the outside world. The education that women received included fine works such as learning languages and to read and write, to dance... Women did not learn things for themselves but to impress others. Nevertheless, a wise and intellectually superior woman was considered unattractive for a future husband as wisdom gave women a pretentious quality which was highly undesirable.

Parents used to pay a lot of money to make their daughters more appealing by giving them the possibility of having a good education in order to draw attention not only from a man but also to be accepted by society. In exchange, as daughters their duty was to take care of their parents, and be decent, educated and obedient. For the families it was a great pleasure and pride to see their daughters having a good social position, or having a wealthy and powerful husband by their side. Nonetheless, if their efforts on trying to transform their daughters into better wives-to-be were not profitable, and all that their daughters would have achieved was spinsterhood, everything they would have done it would have been in vain, and they would subsequently feel ashamed: "Some families appear to have felt nothing but shame for their unmarried daughter" (Hill 226).

For single women living in rural areas their education was just the opposite, unlike urban women, village spinsters knew how to deal with hard work. Many single women who belonged to the middle or upper classes in society did not have any experience in tough jobs, as their education was limited, they were never taught to manage any kind of real productive job that helped them earn a living. As Bridget Hill points out "For the great majority of women outside marriage, there was little possibility of creating an independent household" (232).

Consequently, a visible difference was remarked between urban and rural spinsters who inherited real states.

On the one hand, urban never- married women were able to rent their properties to get profit or to use them as a home if they required so. Shops and inns were also a feasible medium to get a productive holding company, this helped to perceive spinsters from a different perspective, as “singlewomen were not different from the men and widows who also held urban property” (Froide 123). On the other hand, rural single women were most likely to hold land instead of a business, however, they had a problem as it was more difficult for women to be owners of the lands, so they were normally co-holders, while their siblings or male relatives were the land tenants, thus single women were hardly ever in possession of their own properties. Furthermore, women in the countryside had animals and agriculture to take care of, but sometimes they had to find another way to survive by doing “lace- making, straw- painting, and frame work- knitting [...]” (Hill 236).

One of the good use of the inheritance that never-married women made was to seek for properties and businesses where they could invest, and get a chance to run the businesses themselves. Throughout history, spinsters gained a position in society as landladies, and as Froide observes “they were the very people whose property was taxed to pay the poor rates and keep up the town infrastructure” (128). Once a woman became the owner of a property, she was able to put her own name to it, unlike married women, a spinster possessed a legal identity, and thus she could be the owner of properties, businesses and they could use some of the legal power that was denied to married women.

Being all that said, what about single women who were not from a high status or with a family who could help them? Of course, they did not have the privilege of being economically independent, alternatively they needed to find a job in order to survive. In a sense, these women had to prove to society that they were able to work and live independently. As a general rule, jobs for spinsters were limited, and the ones that were available were quite harsh.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were few employments available to women. And the ones that still remained were low paid and women could not make a living from them. One plausible job for unmarried women was the one of a servant, as many employers asked for single women to work in the domestic service so they could live and work without the need of leaving the house to take care of their own families.

Domestic service provided single women the opportunity of living safely with a family, and having the possibility of earning some money without the need of paying a mortgage in order to live under a roof. Nevertheless, domestic service was only available for the lower- class single women, so middle class women were not allow to work as servants, as it was denigrating for them.

Under different circumstances, single women had to look for a job that could pay their rents, but it was quite difficult for them as the wages were too low to pay a mortgage, the heating, lighting, lodging, food... This led single women to look for other never-married women to share bills and to secure a roof above their heads. Nevertheless, almost at the end of the century, employment opportunities for women notably declined, some single women faced the crossroad of getting married or starting to prostitute themselves. Prostitution was one of the “jobs” available for women, but of course, if being an old maid was already hard, being a prostitute was clearly worst.

Working as a governess was one of the few jobs accessible for single women with a good education. Middle and upper classes used to hire an unmarried woman who was dedicated to her job. The role of the governess consisted in taking care of her employer’s children and provide them a good education. There were three types of governesses: a teacher, who worked in a school and taught different subjects such as arithmetic, history, English etc.; a daily governess, who had her own house and travelled to the place of work every day and the most common one: a private governess, who lived in the household and was part of the service. Nevertheless, governesses were socially inferior, it was considered a misfortune for a woman to accept this job and take care of other children, instead of their own. Governesses, even though they were superior to the servants, were isolated and they did not fit in any social group. Moreover, they could not expect any attention or affection from the family or the children they took care of.

The condition of women who were not economically independent, was quite complicated, as any job secured them the possibility of living a life socially accepted.

Finally, it is also important to highlight the position of widows in the English society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as in a sense they were also single women, but with less obstacles. Unmarried women had more difficulties in life than widows, because at least widows had been married once, which gave them a superior position in society.

Once a married woman was left alone by her husband's death, she had to continue with her life in one way or another, although this time she had new responsibilities. Widows dedicated their lives to the welfare and happiness of their children.

Widows, unlike single women, had more opportunities of being economically independent. Being that as it may, they were free to a certain extent, depending on their economic liquidity, and in many occasions widows depended on the kindness of their sons, as their children were the ones who inherited the patriarch's bequest.

Spinsters, married women and widows are a synonym of struggle in an age where social judgement, economy and politics were against them. They could be seen as the survivors of a society that did not allow them to be free, and they conspicuously represented "the survival of subsequent generations" (Hufton 374).

To conclude, I would like to recall a statement in which Elizabeth Bergen summarizes in one single statement the life of a woman in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: "As a daughter she obeys her parents, as a wife she obeys her husband, as a widow she practices pious self-sacrifice" (11).



### **3.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE ANALYSIS**

*Emma* was written by Jane Austen and it was published in 1815, being her fourth novel. *Emma* is the story of a young and wealthy woman who lives in Highbury with her father Mr. Woodhouse. The novel takes place during the Georgian age in England, which was marked by the reign of George III. Furthermore, Jane Austen focuses all her novels on women's lives, and *Emma* is not the exception. In the novel Austen explores the lives of women within the society of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the question of marriage, which is central to the plot.

In *Emma* the author places the different characters in a contained setting, where the protagonist struggles with her emotions, morality and fate. Jane Austen was fond of describing the situation of women from an intelligent and audacious perspective. Novelists usually considered that entering a marriage with love and esteem towards each other was the only way of getting married or "as a reward to their heroines" (Bergen 195), and this is the perspective through which we need to analyze any novel written by Austen.

In the case of *Emma*, Austen presents a novel with a strong central character: Emma Woodhouse, and by opposition the equally strong but less privileged character of Jane Fairfax. The author in a masterful way describes two determined characters with great intelligence and moral values, which helps Austen to conduct her characters to their fates using their intelligence and not their emotions. This is the story of two heroines with different purposes and conditions in life but that their fates are pretty much the same.

In the analysis of *Emma*, I shall explain the situation of both characters as single women, and how Emma is able to choose whether to marry or not, whereas Jane does not have the luxury of choosing but to try to find a husband before taking a job as a governess.



### **3.2. ANALYSIS OF EMMA**

My project, as it has already been stated, analyses the different fates of the characters of Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax, being both completely opposed to each other.

In the first place, the novel presents the character of Emma, a twenty-year-old single woman who lives with her father, as her older sister Isabella is already married, so she cannot look after her father, except from the occasional visits she makes to Hartfield. The Woodhouse family belongs to the middle-upper class, they possess a wealthy economic stability; they constitute one of the richest families in town.

After Miss Taylor, who was Emma's governess, gets married and leaves the house, the one in charge of the house and Mr. Woodhouse is Emma herself. Emma Woodhouse, in a sense, replaces the role of her own mother, as she becomes the housekeeper of her house and she takes care of her father. Her sister Isabella, clearly represents the married women stereotype of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England by dedicating her life to her husband and her children. Emma, as an unmarried daughter, carries the duty of being obedient and showing love and respect to her father; whereas Isabella has her own family to take care of. Parents used to exercise certain power over their daughters, for instance, women could not marry without the acceptance of their parents and at the same time parents would not force their daughters into marriage. Nevertheless, parents had a narrow perspective when it came to the best for their daughters, so they acted as a kind of guidance for them. In the case of Mr. Woodhouse he has a wider perspective of marriage: "Matrimony, as the origin of change, was always disagreeable; and he was by no means yet reconciled to his own daughter's marrying, nor could ever speak of her but with compassion, though it had been entirely a match of affection, [...]" (3).

Mr. Woodhouse from a selfish state of mind, does think that matrimony is not something that should be a goal for women, especially those with everything accessible to them. Of course, we need to take into account that Emma and Isabella's father has this idea of marriage due to the fact that he is almost alone, except from Emma's company, and he feels the need of having his daughters and even Miss Taylor take care of him. Thus, the last thing Mr. Woodhouse wants is Emma getting married, even if it is with a wealthy and good husband. Correspondingly, is Emma herself the one who swears she would never marry, not to mention the fact that she possesses such a good education and wealth that allows her to decide the man she would marry, so it is difficult to believe that a woman as Emma does not conceive the idea of marriage for

herself, even her friend Harriet Smith also tells her: 'I do so wonder, Miss Woodhouse, that you should not be married, or going to be married - so charming as you are.' (67). Harriet in awe assures Emma that it is impossible that someone like her is not married or at least has men waiting to propose. Emma is a beautiful and well educated woman with a wide range of qualities that make her appealing to men:

'[...]With all dear Emma's little faults, she is an excellent creature. Where shall we see a better daughter, or a kinder sister, or a truer friend? No, no; she has qualities which may be trusted; she will never lead any one really wrong; she will make no lasting blunder; where Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred of times.' (29)

As stated in the introductory part, parents invested a great amount of money in their daughters' education, so they expected them to take advantage of it and search for a good husband, who could provide them an unquestionable economic stability. In the case of Emma Woodhouse, she was given a good education according to the canons and stereotypes of upper class women. Emma plays the piano, she knows how to sing and paints incredibly well, what probably was taught by her governess Miss Taylor. In fact, there is a possibility that Emma knows something about mathematics, as sometimes women's education included arithmetic so they could cope with certain aspects of management when they were in possession of any property.

Although this is true, Emma Woodhouse absolutely rejects the idea of marriage for herself, despite of being charming, wealthy and educated: "My being charming, Harriet, is not quite enough to induce me to marry; I must find other people charming - one other person at least. And I am not only not going to be married at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all.'" (67).

In this conversation between Emma and Harriet, we get to know better Emma's intentions in life. She is not willing to give up all her life for a husband, after all she lives in an enormous house with a comfortable life in which she is the one in charge of everything, so why would she should put an end to all these commodities:

'I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing; 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.' (67)

Emma is pretty conscious of her situation and position, so she has intelligently decided to stay with her father and in her house, realizing that she will not be in a better position than she is right now, being “Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds” (108).

In spite of having this conception of marriage, Emma loves arranging marriages, she likes to match people with agreeable partners, and she is continually praised by her arranged matrimonyes. Nevertheless, Emma is not totally aware of the social possibilities of the people she is trying to help, for instance, Harriet Smith, who belongs to the lower class, she cannot allow herself to marry any man from a higher position because as Mr. Knightley, who always pushes Emma towards reality, states: “[...] She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations. She is known only as a parlour boarder at a common school. She is not a sensible girl, nor a girl of any information.” (47).

Emma, on the other hand, is decided to make Harriet appealing to men from any social scale. By this token, it is clear that Emma is still a naïve girl, whose dreams and perception of the world do not coincide with the ugly truth. Unlike Emma, the character of Jane Fairfax is more down to earth in this sense, she knows her possibilities in life, and in the novel we learn how she struggles to find the right place for her in a society that rejects the idea of single women as a marital status.

Jane Fairfax’s character is presented in the novel as a twenty- one- year- old young, beautiful and reserved woman whose parents died when she was a child:

Jane Fairfax was an orphan, the only child of Mr Bates’ youngest daughter. [...] By birth she belonged to Highbury; and when, at three years old, on losing her mother she became the property, the charge, the consolation, the fondling of her grandmother and aunt, there had seemed every probability of her being permanently fixed there; of her being taught only what very limited means could command and growing up with no advantages of connection or improvement, to be engrafted on what nature had given her in a pleasing person, good understanding, and warm- hearted, well- meaning relations. (127-128)

The fact that Jane is an orphan complicates her situation even more, because she has no one to protect her from rejection or society itself. Nevertheless, this situation marks one of the difference between Jane Fairfax and Emma Woodhouse. In the event that Jane is an unmarried and orphaned woman, she does not have any duties towards any men, nor her parents or her possible husband, but Emma occupies the role of a daughter, and as a daughter she has certain responsibilities that Jane lacks of, as Elizabeth Bergen assures: “An unmarried woman or

widow of independent means certainly had for greater opportunities to determine her own course of life than a daughter who owed obedience to her father, or a wife who was subject to her husband.” (198)

One of the most important role of a woman is that of a daughter. Daughters had diverse duties towards their parents, which include to show them love and obedience, as we have already highlighted. Nevertheless, once a daughter was married her duties were transferred to her husband and their future children. In the case of Emma, she still has a responsibility towards her father, whereas Jane does not have any male relative to take care of, so Jane is, in this sense, free from any restriction when taking a decision in her life. Patriarchy played an important role in the society of this age, in which women were subordinated to their fathers and later to their husbands.

For single women, their most important familiar ties were above the female figures. In the case of Jane Fairfax, the lack of parents and siblings, makes her find refuge in the Campbells, who were friends of her parents, and treat her as a relative:

She had fallen into good hands, known nothing but kindness from the Campbells, and been given an excellent education. Living constantly with right- minded and well- informed people, her heart and understanding had received every advantage of discipline and culture; and Colonel Campbell’s residence being in London, every lighter talent had been done full justice to, by the attendance of first- rate masters. (128)

Luckily, Jane was able to receive a good education and was raised up in a well- off family that helped her to “fit” in London society. Furthermore, Jane also has her aunt Miss Bates, who is also a spinster, and her grandmother Mrs. Bates, both of them help Jane whenever she visits Highbury. For single women, their aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins were the most important relatives, and many often spinsters took care of them, mainly because of the lack of a husband and children. Emma, for instance, if she does not marry, she will probably be the maiden aunt of her sister’s children, once her father dies. In the case of Jane Fairfax it is more complicated, as she does not have any sister or brother and the family she has left has no kids, so in order to survive she “had yet her bread to earn” (129), most likely as a governess.

Single women did not fit in the canons of the age, women without a man to love, protect and care. A woman without a man, children or family to take care of was just a nuisance in society, she did not offer any service at all. Notwithstanding, if spinsters occupied a high position within society, they were treated differently than other women who did not have a prosperous financial position. On the one hand, Emma possesses a privileged position in society, being the legal

heiress of Hartfield and having a good education gives her the opportunity of living a life that fits in society. Nevertheless, Jane, on the other hand, lacks the possibilities given to Emma, thus she wants to find a husband that helps her to survive, otherwise she has to become a governess.

Emma from the very beginning experiences rejection towards Jane Fairfax: “Emma was sorry to have to pay civilities to a person she did not like through three long months- to be always doing more than she wished, and less than she ought! Why she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer [...]” (130).

She is jealous of Jane, but why? A possible answer could be that even though Emma has a good position in society, a great education and a loving family, she sees in Jane qualities that Emma does not possess, as Mr. Knightley, her long and beloved friend intelligently remarks:

[...] Mr. Knightley had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman which she wanted to be thought herself; and though the accusation had been eagerly refuted at the time, there were moments of self-examination in which her conscience could not quite acquit her.

Emma is even jealous when Jane Fairfax captures everyone’s attention when she starts singing and playing piano in front of everybody: “ [...] Emma would then resign her place to Miss Fairfax, whose performance, both vocal and instrumental, she never could attempt to conceal from herself, was infinitely superior to her own.” (180).

The main reason why Emma is jealous of Fairfax is, above all, her achievements in life and the fact that everyone praises her for the efforts she has made to survive on her own. Jane Fairfax leads a difficult life despite of her efforts to find a way to avoid dismissal and to survive by her own means. On the contrary, Emma has not achieved anything in life but to be a good and educated daughter, whose life has been easy and without any difficulty. Nevertheless, Emma’s perception of Jane dramatically changes when she knows more about Jane’s past and fate:

When she took in her history, indeed, her situation, as well as her beauty; when she considered what all this elegance was destined to, what she was going to sink from, how she was going to live, it seemed impossible to feel anything but compassion and respect; especially, if to every well-known particular, entitling her to interest, were added the highly probable circumstance of an attachment to Mr. Dixon, which she had naturally started to herself. (131)

Emma realizes that Miss Fairfax is an orphan, and the only relatives she has left are her aunt, her grandmother and the Campbells. From this point onwards, Emma adopts a better attitude

and stops being selfish and self-centered, and starts to worry about Jane, while she realizes that she is a lucky woman who does not need to worry about her survival.

Jane Fairfax's fate depends on whether she finds a husband or gets an employment. Considering the employments available in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for middle class single women, the only one available to Jane, as she certainly has a good education, which does not allow her to be just a servant, is the one of a governess, and it is the only job that Jane is contemplating: “Governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view; widely different, certainly, as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies.” (241).

She knows that being a governess is not such an ideal job, but she is willing to accept it as she was educated with the purpose of helping others “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” (128). Jane, unlike Emma, does not possess economic independence, and the only bequest she received from her father is not enough for her to be emancipated. Jane is aware of the social rejection that becoming a governess entails, and now it is the time when she has to sacrifice herself in order to survive:

[...] she had now reached the age which her own judgement had fixed on for beginning. She had long resolved that one-and twenty should be the period. With the fortitude of a devoted novice, she had resolved at one- and twenty to complete the sacrifice, and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever. (129)

Governesses in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were not socially accepted, as they were spinsters who took care of someone's children and not their own, but for many women, becoming a governess of a wealthy and well-off family was the only way to honourably earn a living, even though it was highly criticized and it was socially challenging because society was harsh on those women because middle class women were not supposed to work at all. Governesses were not inferior as the servants but not superior as the family they were working for, as Elizabeth Bergen points out: “The financial problems of spinsters were directly related to the few opportunities for remunerative employment open to women, while social and psychological problems undoubtedly followed from the nature of these opportunities.” (209).

Spinsters had a very few possibilities of getting a decent employment that was well paid. Jane Fairfax knows that this employment will give her a roof above her head and a certain economic stability. Nevertheless, Jane has another available option: marriage; and even though matrimony is not her first choice, she contemplates the decision of getting married.

Emma, on the other hand, is a woman that belongs to the upper class, and as such she is not prepared to work, because her education did not prepare her to carry any hard work. It is important to realize that although Emma will inherit her father's bequest, she is undoubtedly dependent from it, making work unnecessary:

'Dear me! But what shall you do? How shall you employ yourself when you grow old?'

'If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources; and I do not perceive why I should be more in want of employment at forty or fifty than one-and-twenty. Woman's usual occupations of eye, and hand, and mind, will be as open to me then as they are now, or with no important variation. If I draw less, I shall read more; if I give up music, I shall take to carpet-work. And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, which is, in truth, the great point of inferiority, the want of which is really the great evil to be avoided in *not* marrying, I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much to care about. There will be enough for them in all probability, to supply every sort of sensation that declining life can need. There will be enough for every hope and every fear; and though attachment to none can equal that of a parent, it suits my ideas of comfort better than what is warmer and blinder. My nephews and nieces: I shall often have a niece with me.' (68)

In this fragment, Emma makes clear the fact that she is rich and independent, so she does not need any occupation rather than reading, painting, dancing, playing piano, and taking care of her sister's children, as Froide points out: "Single women were encouraged to help other children and families if they did not have ones of their own" (66). Moreover, "[...] the bonds between maiden aunts and their nieces were amongst some of their strongest (bonds) in their lives" (Froide 66).

The assumption that single women were single because they had no other option but to remain as spinsters due to the lack of a good husband, and not because they decided so, is completely wrong, as we have stated before. Emma is absolutely convinced that she is never going to marry, but not as a consequence of certain actions that lead to that decision, on the contrary, from the very beginning she chooses a life of singleness. Women could actually choose whether to marry or not: "The existence of choice, not merely of marriage partner but of whether or not marry at all, represents a significant acknowledge that women's lives were not inevitably defined by marriage" (Peter 326), even if the common thought is to accept matrimony as the only way to survive, as Emma herself states: "'It is always incomprehensible to a man, that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her.'" (47)

Emma in her choice of not marrying she is exposing herself as a determined and intelligent woman. Emma could be seen more as a spinster more than Jane, because of the simple fact that Emma is completely closed to any marriage proposal, while Jane is still opened to the possibility of getting married. Unlike Jane Fairfax, Emma has already decided that she will never take any man as her husband, which directly includes her in the concept of spinster:

‘But still, you will be an old maid – and that’s so dreadful!’

‘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 is 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 not contracted her mind; I really believe, if she had only a shilling the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it; and nobody is afraid of her – that is a great charm.’ (68)

Emma is not afraid of being treated as an old maid as she is economically independent, she is a good woman and there is nothing society can reject about her. Emma, indeed, makes a great point when she highlights the fact that old maids with a huge income are more respectable and agreeable to society, but an old maid, who does not possess any wealth or good qualities, will most likely be dismissed by everyone.

Emma has made up her mind, and she is really convinced that there is nothing that would change her opinion on getting married, indeed she finds singleness quite appealing, as she tells Harriet: ‘But between us, I am convinced there never can be any likeness, except in being unmarried.’ (67). Emma indeed loves her singleness life, and she does not consider the option of changing it by any chance. Although this may be true, there is an element that Emma did not consider before: love. The idea of falling in love was not in Emma’s mind, she was so committed to her purpose of staying single, that what she did not take into account was that she could meet a man that would fulfil her needs and expectations in life, and would make up her mind about her singleness.

Frank Churchill, a young, handsome and rich man comes into town after his father Mr. Weston marries Emma's governess Miss Taylor. Before Emma's eyes he is the perfect match for her, he has everything she would have ever wanted:

He was presented to her, and she did not think too much had been said in his praise. He was a *very* good- looking young man- height, air, address, all were unexceptionable, and his countenance had a great deal of the spirit and liveliness of his father's- he looked quick and sensible. She felt immediately that she should like him; and there was a well- bred ease of manner, and a readiness to talk, which convinced her that he came intending to be acquainted with her, and that acquainted they soon must be. (151)

All things considered, Churchill seems to be the adequate man for a woman as Emma, so she instantly thinks that "she should like him", without realizing that she barely knows Frank, apart from the information that his father and Miss Taylor have provided. Regardless of her scant sense of prudence, she decides that Churchill would perfectly play the role of a husband.

Now it so happened, that, in spite of Emma's resolution of never marrying, there was something in the name, in the idea, of Mr Frank Churchill, which always interested her. She had frequently thought – especially since his father's marriage with Miss Taylor- that if she were to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition. He seemed by this connection between the families, quite belong to her. (95)

This excerpt of the novel shows how Emma is predisposed to marry Frank Churchill by claiming that Churchill does belong to her because of their familial relations, and she is even convinced that Frank feels the same about her, that the feeling is reciprocated. To make matters worse, Emma is sure that she is in love with him, except that "her ideas only varied as to the how much", she also believes that she should not fall completely in love with him as it would be a terrible mistake: "I certainly will not persuade myself to feel more than I do. I am quite enough in love. I should be sorry to be more" (211). It is obvious that Emma does not know what true love is. Furthermore, she also addresses the fact that before meeting Frank, she was completely opposed to the idea of marriage, and suddenly now she is willing to get married:

When she became sensible of this, it struck her that she could not be very much in love; for, in spite of her previous and fixed determination never to quit her father, never to marry, a strong attachment certainly must produce more of a struggle than she could foresee in her own feelings. (210)

Emma's change of mind reveals the power of choice she possesses. Nonetheless, Jane Fairfax does not remotely have the advantages of Emma, so in a way she envies Emma's life, as she has the choice of marrying a man she loves, whereas Jane, in the case of getting married, it is most likely that she would have to marry a man that she probably does not love, but gives her an economic stability, which is her main aim. Luckily for Jane, she falls in love with Frank Churchill and their engagement takes everybody by surprise, saving Jane from becoming a governess. Notwithstanding, we need to consider the possible life of Jane as a governess in the Smallridge family. Firstly, she would have to bid farewell to her social life, as she would have been dedicated entirely to her "new family" and her responsibilities towards it. Moreover, being a governess is not such a well-paid job, as Jane would have annually earned between twenty to forty pounds. For Jane Fairfax, becoming a governess would have supposed an inferior position within the social scale. Fortunately, Frank Churchill saved Jane from this terrible fate and gave her an opportunity in life not only of being happy, but also an economic safety net.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Finally, after the analysis of the situation of single women and how it is reflected in the characters of the novel, I shall summarize in depth the project itself and I shall reiterate the main points that have been made in every part of the project.

First of all, an important point to remember is, as we have seen in the first part of my project, that in many different ways, widows, unmarried women, spinsters... women, in general, had a tough time during this age; they were suppressed to the desires, wishes and duties of other people who were superior to them, being “them” all men. Women had just one main objective in life as they had to “[...] fulfil what was seen by many as their most important mission: to propagate the species” (Hill 229). Nevertheless, many women decided to stay single because for them it was the best choice and they could afford singleness, mainly due to their economic stability. In the case of unlucky single women who did not have economic independence, they had to find a job according to their social status or find a husband who could economically maintain them.

The main aim of the project was to try to portray single women as real survivors of a generation that despised them because of their marital status. As it has been stated in the theoretical part, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century middle- class single women were clearly having a tough time in finding a place to fit in, especially for those who were not economically independent. Middle- class women were not supposed to work because their social position, so consequently single women, who had no other option rather than work, were denigrated by her own social class. This would have been the case of Jane Fairfax, as she had no other choice but to become a governess, due to the fact that she could not find any husband. Luckily for Jane, she was able to find a man who is socially and economically well established, giving Jane the opportunity of living a good life.

Emma Woodhouse, as we have seen in the analysis of the novel, rejected marriage since a young age, but as soon as she found out that she is deeply in love with Mr. Knightley she made up her mind, and decided that maybe she was destined to get married. Of course, we have to take into account the power of decision that Emma had, as she could afford a life without the necessity of getting married. Emma, on the one hand, did not want to find a husband, whereas Jane was desperate to find one. Jane Austen saves the fates of her two female characters by getting both of them married.

Jane Austen in *Emma* idealize a situation that in reality would have been played in a completely different way. In the case of Jane Fairfax, she would have started working as a governess and the option of marriage would not have ever appeared, at least not from a wealthy man like Frank Churchill. Perhaps, the author was depicting an idealized world and community in which the characters had a chance of changing their fates.

The author is able to perfectly capture in the novel the difficulties of single women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century taking into account their position and condition in society. It is interesting how at the end of the novel, Austen gives her characters a happy ending, marrying Emma and Jane with well- positioned, young and kind men: Mr. Knightley and Frank Churchill, respectively.

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