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NEITHER HANDSOME, CLEVER NOR RICH: ANALYSIS OF MISS BATES AS A MAIN
CHARACTER IN JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA*

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ABSTRACT

In Jane Austen's novels we can find varied characters, although all described with realism and coherence, according to the sociohistorical context of this author. Through these characters, Austen offers us a faithful reflection of the society of her time and highlights some of the social injustices that limited the lives of women of that period.

This article offers a detailed analysis of Miss Bates, from the novel *Emma*, with which it is intended to demonstrate that this character, apparently secondary and ridiculed, is of great relevance for the development of the plot, and is also the resource that Austen uses to show the socioeconomic predetermination of her time. Before carrying out this analysis, first we will offer a section on the role of the spinsters in the works of Austen and in her historical context, and later, another section dedicated to the definition and characteristics of the flat characters. This theoretical framework will allow us to appreciate in more detail the historical realism with which Austen describes the character of Miss Bates and the relevance of that character for the development of the plot.

Key Words: Literary analysis, character analysis, flat character, women's studies, social criticism

1. Introduction

One of the characteristics of Jane Austen's works is the realism with which this author designs her characters, regardless of the relevance they have in the story. The behaviour of each of the characters is justified by the information we know about them and is consistent with the personality and the circumstances that have been assigned to them. Austen's stories are framed within her sociohistorical context and, for this reason, although this author does not lavish herself on descriptions or openly express her opinions on social issues, she offers a faithful portrait of the society of her time through her characters. In this way, Austen is able to highlight some of the social injustices of her historical context without the need to make an explicit criticism.

The main theme of *Emma*, is the process of evolution of its protagonist, her education. For that reason, Emma has been cataloged as a *bildungsroman* by some critics. (Kohn 1995). When talking about this process, it is usual to define as its critical point the scene of Box Hill, which is told in chapter 7 of the third volume of the novel, and that has Emma, Mr. Knightly and Miss Bates as protagonists. However, in most

approaches to this scene, the focus is mainly on the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley, and on the subsequent reaction of Emma, giving Miss Bates a merely circumstantial or, at least, secondary .

In this article we will demonstrate that the figure of Miss Bates is of great relevance in the development of Emma's plot, and not only because of her role in the scene that we have just commented, but as a constant reference throughout all the work and as necessary means to reflect the socioeconomic predetermination to which women were subjected during Jane Austen's time.

With this purpose, we will analyze the character of Miss Bates, in an isolated way in the first place, taking into account both the treatment given by the narrator, her presence throughout the work and the relevance of her figure within the plot; and, later, in her relationship with Emma, deepening the contrast that Austen creates between both characters.

Before conducting this analysis, we will offer some information about the figure of the spinsters in Austen's novels and in her social context. Later, we will dedicate a section to the definition and features of flat characters, and the way Austen uses this type of characters in her novels. This theoretical framework will allow us to appreciate in more detail the realism with which Austen represents Miss Bates, the features of this type of character and her relevance in the plot.

2. The spinsters in Jane Austen's novels and society

The social situation of women in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was one of great dependence and vulnerability. In the case of ladies of middle or high social class, marriage was often their only means of maintaining their social status or even improving it. Since it was not proper for a lady to work, her resources could only come either from assigned income or, in the case of married women, from their husband's assets. For women of low social class, marriage could also imply a certain economic stability and a improvement in their social positioning.

Women's role in society, during these centuries, was marked by their status as wives and mothers so, according to Halperin (1984), being considered a spinster was comparable to being considered a failure, and this social pressure was added to the other reasons that pushed many women into marriage, not so much for sentimental reasons, as "for a home and independence and companionship and children, and to avoid diminishing consequence and financial and social dependence on others" (54). Although there were no legal impediments for a single woman to be the owner and administrator of various goods, social customs, according to Hill (2005), implied a high prejudice against those who worked, relegating them to social ostracism: "single women of the middle class were not merely deprived of their ability to work, but of any recognized usefulness in society "(229)

The spinster, as a literary element, has been present in English literature since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and reached a greater height in the period between wars in the twentieth century (Mezei 2007).

Her narrative function, in representing the dialectic between seeing and being seen, omniscience and invisibility, often mirrors the ambiguous and hidden role of the author/narrator in relation to his/her characters. By focalizing through the spinster, the narrator/author thus affords her a measure of power and control. Even her effacement, silences, and apparent invisibility are effective narrative strategies for control over others and events. (104)

The characteristics attributed to this type of characters make them unnoticed witnesses of very diverse events. For this reason, although it is often the object of criticism, ridicule or commiseration, the role of the old maid is a very useful resource for the author, who can delegate part of her narrative function in this character.

Jane Austen began to write *Emma* shortly before her thirtieth birthday. Her father had passed away years ago and she lived with her mother, her sister and Martha Lloyd, a friend of the family, in a house owned by her brother Edward in Chawton. In spite of the financial aid that the Austen brothers dispensed to these

ladies, their situation was modest and exempt of luxuries. Although they never came to need and always had the help of a maid, we can state that Austen experienced personally some of the limitations of the impoverished gentlewoman, who appear in *Emma*, not only in terms of their efforts to save and manage with their limited means, but also for the loss of social status and small humiliations when excluded from certain social circles (Mezei 1988).

"In *Emma* Austen portrays the economic and social conditions of a surprisingly large number of female characters, describing in the first eight chapters the lives of fourteen women, mostly of the 'middling ranks' of society" (Fawkes 414). Of all these cases, the most relevant in the novel is that of Mrs. and Miss Bates, widow and daughter of the deceased parish priest of the town, who live in a situation of great economic hardship, alleviated in part by the generosity of some of the families of Highbury gentry.

As will be explained later, Miss Bates is a main character in the novel. Her situation contrasts directly with Emma's, who in a conversation with her friend Harriet Smith confesses her intention to remain single. Thus, Austen highlights the difference between low-income and upper-class single women, although the latter were also affected to a certain extent by their situation (Neubauer 2015).

3. Flat characters

In his study *Aspects of a novel*, Foster divides characters into flat and round and defines flat characters by saying that they are constructed to a single idea or quality, and supports this idea with some examples:

The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as "I never will deser Mr. Micawber." There is Mrs. Micawber –she says she won't desert Mr. Micawber, she doesn't, and there she is. Or: "I must conceal, even by subterfuges, the poverty of my master's house." There is Caleb Balderstone in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. He does not use the actual phrase, but it completely describes him; he has no existence outside it. (104)

According to Foster, the test to a round character is whether if it is able to surprise the reader in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat; and if it is not convincing, it is flat although it pretends to be round.

An advantage of flat characters is that they are easily recognizable by readers and are a useful resource for the author, since they are not expected to evolve and provide their own setting through their clearly defined features. The second advantage that Foster of this type of characters, according to Foster, is that they are easy to remember because they are simple and static. Flat characters remain invariable throughout the work and this quality provides continuity and consistency even if the plot has lost intensity.

In his book *The Structure of a Novel*, Muir reviews some of the statements in Foster's work that he considers incorrect. This is not the place to analyze this controversy, so we will limit ourselves to expose some of Muir's proposals about flat characters.

What can the writer do with them? What will the function of his plot be? Obviously not to trace their development, for being flat they cannot develop, but to set them in new situations, to change their relations to one another, and in all of these to make them behave typically. The task of the character novelist is more like the choreographer's than the dramatist's; he has to keep his figures moving rather than acting; and for the most part he has them masked. (26)

Due to its invariability, the flat characters provide us with a constant reference within the evolution of the plot and the characters. The contrast of the flat characters with the others, especially with the central ones, will bring us different points of view throughout the work, depending on the evolution of the round characters.

Muir validates Foster's claim that flat characters can be explained in a single sentence, but adds a new question. How is it possible that flat characters can cause effects that are not mechanical and offer a vision of the human being that is not superficial? Muir answers this question by stating that flat characters have two sides. A side visible to the readers, which is the one that is reflected in the work, and another hidden, that only

the author knows. Therefore, although flat characters do not evolve throughout the plot, their way of acting must be consistent with the personality and circumstances that the author has conferred them. For this reason, in their apparent simplicity, these characters can cause effects that go beyond what is obviously foreseeable, although without surprising convincingly since, in that case, they would be round characters.

In the essay we cited earlier, Foster defines Austen's style by saying that she is a miniaturist, but never two-dimensional. Her characters, even the seemingly flat, are complex or capable of being complex. "Even Miss Bates has a mind, even Elizabeth Eliot a heart, and Lady Bertram's moral fervour ceases to vex us when we realize this: the disk has suddenly extended and become a little globe" (113-4). And, a little further on, comparing the characters in Austen's works with Dickens', Foster states: "her characters though smaller than his are more highly organized. They function all round, and even if her plot made greater demands than it does, they would still be adequate." (114). Although some characters of Austen's works have the features of flat characters, the author has designed them so that they can acquire a momentary roundness, if the work requires it and, according to Foster, they have enough consistency to be able to fulfill a role more complicated if the work demanded it.

Clay (2001) also analyzes the flat characters of the works of Dickens and Austen, and assigns them different roles. While in Dickens's "flat characters replace his indifferent main plot with a fascinating side show", in Austen's, "they propel the main plot, moving her hero and heroine's relationship in, then out of difficulties." (280). According to Clay, therefore, Dickens' flat characters provide additional stories, which are added to the main, conferring greater interest and variety. However, in Austen's novels, the function of these characters is to contribute to the development of the main plot and, in particular, to the culmination of the central theme of the plot.

4. Miss Bates

In this section we will make a first approach to the character of Miss Bates, which we will complete in the next, making a contrast between Miss Bates and Emma Woodhouse.

When making a first reading of *Emma*, it is likely that many readers get the impression that Miss Bates is a secondary character, flat, similar to other ridiculous characters in Austen's novels. With her constant and incessant verbiage, Miss Bates is presented by the author as a woman who is difficult to pay attention to: "a pretty long speech from Miss Bates, which few persons listened to." (307). Throughout the novel, there are several Miss Bates' interventions, in which Austen reflects the way of speaking of people suffering from verbal incontinence, whose monologues are tedious and virtually absent of content.

In each of Austen's six major novels, we find some female character ridiculed by the author. Mrs. Jennings (*Sense and Sensibility*), Mrs. Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*), Mrs. Norris (*Mansfield Park*), Mrs. Allen (*Northanger Abbey*) and Maria Elliot (*Persuasion*), are some examples of these women caricatured by Austen. However, we can detect some differences between Miss Bates and the other women both in their circumstances and in the treatment that the author gives her.

Although Miss Bates is one of Austen's comic character because of her loquaciousness and tendency to constantly jump from thought to thought in rapid succession, she is treated with a higher degree of sympathy than Austen usually reserves for her comic characters. (Neubauer 136)

One reason that may explain the greater sympathy with which Austen treats Miss Bates is the fact that she is a single and poor woman, while the other women are married -or are widows like Mrs. Norris-, and enjoy an advantageous, or at least comfortable, social position. Miss Bates, therefore, is in a situation of vulnerability that the other ladies do not suffer, and this circumstance awakens the narrator's compassion and affects her way of presenting her to the reader. In addition, at all times, both the narrator and the characters of *Emma*, refer to Miss Bates as a kind and grateful woman, estimated by her neighbours. Her only fault is that she talks too much.

In her essay "The Letters", collected within the *Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, Flynn states that Miss Bates is one of the most important minor characters of Austen's novels. Both in this section and in the following, we will provide some explanations that will support this statement.

The narrator of the Austen novels introduces the characters in their first appearance during the story. When it comes to important characters, that first introduction is followed by other partial presentations in different moments of the narration. It is not usual for the narrator to provide information about a character prior to its participation in the plot. In *Emma*, this only happens in two occasions. One of these exceptions is Frank Churchill, whose visit to Highbury is desired not only by his father, but also by Mr. Weston's friends. The various references to Frank Churchill prior to his appearance provokes expectation in the readers and contribute a greater relevance to the character. The second case in which some characters are presented before their appearance in the novel is that of the Bateses. Mrs. and Miss Bates are mentioned for the first time in chapter two and their names appear repeatedly throughout the first volume. However, the first time they are shown is at the beginning of the second volume, that is, seventeen chapters after their first mention.

The first volume of the novel revolves around Emma's plan to achieve the engagement between Harriet and Mr. Elton. The eighteen chapters that make up this volume are, therefore, an introduction to the plot, in which the story focuses on a limited number of characters. With the second volume begins the main node, in which Frank Churchill will play an important role. This second volume begins with a visit from Emma and Harriet to the Bateses, which the narrator introduces with a new description of the situation of these women and some reflections on Emma's attitude towards them.

From this moment, the presence of Miss Bates is a constant in the novel; it is shown or spoken of practically in all the chapters of volumes two and three of the work. In fact, her name appears more than two hundred times in the thirty-seven chapters that make up these volumes.

In the first volume of the novel, Hartfield, home of the Woodhouses, is the center of the story. However, from the second volume on, the plot is decentralized and the home of the Bateses acquires great relevance, both for the scenes that are framed in that scenario, and for the times in which reference is made to it.

To conclude this section, we will add a final idea about the character of Miss Bates. As has been said before, the most characteristic feature of Miss Bates is her loquacity. Her interventions are usually extensive and, for this reason, sometimes she plays a role as a second narrator. As it was said in point 2, the features of the character of the spinster facilitate that the author grants them a function of control or power over the rest of the characters. In this case, this central function is manifested in the fact that the home of the Bateses is one of the nerve centers of Highbury, where many of their neighbours spend a visit or take a gift. Through these conversations, Miss Bates receives a large amount of information, which she later communicates in her long interventions, supplying in part the role of the narrator.

5. Miss Bates and Emma Woodhouse

In the previous section, the importance of the character of Miss Bates in the novel *Emma* has been briefly explained, taking into account the narrator's treatment, her presence throughout the work and the relevance of her figure within the plot. In this section, we will offer a contrast of the characters of Miss Bates and Emma Woodhouse that will highlight the central role of Miss Bates in this novel.

Emma Woodhouse is undoubtedly the protagonist of the book that bears her name, and that begins 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. (1)

Handsome, clever and rich. These are the three words with which the narrator defines Emma, adding later a more detailed explanation about her character and circumstances. This description contrasts directly with that of Miss Bates a few pages later.

(Miss Bates) enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married. Miss Bates stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favour; and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. (...) And yet she was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good-will. (16)

Neither young, handsome, rich ... and she had no intellectual superiority. As can be seen, the narrator contrasts the characteristics and circumstances of Emma to those of Miss Bates from the beginning of the story. Emma has all the qualities that Miss Bates lacks, beauty, intelligence and wealth. Her life is full of comforts and that explains her pleasurable existence. As the daughter of the late vicar "Miss Bates has her origins within the upper reaches of the Highbury system of ranks" (Monaghan 139), but after the death of her father, she and her mother find themselves in an adverse economic situation. Miss Bates lacks all the blessings that Emma enjoys, and yet the narrator says that she was a happy woman whom no one name without good-will.

Jane Austen usually establishes the main theme of her works in the first paragraphs of her novels. Conciseness and the use of the right word are some of the features of her literary style (Jordan 2017), and this is revealed specially in the opening pages of her novels, in which Austen is able to condense in a few lines the content that she will develop throughout the book. In the case of *Emma*, the opening paragraph shows us the protagonist's virtues and defects, and the circumstances that have led her to be as she is. This way, we can guess that the main theme of the novel is the evolution of heroine, her education and her growth as a person. By contrasting the character of Miss Bates to Emma, Austen reveals the importance of Miss Bates for the development of the plot. To better understand the heroine, we must deepen this seemingly secondary and ridiculous character.

Emma spends most of her time at home, taking care of her father, accompanied by her friend Harriet and receiving visits from Mr. Knightley and other friends and neighbours. Miss Bates, also spends most of her time in her home, taking care of her mother, accompanied by her niece Jane and also receiving visits from friends and neighbours. Thus, Austen represents both characters living in parallel but opposed universes. While Hartfield is the home of a noble family and has all kinds of luxuries, in the case of the Bateses:

The house belonged to people in business. Mrs. and Miss Bates occupied the drawing-room floor and there, in the very moderate-sized apartment, which was every thing to them, the visitors were most cordially and even gratefully welcomed. (135).

This contraposition of characters is also evident in the novel, when following a comment by Harriet, Emma compares her situation with that of Miss Bates.

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 any body else. (75).

From Emma's point of view, what makes the difference between Miss Bates' situation and hers is money. As she enjoys a high social position, Emma considers herself above Miss Bates and affirms that she will never find herself in a similar situation. However, according to Galperin (2013), Emma's critical attitude towards Miss Bates, shown at different times in the novel, arises precisely from the fear that money will not suffice to save her from a similar situation. From our point of view, which we will justify below, Emma's critical attitude towards Miss Bates stems from the personal dissatisfaction that Emma experiences when compared to her.

As has already been said, at the beginning of the novel it is affirmed that Emma's qualities are her beauty, intelligence and good economic position. That is, qualities that do not depend on her and that she has not done anything to deserve. A few paragraphs later, the narrator shows the negative points of Emma's character.

The real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. (1)

Accustomed to others giving in to her insistence, and receiving praise, Emma relies too much on her own judgment, ignores the advice of other people and acts according to her will, causing suffering to those around her. In addition, something later, the narrator informs us of another defect of Emma: inconstancy. However, when describing Miss Bates, after enumerating the circumstances against her: her lack of beauty, intelligence and economic resources, the narrator extends her qualities:

It was her own universal good-will and contented temper which worked such wonders. She loved every body, was interested in every body's happiness, quick sighted to every body's merits; thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother, and so many good neighbours and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing. The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to every body, and a mine of felicity to herself. (16).

This way, the contrast between these two characters is reinforced. Emma has natural qualities and good position. However, her character is deficient and her efforts to improve are unsuccessful. Miss Bates, on the other hand, has few natural qualities and an unfavourable economic position. But her attitude and personality replace these deficiencies, leading her to enjoy and appreciate small details and engage her neighbours' affection.

Emma's and Miss Bates' relationship with the rest of the characters of the novel and these character's opinion towards both ladies are other point of contrast that the narrator offers at different times.

Due to her position, her family circumstances and her qualities, Emma is accustomed to occupy a privileged place in social events and meetings, to act according to her opinion and to receive praise. At the same time, her high social position also leads her to a certain solitude, since Emma is only accessible to some people. Emma's superiority causes fascination in Harriet, respect in the Cole, distrust in Mrs. Elton and, in general, a certain distance. She is admired by the majority but estimated only by a few, by those who are part of her inner circle.

Miss Bates, however, is close and accessible to everyone. Even Emma, who, as we have said, maintains a critical and irritated attitude towards her, does not hesitate to affirm her virtues:

She is very much to the taste of every body, 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 away sixpence of it; and nobody is afraid of her: that is a great charm. (76).

Nobody is afraid of her. This sentence of Emma reflects that she is aware of some of her neighbours' distant attitude, who feel intimidated by her position. Miss Bates is a generous and grateful woman that people are inclined to help. Her good heart and her benevolent nature make her a resource for her neighbours when they need someone to approve their plans.

As a counsellor she was not wanted; but as an approver, (a much safer character,) she was truly welcome. Her approbation, at once general and minute, warm and incessant, could not but please. (227).

The grateful and kind personality of Miss Bates makes people feel safe and comfortable in her presence. For this reason, although she lacks great qualities, she has the affection and respect of her neighbours. In addition, her precarious situation earns her the compassion and understanding of all those who

know her, despite her verbal incontinence. Austen puts in Frank Churchill's mouth a sentence that sums up these last paragraphs: "She is a woman that one may, that one must laugh at; but that one would not wish to slight." (231). On the contrary, we could say that Emma is a lady that no one can laugh at, but that certain people (Mr. and Mrs. Elton) would want to hurt.

As we have seen, the narrator offers a clear contrast between Emma and Miss Bates, which highlights their shortcomings and qualities. Throughout the novel, we can also find a contrast between the attitude of different characters towards Miss Bates, which the narrator uses to show us certain aspects of the protagonists' personality. As stated above, Emma's attitude towards Miss Bates throughout most of the story is critical and, at times, cruel. Emma is aware that she should correct her attitude, both for personal and social reasons. Because she belongs to one of the most important families of Highbury, her obligation is to help those in need. However, this task is too difficult for her and she frequently fails to fulfill her obligations.

She knew she was considered by the very few who presumed ever to see imperfection in her, as rather negligent in that respect, and as not contributing what she ought to the stock of their scanty comforts. She had had many a hint from Mr. Knightley and some from her own heart, as to her deficiency--but none were equal to counteract the persuasion of its being very disagreeable. (135).

Mr. Knightley, however, is always willing to help the Bateses and his dealing with Miss Bates is always patient, attentive and polite. In different moments of the novel the narrator shows concrete examples of this generous and cordial attitude. Emma, although unable to imitate him, does not hesitate to praise the behaviour of Mr. Knightley. For example, when Mrs. Weston suggests that Mr. Knightley used his carriage to go to the Cole's party, with the sole intention of making offering it to the Bateses, Emma replies: "I know no man more likely than Mr. Knightley to do the sort of thing" (198). And, later, also in response to a suggestion from her former governess, Emma adds: "He has a great regard for the Bateses, you know, independent of Jane Fairfax-- and is always glad to shew them attention." (199).

Miss Bates is not only an instrument to contrast Emma's and Mr. Knightley's attitude, but also a point of conflict between them. In a previous quote it was said that Emma "had had many a hint from Mr. Knightley (...) as to her deficiency". (135). Mr. Knightley is the only person able to correct Emma for her wrong attitude. There are several interventions of this type that we find in the novel but, without a doubt, the most significant one takes place during the excursion to Box Hill, in which Emma cruelly ridicules Miss Bates. This scene, which has been discussed in a large number of studies on *Emma* (Sabor 2015), is a critical moment in the evolution of the heroine and, in addition to the conflict between Mr. Knightley and Emma, we can appreciate the contrast between Miss Bates and Emma, and also the contrast between the attitude towards Miss Bates of both protagonists.

To appreciate the contrast between Emma and Miss Bates, we will use the Emma's monologue after her first conversation with Mrs. Elton. In this conversation, Emma feels offended by the condescending attitude of her interlocutor, who instead of treating her with the deference she expected, places herself at the same social level or even something higher. When finishing that meeting, Emma exclaims: "'Insufferable woman!' was her immediate exclamation. 'Worse than I had supposed. Absolutely insufferable'" (247). However, during the mentioned excursion to Box Hill, Miss Bates, after receiving a much greater offense from Emma, blames herself for what happened: : "Ah!--well--to be sure. Yes, I see what she means, (turning to Mr. Knightley,) and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend." (332).

A few paragraphs later, the narrator shows a scene in which Emma and Mr. Knightley are alone and the gentleman vigorously reproaches the young woman's behaviour. In this scene, as we said, through the attitude of both towards Miss Bates, the narrator offers us a clear contrast of both characters and, at the same time, a point of conflict that will be definitive for the evolution of the plot.

Were she prosperous, I could allow much for the occasional prevalence of the ridiculous over the good. Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I

would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation-- but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! (336).

Through these words, Mr. Knightley not only reproaches Emma's attitude, but shows the contrast between her and Miss Bates. Miss Bates belongs to the same social class as Emma and should enjoy a position, not as privileged as Emma's, but comfortable. However, after her father's death, both Miss Bates and her mother were deprived of their comforts and, year after year, their situation has been complicated by lack of resources. Miss Bates' and Emma' situation could have been similar, however, the circumstances caused one to enjoy a privileged position while the other sank socially. For this reason, concludes Mr. Knightley, Emma should have a special compassion towards Miss Bates, since Emma should understand better than anyone the suffering of this woman, who lacks all that she enjoys.

Mr. Knightley's words make Emma face reality and recognize her cruel attitude: "The truth of this representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!" (337). This self-discovery marks a turning point in Emma's evolutionary process that, at last, is aware of her mistakes. Previously it was said that Emma considered herself superior to Miss Bates thanks to her economic situation. However, after Mr. Knightley's reprimand, Emma realizes that her social position and her economic situation are not enough to make her a good person. This discovery has as consequence a change in Emma's attitude who strives to repair her offense to Miss Bates and correct her behaviour towards her and towards other people. The contrast between her attitude and that of Miss Bates leads Emma to acknowledge her mistakes and for this reason Miss Bates' compliments, which remind her of her past mistakes, are painful.

"So very kind!" replied Miss Bates. "But you are always kind."

There was no bearing such an "always" (340).

During the following chapters, the narrator shows Emma's evolution, who ends the story recognizing her mistakes and judging herself without excuses. Emma's response to Mr. Knightley, when he is surprised to see his change of attitude regarding Harriet's commitment to Robert Martin, can serve as a summary of the evolution of Emma's character.

"You are materially changed since we talked on this subject before."

"I hope so--for at that time I was a fool." (425)

The process of evolution of Emma focuses on her character, since it is her main faulty aspect. At the beginning of the story, as we saw, the narrator said that Emma was beautiful, intelligent and rich, so that the growth of the character should focus on qualities that did not depend on nature or social position. In the case of Miss Bates, the opposite happens. As a character, she remains the same, as her personality does not vary, but it is foreseeable that her economic situation will improve after the marriage of her niece Jane with Frank Churchill.

6. Conclusions

In section 2 of this article, the figure of the spinster in Austen's novels and the social limitations to which unmarried women were subject during the author's time were discussed. Through the character of Miss Bates, Austen offers a realistic portrait of the situation of precariousness that some women of her time had to suffer, who depended completely on other people's assistance to survive. This situation was not unknown author who, like Miss Bates, was a cleric's daughter and saw her income decrease after her father's death, although she always had the financial help of her brothers.

As explained in section 3, it can be stated that Miss Bates is a flat character, since she does not evolve throughout the story and does not surprise readers convincingly. However, the fact that she can be classified as a flat character does not mean that she plays a secondary role. As it has been shown in the previous point,

Miss Bates' role is very relevant, since the author establishes a continuous contrast between her and the protagonist. Miss Bates is not only crucial for Emma's evolution because of Box Hill's episode, as has been affirmed in many studies, but, in fact, she is necessary to fully understand Emma's personality and situation and to comprehend the main theme of the plot.

Austen uses Miss Bates to show the socio-economic predetermination of her time and the superiority of personal values over innate qualities and social and economic position.

By contrasting Emma's story with Miss Bates's, Austen shows us to what extent socio-economic circumstances could limit a woman's existence. While Emma enjoys a privileged position and does not fear for her future, Miss Bates, who was also born into a family belonging to the gentry, depends on increasingly scarce resources and the compassion of her neighbours. Neither Emma nor Miss Bates has done anything to deserve their fate. However, while one enjoys luxuries and comforts, the other is doomed to increasing poverty, unable to do anything to prevent it.

Through Emma's contrast with Miss Bates, Austen also highlights the superiority of what we can change about that which is given to us. As was seen in the previous point, Emma's qualities at the beginning of the story are her beauty, her intelligence and her wealth. All of them received at the time of her birth without her intervention. However, in what she can intervene, that is, in her character and attitude, Emma has clear deficiencies. Miss Bates' case is almost the opposite, her innate qualities are scarce, but her character and attitude, although not perfect, earn her the affection and understanding of her neighbours. For this reason, throughout the book, the character which evolves is Emma's, who is the one who needs to change. And this evolution leads her to approach the character of Miss Bates, who has followed a uniform trajectory throughout the story.

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