

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## EMMA WOODHOUSE: HEROINE OR ANTIHEROINE?

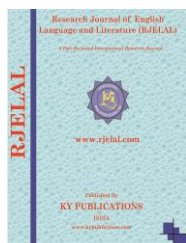
Miguel Ángel Jordán<sup>1</sup>, Sarah Rose Kearns<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Part-time Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies, Universidad de Valencia (Spain)

Vice President of Jane Austen Society in Spain

<sup>2</sup>Jane Austen Society in North America.

E-mail: [miguel.jordan@uv.es](mailto:miguel.jordan@uv.es)<sup>1</sup>; [sarahrosekearns@gmail.com](mailto:sarahrosekearns@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>



### ABSTRACT

The figure of the hero has been present in literature and popular folklore since their inception. Over the years, the role of the hero has evolved, leaving behind its semi-divine connotations to emphasize the characteristics that make them referential and inspiring beings. This evolution has also resulted in the appearance of a new category of characters, the antihero, in which great qualities coexist with imperfection. This category has followed its own evolution in various genres and, at present we not only can find examples of this type of characters in literature, but also in audiovisual products.

More than two hundred years ago, when Jane Austen wrote *Emma*, she chose as protagonist a character of great complexity, in which the negative characteristics stand out above the positive ones during a large part of the work. This has led to the questioning of whether the protagonist is a heroine or an antiheroine. In the present article, an analysis of the character of Emma Woodhouse is carried out in order to offer an answer to this question.

**Key Words:** Literary analysis, character development, regency novel, Jane Austen.

### 1. Introduction

"I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." (Austen-Leigh 148). This is how Jane Austen, according to her nephew's *Memoirs*, defined Emma Woodhouse. The figure of this protagonist has caused some controversy in the various studies that have been conducted on the novel *Emma* in the more than two hundred years since its publication. Although the affirmation of her creator has not been fulfilled completely, since there are many articles and reviews in which this protagonist is praised, Austen's doubts about the reception of this young lady among her readers and critics are understandable, due to the defects of Emma's personality and the negative consequences

that her actions cause in the characters that surround her.

The aim of this article is to perform an analysis of the protagonist of the novel *Emma*, with the intention of elucidating whether her characteristics correspond to those of a heroine or an antiheroine. In order to do this, first, we will take a brief tour of the evolution of these two categories in literature and popular culture to highlight some of the features of those characters. Later, we will offer some examples, extracted from Austen's works, of characters that can be grouped within these categories. Thus, we will have a referential framework that will allow us to more easily detect the characteristics of both the heroines and the antiheroines designed by this author. After this task,

we will give way to the analysis of the character of Emma Woodhouse, from the double perspective of the categories already mentioned, emphasizing the characteristics that could place her in each of them. Finally, we will highlight the most relevant points of the analysis and offer the conclusions to which it has led us.

Before giving way to the next section, we will clarify that, when referring to the categories of hero / heroine and antihero / antiheroine in sections 2 and 3, we will do it using the masculine gender in a universal sense, since this is the common pronoun in the texts that form a basis for our theoretical framework. In the rest of the sections, the feminine will be used, since it is the object of this work.

## **2. The concept of the hero in literature**

The figure of the hero has been present since the beginning of literature, although the features that define him and his main characteristics have evolved. In both mythology and classical folklore, the hero was represented as a semi-divine character, endowed with great courage and strength, prepared to take on tasks of enormous difficulty and favoured by the gods, although sometimes also in conflict with some of them (Miahela 2017). As a fruit of his semi-divine nature, the hero enjoys prestige, backed by his integrity, which makes him a prominent character of the epic (Ibáñez 2009). Although living among humans, the hero is not comparable to other mortals, but is above them and, at the same time, sets himself at their service, to carry out arduous tasks in favour of humanity.

Over the centuries, the figure of the hero has been losing its divine aura, but the characteristics that placed it above others and that made it a model to follow and imitate continue to be evident.

Conventional heroes were distinguished by exceptional features, which carry connotations of bravery, virtuousness, honour, strength, nobility of mind and action, the spirit of sacrifice, selfrestraint, maturity and civility. Nobleness, the key-term associated with the hero, was founded on

high moral principles of uprightness, righteousness, decency, beneficence, bravery, and honourableness. Due to such virtues, he comes to be regarded as a paragon or ideal, one that is highly admired, reverently feared, embodying the projection of a community's grand dreams or loyally serving them by setting grand ideals for himself to pursue. (Miahela 50).

There are many characteristics that lead the hero to stand in a place of reverence, but the nobility, in the sense of his moral rectitude and the firmness of his values, is what defines him most correctly. It is not just about someone with special gifts, he must also have solid principles that will allow him to use those exceptional traits well.

The evolution of the hero is closely linked to the evolution of society. The role of the hero adapts to the specific needs of the period in which he lives. Since we are talking about fictional characters, created by an author, or by the cultural tradition, we can affirm that the figure of the hero responds to an individual or collective psychological need. It is the embodiment of those features lacking, with greater or lesser intensity, in a specific place and time.

The figure of the hero is protean like the myth and has been adapted to the society and the spiritual needs that each era required because, according to the postulates of psychology, all the symbols coming from mythology, that is to say from the origin of the hero, are products of the psyche and therefore men are carriers of them. (Ibáñez 35)

While at first the heroes were called to fight against the gods to save humanity from their whims, or from the evil designs of some of them, over time, their role became that of an idol or a model, so that their way of saving humanity does not depend so much on the warlike exploits in which they participate as on their inspiring role.

### **3. The appearance of the antihero**

Over the centuries, the devaluation of the term coincides with the introduction of a new and opposite concept, that of the anti-hero. If not endowed with outstanding or exceptional qualities, the anti-hero still possesses good qualities that set an example, so he manages to win the readers' admiration and/or sympathy. (Culea 51)

The antihero has qualities different from those of the conventional hero, but, it is not an evil character and cannot be equated to the villain. His defects can be clumsiness, incompetence, lack of tact, lack of intelligence, etc. His role is not directly opposed to that of the hero, although it may come into conflict with him. Within this category, we can find different types, ranging from characters with moral flaws, such as lack of honesty or strength to overcome the vices, to those who have character flaws, whether inconsistency, indecision or frivolity.

In fiction, the unnerving rubric 'anti-hero' refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor sod, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause, the hero in the ashcan and the hero on the leash. (Hassan, 1995: 55)

Categories very broad, but all antiheroes have imperfection as a common point. In fact, since human nature is imperfect, representations of perfection in literature cannot be realistic, so the characters, including the heroes, must have defects to be credible. The eagerness to emulate reality had as a consequence the occasional elevation of antiheroes to the role of protagonists of works of fiction. Such is the case, for example, of Tom Jones, the protagonist who gives name to one of Fielding's novels. For this book, the author chose a character who, although he is a victim of his weaknesses again and again, does not stop having good intentions and noble aspirations.

What Tom manages successfully is to show that man is not perfect but improvable and

that qualities related to the heart, such as goodwill and kind-heartedness, compensate for the lack of other virtues without dramatically diminishing one's worthiness. (Culea 52)

In this way, Fielding analyses the personality of the human being, showing that goodness and badness have a place within his heart and that it is the perseverance in the search for good that differentiates some people from others. This work contrasts with the treatises on morality of its time and with those works in which, in an excessively serious tone, we find protagonists of irreproachable behaviour, far from reality.

To finish this section, a current definition of an antihero will be offered, which summarises different approaches to this type of character.

An antihero is a central character in a dramatic or narrative work who lacks the qualities of nobility and magnanimity expected of traditional heroes and heroines in romances and epics. Unheroic characters of this kind have been an important feature of the Western novel, which has subjected idealisticheroism

to parody since Cervantes's Don Quixote (1605). Flaubert's Emma Bovary (in Madame Bovary, 1857) and Joyce's Leopold Bloom (in Ulysses, 1922) are outstanding examples of this antiheroic ordinariness and inadequacy. (Baldick 16)

In the examples collected in this quote, the role of the antihero or antiheroine corresponds to the protagonist of those books, but it could also be represented by a main character of the story different from the protagonist. In Austen novels, both possibilities can be found, although, as it will be explained in the following part, Austen usually identifies the female protagonist as the heroine and confers antiheroic features to a different female main character.

### **4. The concept of antihero and antiheroine in Austen's novels**

The concept of an antihero is very broad, as seen in the previous section. For this reason, at this

point, an approach to the figure of the antihero and antiheroine in Jane Austen's novels will be offered, with the aim of establishing a clear and concrete definition of these types of characters, which will serve as a frame of reference for the analysis of the character of Emma Woodhouse.

As can be seen in *Plan of a Novel*, Austen conceives the roles of hero and antihero as different and confronted characters whose point of conflict is the heroine. The hero corresponds to the male protagonist and the antihero, in this particular case, resembles the villain, but, as explained below, this is not Austen's habitual procedure.

Heroine inconsolable for some time -- but afterwards crawls back towards her former Country -- having at least 20 narrow escapes from falling into the hands of the Anti-hero -- and at last in the very nick of time, turning a corner to avoid him, runs into the arms of the Hero himself

*Plan of a novel* is the ironic sketch of a story that Austen had no intention of writing. For this reason, in this example the difference between the antihero and the villain cannot be appreciated. However, in her novels, Austen creates complex characters that are not easy to define and have varied characteristics. The male character that competes with the hero to achieve the protagonist's affection cannot be described as a villain in any of Austen's works, since this would be a simplification that would eliminate many of the nuances of his personality. For this reason, it is more appropriate for the concept of "antihero" to be broader and less negative. Lauber (1972) discusses these concepts in his article about heroes and antiheroes in Austen's novels.

The word "villain" itself is misleading when applied to her novels and should be avoided because of its melodramatic connotations and the simplistic morality which it suggests. It is a serious error to say, for example, that "Henry Crawford is meant to be a villain." Henry Crawford is not a villain and the author never calls him one; he is considerably more interesting and complex than the word "villain" allows for.

It therefore seems preferable to use Jane Austen's own term, "anti-hero", which accurately describes the role of such characters without implying a heavy moralism that does not exist in the novels themselves and without reducing them to a single stereotype. Willoughby and Wickham, Henry Crawford and Frank Churchill, may have traits in common, but they are no more to be confused with each other than are the heroes of their respective novels. (Lauber 490)

One of the common traits of Austen's antiheroes is their lack of moral principles. Although they are handsome men with good manners and pleasant conversation, (with the exception of John Thorpe, who is portrayed as unattractive) their lack of moral rectitude is revealed at some point in the story, which decisively sets them apart from the heroine.

Analogously, the antiheroines of Austen's novels could be defined both by their characteristics and by their relationship with the heroine.

In the majority of Austen's novels, the anti-heroine is in direct competition with the heroine for the heart of the hero, but this does not necessarily make the anti-heroine morally reprehensible or "bad". (Meng 14)

Similar to antiheroes, antiheroines are physically attractive ladies, endowed with positive qualities. But, just as with antiheroes, these ladies have some moral shortcomings that differentiate them from the heroines and prevent them from obtaining the love of the hero as a reward for their merits.

The role of the antiheroine, therefore, is usually different from that of the protagonist in Austen's novels. However, there is one exception: *Lady Susan*. In this novel, which was not published until 1871, more than fifty years after the death of the author, the protagonist has the characteristics of an antiheroine - that is, she is an attractive character, with great qualities, but lacks the moral principles of a heroine. This ambivalence to the concept of "antiheroine" in Austen's novels allows

us to pose the question of whether, in designing the character of Emma Woodhouse, Austen assigned her the role of heroine or antiheroine.

### **5. Heroines and antiheroines in Jane Austen's novels**

After this brief theoretical framework, and before making our analysis of the character of Emma Woodhouse in light of both stereotypes, we will offer examples of heroines and antiheroines present in Austen's novels, in order to establish references that will allow us to assess more accurately the characteristics of this protagonist.

In order to not dwell too much on this subject, when speaking of the heroines, we will limit ourselves to commenting on aspects of three of them: Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*), Elinor Dashwood (*Sense and Sensibility*) and Anne Elliot (*Persuasion*). It is not the object of this study to delve into these characters, so we will only highlight some of their characteristics that make them deserve the title of heroines in the classic sense of the expression.

Elizabeth Bennet is a young woman of strong and decisive character, who does not stop before obstacles and does not feel intimidated by those who surpass her in titles and economic position. She has an agile and alert intelligence, cultivated by frequent reading, and usually acts with common sense and good humor. She is a woman of firm principles and straight morals, knows how to behave with elegance and feels a strong affection for her older sister. Although at times she is a victim of her prejudices, especially during the first part of the novel, she is able to rectify when she realizes her error.

The most outstanding feature of Elinor Dashwood is her self-control. This feature is even more evident due to the contrast between her attitude and that of her sister, Marianne. Elinor is an intelligent and observant young woman, with an exquisite education and an admirable sense of duty. She is able to forget her wishes and inclinations to look for what is best for her family, and even relegates her suffering to the background to comfort Marianne's sorrows.

Finally, we will stop a few moments on the character of Anne Elliot. Although her family circumstances are not the most propitious for her personal development, at all times we see how this woman, who lives marked by a decision of her youth, strives to overcome her pain. She is patient and attentive to her father and her sisters, despite their affectionless treatment of her. She is always ready to listen to others and to offer comfort, even though she herself is suffering. She is faithful to her principles and her sense of duty.

As mentioned above, it is not the objective of this section to carry out an in-depth analysis of these characters but to create a contextual framework that will allow us to better understand the usual characteristics of heroines and antiheroines of the works of Austen. So, now that we have provided a brief tour of heroines in Austen's work, we will continue to the antiheroines.

Caroline Bingley (*Pride and Prejudice*) is one of the examples of intolerant classism that we find in these novels. From her high social position, although her father acquired his fortune through commerce, she looks with disdain on everyone who is below her in that ladder. Social rank and economy, and not personal values, are her criterion for judging others.

Isabella Thorpe (*Northanger Abbey*) is another example of a manipulative socialite. From the beginning of the story, the reader is most impressed by her frivolous character and her selfish attitude. Blinded by her innocence and her natural kindness, Catherine Morland, the heroine of this story, is a victim of Isabella's trickery, since she does not perceive the falsity of many of her words and actions.

In the same way that Elinor's self-control is contrasted with the excessive sentimentality of her sister, we could say that the charms of Mary Crawford shine more strongly against the shy and timid character of Fanny Price, the protagonist of *Mansfield Park*. Mary Crawford has many qualities: she is an attractive woman, pleasant, intelligent, affectionate, sensitive, with a delicate natural elegance and ease for social interaction. However, having been educated in an environment that is not



conducive to the proper development of values, this woman lacks key moral principles. Throughout the narrative of *Mansfield Park*, we find different scenes in which this is revealed, either in conversations with Edmund Bertram on issues related to morality and the Church, in her complicity with her brother Henry, who intends to flirt with the Bertram sisters, or in the way in which she justifies her brother's attitude when he runs away with Maria Bertram, married to Mr. Rushworth.

Finally, we will refer briefly to the antiheroine protagonist of the novel whose title is her name: Lady Susan. The main positive characteristics of this lady are her physical attractiveness, in spite of not being a young woman, her intelligence, and her pleasant manners. However, her lack of moral principles is evident throughout the story. She does not mind hurting other people's feelings in order to achieve her goals. Thus, she is capable of lying, manipulating those who trust her, showing an affection she does not feel, etc. Despite the suffering she causes to other people through her immoral attitude, she never regrets her behaviour.

## **6. Emma Woodhouse: Heroine or antiheroine?**

We now come to the central part of this article, in which we will make a brief analysis of the protagonist of the novel *Emma*. In the first section of this analysis, we will comment on the personal characteristics that could justify her being considered an antiheroine, and next, we will explain the characteristics that make her a heroine.

### **6.1. Emma Woodhouse as an antiheroine**

Two hallmark traits of Jane Austen's literary style are her attention to detail and her eagerness to give realism to her characters (Jordán 2017). When it comes to designing a character, and in a special way when it comes to a protagonist, Austen does not limit herself to describing her physical or psychological characteristics, but shows us her environment, social situation and all those factors that may have influenced her way of being. Thus, it will be easier for us to understand her behaviour and, at the same time, we will perceive the

character as real, justified in part by her circumstances.

The first paragraphs of *Emma* provide us with very relevant information to understand the story and, above all, mark the point of view from which it will be narrated and some of the central themes of the plot.

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.

She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father; and had, in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period (...).

Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse's family, less as a governess than a friend, (...), they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own.

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. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her. (1)

With her usual conciseness, Austen is able to summarize in a few lines the first years of the protagonist's life, highlighting the circumstances that have shaped her character. In these first paragraphs, we find several elements that we will discuss below to show the anti-hero side of Emma.

First of all, we will state three ideas which will support Emma being an antiheroine. The protagonist of this story is settled in a very limited

universe, in which she occupies a pre-eminent place; she receives the esteem and good opinion of all those around her, which reinforces her own self-esteem and the concept she has of herself; and, finally, she is used to being the owner of her house and her time.

The scenario in which Emma's plot takes place is the most limited of all Austen's novels. Her protagonist does not change city at any time and always occupies a privileged position, either as a hostess, as a special guest, or as a member of the highest class in the locality.

Almost all the characters who live in this limited scenario pay homage to Miss Woodhouse, both the closest -as her family and close friends- and those with whom she has less frequent treatment. There is only one exception, which will be of great relevance for the development of the plot.

Emma lives with the flattery she receives from her preferred companions and from her own easy conscience. She and the reader hear a very different tone, one which jars indeed in its abrupt, unequivocal rhythms, when at intervals she encounters Mr. Knightley for one of the brief conversations that sound a counterpoint throughout the novel. (Butler 265)

Accustomed to hearing praises and judgments favorable to everything that concerns her person and way of acting, it is logical that Emma has grown up with a high concept of herself. However, there is a dissonant voice in this choir of more or less well-intentioned flatterers. Mr. Knightley, friend of the family, and brother-in-law of Emma's older sister. But this is not the time to talk about this gentleman, we will come back to him later.

After the death of her mother -when she was still a child- and the marriage of her only sister, Emma occupied the position of mistress of the house. Given her financial position and family situation, Miss Woodhouse has a lot of free time and no worries, other than taking care of her father. Some negative aspects of her character derive from this abundance of time and lack of obligations

It is her restless energy and intelligence, fed by the degree of self-will and conceit of which Jane Austen has warned us, and coupled with the boredom of her lonely home life, that drives Emma into busying herself with her neighbours' affairs in a most reprehensible manner that nearly leads to lasting unhappiness for all those with whom she interferes. (Le Faye 258)

An attractive and intelligent young woman, of good social and economic position, accustomed to being praised and doing everything in her own way, with a lot of free time and few obligations. This is the personal context of the protagonist of this story. What are the consequences of these circumstances?

If Emma is an artist who manipulates people as if they were characters in her own stories, Austen emphasizes not only the immorality of this activity, but its cause or motivation: except for placating her father, Emma has nothing to do (Gilbert and Gubar 158).

When reading Austen's novels, it is common for a contemporary reader to be surprised by the absence of activity and the abundance of free time. It gives the impression that the ladies of that time did not have more obligations than to visit their friends, to receive visits, to go shopping, to attend a play or a concert, to go for a walk or to spend time reading or playing music. And the truth is that, in most cases, that was the real situation. During their childhood and adolescence, high-status girls received education in a school for young ladies or, in most cases, in their own home, from the hands of a governess (Barker 2005). However, in the case of Emma, we know that this time has passed, so, certainly, she has no more obligations than those that she decides to exert. And, as we will see a little later, Emma does not stand out for her perseverance or self-demand. So this intelligent and active young woman needs to find tasks that occupy her time and can be rewarding for her, and that task is none other than that of being the matchmaker for those around her and, in particular, of her new friend Harriet Smith, a young girl of uncertain origin, who becomes Miss Woodhouse's pastime.

The relationship of these two young women is completely uneven and evidences the manipulative tendency of Emma, who "never saw Harriet as a person but as a blank page to be filled in" (Liu 649). From the first moment, the reader detects the interested attitude of the protagonist, who sees in Harriet an opportunity to exercise the skills with which she fancies herself to be gifted. Emma is not as interested in Harriet's good as her own entertainment and the self-affirmation of her projects. In this relationship of false friendship, Emma plays a manipulative role very similar to the one Isabella Thorpe exercises over Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* (Hannon 2005). Both Emma and Isabella boast repeatedly about their disinterested and unconditional friendship, although they use this relationship to achieve their goals and in the process hurt the other person.

The reader is aware of this situation and also of the mistakes Emma makes throughout the story. In spite of the signs that indicate the wrongness of her attitude, she continues with her plans, without realising that she is wrong until it is evident. Emma insists on acting as Harriet's teacher when she has not yet passed the student stage (Hughes 1961). As Richard Simpson points out in his review of the novel, Emma overestimates her intelligence and ability to penetrate the hearts of those around her, causing uncomfortable and painful situations for others (Edmonston 1870). With her impetuous nature, Emma comes to hasty conclusions denying evidence and ignoring advice (Butler 1987). In this attitude of stubborn egoism, which leads her to insist that things be done according to her will, we can detect certain similarities with the character of Mary Crawford, the antiheroine of *Mansfield Park*, who will not hesitate to justify her attitude stating that "selfishness must always be forgiven, you know, because there is no hope of a cure" (61).

Emma's obstinacy and pride lead her to commit serious errors and prevent her from perceiving the feelings of other people. Instead Emma relies too much on her own judgments and does not consider habitual observation of her surroundings necessary.

It demands what Aristotle calls "practical wisdom"; what we might call social intelligence; what Iris Murdoch (and Jane Austen herself) calls "attention." Emma has to be educated in this proper attention to individuals and their circumstances. (Clark 59)

As already explained above, Emma had certain deficiencies in her education, not only in the contents but also in that which refers to her attitude toward others. Despite the good intentions and the sincere affection of her closest circle, the lack of strength of some of her educators had as a consequence that this young woman grew convinced that she was always right, accustomed to always getting away with her mistakes and, consequently, little sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others. Austen illustrates this attitude in a short passage starring Emma and Mrs. Weston, her former governess.

They combated the point some time longer in the same way; Emma rather gaining ground over the mind of her friend; for Mrs. Weston was the most used of the two to yield. (201)

Along with these imperfections of character, we find in Emma another common characteristic of Austen's antiheroines: social classism. This class attitude, although inconsistent because she does show respect and affection for the working lady Mrs. Weston, leads her to judge certain people just for their work or position, to consider herself above certain members of the society in which she lives, and to adopt an attitude of condescending and contemptuous superiority towards families or people around her.

The class-conscious attitude is a quality that Austen reserves for her antiheroines and "evil" characters, such as Caroline Bingley, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Ferrars or Sir Walter Elliot. Emma's manipulation of Harriet to reject Robert Martin's offer of marriage hardly differs from that of Mr. Bingley at the hands of his sister, who wants him to get away from Jane Bennet. And the same happens with her considerations about the Woodhouse's position at Highbury, and the need to stay away from certain lower-level people to avoid them wanting to frequent her deal. "And all the horror of



being in danger of falling in with the second-rate and third-rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever" (135).

This attitude has as a consequence that, on occasion, Emma feels isolated, as, for example, when she doesn't receive an invitation from the Coles to attend a reception at their home. At first, Emma feels offended at the mere possibility of being invited, but, seeing that many people around her are going to attend, including Mr. Knightley who enjoys a social position superior to hers, the young lady experiences the loneliness of her situation. "Emma is isolated not because she is superior but because she must feel superior; she can not participate in a relationship where she is not first" (Thaden 50). Her isolation is not forced by circumstances, but the result of her own conception of reality, which leads her to put herself on a higher level.

Emma is not completely unaware of her shortcomings, although she usually judges them with indulgence. In spite of everything, in diverse moments of the novel, the author depicts attempts of the protagonist to improve her formation and personality. However, these attempts, instead of producing an improvement, only manage to highlight other defects of the protagonist: her inconstancy and her envy towards Jane Fairfax.

In the first chapters of the novel, we can read about Emma's good gifts for the different arts: drawing, piano, singing... But, at the same time, it is explained that she has not managed to stand out in any of them for her lack of practice and dedication.

She played and sang;--and drew in almost every style; but steadiness had always been wanting; and in nothing had she approached the degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command, and ought not to have failed of (37)

The same thing happens with reading, as it is explained in a conversation between Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightley, in which the gentleman recalls Emma's various attempts to compile lists of works to be read and, underlining the fact that, in all those cases, the task was limited to writing very interesting and accurate lists, which undoubtedly

would have been of profit to her creator if she had persisted in her good intentions.

Emma is aware of these shortcomings and their failed attempts to amend, and this is the hidden motive of her animosity towards Jane Fairfax, a young woman of her age, who despite her difficult economic and social situation, has been able to develop her talents with much more success than the praised Miss Woodhouse. From the first moment, the name of Jane Fairfax is accompanied by Emma's critical judgments, until there comes a time when she questions the motivation of her dislike of Jane.

Why she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer; 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. (146)

The figure of Jane Fairfax is a reproach to the conscience of Emma, who can not help but recognize the superiority of a girl with fewer means. Miss Woodhouse's security and self-complacency reel when she sees in someone else what she could have achieved had she been more consistent. That's why it's so unbearable for Emma to hear Miss Bates talk about her niece and the letters she has received from her, while she has no problem listening to Mr. Weston doing the same thing about his son, Frank Churchill (McGraw 2015). Also, in this case, Emma makes up her mind to amend her relationship with Jane, determined to receive Jane on her next visit with all the warmth and affection she deserves, however her inconstancy will prevent it.

As it has been demonstrated in this section, the character of Emma Woodhouse possesses many of the qualities with which Austen usually typifies her antiheroines. In the following part, the heroic features of Emma will be explained so that it will be possible to contrast both perspectives of this character, in order to conclude which category better defines her.

## **6.2. Emma Woodhouse as a heroine**

Emma Woodhouse is a complex character with many negative and positive traits. After having explained her negative features, in this section, we will offer the positive characteristics that make her suitable to play the heroine role of a novel.

Emma Woodhouse is young, rich, intelligent, beautiful, charming, perceptive, and gay; but she is vain of her won perceptions, snobbish, domineering, rash, and selfish. She is kind to her father, charitable to the poor, fond of Mr. Knightley, and attached to "poor Miss Taylor". But her misapprehensions – of Harriet, of Mr. Elton, of Jane Fairfax, of Frank Churchill, of Mr. Knightley, and of herself – lead her to develop and encourage a number of situations, which, however amusing, clearly display the profound contradictions which are the essence of irony (...) Emma is, like all great heroes, the victim of her own illusions: she creates a world, but it is not the real world. How deceptive is appearance, and how misleading (Wright 155).

In this quote, many of the features that we have already commented and others that we will discuss below are collected, and an idea of great relevance is also commented. Most of Emma's mistakes are caused by her misperception of reality. The parameters in which she moves, with which she judges her surroundings, do not always coincide with reality and, for this reason, some of the decisions she makes are erroneous. We could compare this attitude with that of Don Quixote when he lets himself be carried away by his delirious mind. His attitude towards the giants would have been audacious and praiseworthy, if they had not actually been windmills. If we judge him objectively, his attack does not make any sense, but if we do it from his vision of reality, our judgment will change. In the same way, when analyzing the behaviour of Emma Woodhouse, we must take into account her personal circumstances, her vision of reality and, especially, the evolution she experiences throughout the work, while she discovers herself and the world that surrounds her. These will be the keys that will

allow us to determine the heroic role of this character.

In the first place, we will state Emma's positive characteristics, many of which are present from the beginning of the novel, serving as a counterbalance to her defects, so that the reader has a less negative view of the character during the first chapters of the books, although, clearly, the author's will is to highlight the flaws during the opening pages.

We could summarize most of her virtues by saying that Emma is an affectionate young woman, with good intentions, great natural gifts, moral rectitude, good taste and a cheerful and cordial character. In the following paragraphs we will offer examples that will justify this description.

We can affirm, without a doubt, that in the rest of Austen's works we do not find any example of filial devotion comparable to that of Emma. This young woman goes out of her way in attention to her hypochondriacal father, and always chooses the option that is most favorable for him. Through Emma's relationship with Mr. Woodhouse, Austen shows us many of the virtues of the protagonist of this story: patience, abnegation, delicacy, attention to detail, etc. "Her behaviour to her father is consistently selfless, and she seems to quite unaware of it" (Butler 272). While in the novel we find several critical comments from Emma about Miss Bates, the young woman does not make the slightest complaint about her father's attitude and the sacrifices he demands. Instead of that, she assumes her father's care as something that she has to do without lament or self-praise.

But this is not the only case in which Emma's affectionate nature is brought to light. Although we have stated in the previous section that Emma acts with a class mentality, this attitude is not at odds with a concern for the disadvantaged that is not content with simply giving alms, but that leads to personal involvement.

Emma was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her

purse. She understood their ways, could allow for their ignorance and their temptations, had no romantic expectations of extraordinary virtue from those for whom education had done so little; entered into their troubles with ready sympathy, and always gave her assistance with as much intelligence as good-will. (77)

Precisely because of her conception of social classes, she knows what she can or can not expect from poor and uneducated people, and is able to put herself in the place of the disadvantaged, being understanding and affectionate with them.

Emma is the only protagonist of Austen that is described from the beginning as physically attractive, we also know that she enjoys a good economic position and, nevertheless, among her faults there is neither vanity with respect to her appearance nor the misuse of money (Waldron 1999). On the contrary, in one of the dialogues of this novel, Mr. Knightley, who does not hesitate to reprimand her harshly when he must, affirms the following: "I do not think her personally vain. Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it; her vanity lies another way." (33). Her vainglory does not reside in the consideration of her beauty, but in the presumption of always being right.

As previously mentioned, we also know from Emma that she is an intelligent young woman, with talent for the arts -although she exercises little to develop it-, elegant and respectful of good manners, conciliatory when necessary, as often happens in the relationship between her father and her brother-in-law. Besides, due to her high social status and energetic character, Emma assumes a leading role among the women of Highbury, something we do not see in any of the other protagonists of Austen's works (Butler 1987). And in playing that leadership role, which leads her to act in the way she considers best for those around her, she sometimes makes serious mistakes that hurt other people, but never out of malice, but because of her misperception of reality.

It is important to emphasize that she is a well-meaning person, and every terrible

thing she does or says, when she causes harm to other people, is not the result of ill-intention but her improper management of her own power and capabilities. Tony Tanner is also of the opinion that Emma "is given to error but not, at all, to evil". (Tóth 83)

She is a young woman with good intentions who can be labeled a classist, manipulative, stubborn, inconstant... but not evil. And this is a nuance of great importance, since in this detail lies a large part of the reason why we can call Emma a heroine.

We have said several times that Emma is accustomed to acting according to her criteria, without taking into account the opinions of others, although the truth is that all those around her habitually approve any decision that she takes. However, as already mentioned, there is an exception to this general rule: Mr. Knightley. He is the only person who dares to disagree with Emma's opinions and, in fact, frequently tries to show her the wrongness of her assumptions or arguments and, on many occasions, reprimands her with greater or lesser intensity. Emma's reaction, usually, is to continue with her plans, to think that she is right, or to justify her attitude. However, the various interventions of Mr. Knightley never leave Emma indifferent. She always takes his comments into consideration, in large part due to her affection and respect for the gentleman (Clark 2016). In fact, in the final part of the work, Mr. Knightley praises with admiration this receptive attitude of Emma:

You hear nothing but truth from me.--I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it. (385).

When creating the character of Emma, Austen designed a complex personality, rich in nuances. We can not simplify this protagonist by judging her superficially, since, in that case, her behavior would not be coherent. What is the reason why Emma, being stubborn and self-sufficient, is able to cope with Mr. Knightley's corrections "as no other woman in England would have borne it"? It is not only because they come from someone whom

she esteems and respects, since her attitude toward her former governess is very different, in spite of the affection she feels towards her. Emma, as a good heroine, seeks good and truth. That is what we mean by saying that she has a good intention. She makes mistakes because of her human condition and because she misinterprets reality, but at the same time, she longs to act correctly, and this justifies that she values the opinions of Mr. Knightley, in whom she sees a model of rectitude.

Another sign of her desire to achieve good and truth is her ability to repent when she discovers that she has acted incorrectly. Each of these discoveries is a step forward in her journey towards reality and towards self-knowledge. We know that the highest point of the story is the scene of Box Hill, to which we will refer right away, but, before and after that moment, Austen offers us other examples that reinforce the veracity of the story. One of those moments of self-discovery is the scene in which Emma tries to console Harriet's disappointment at Mr. Elton's nonexistent interest in her.

Her tears fell abundantly--but her grief was so truly artless, that no dignity could have made it more respectable in Emma's eyes--and she listened to her and tried to console her with all her heart and understanding--really for the time convinced that Harriet was the superior creature of the two--and that to resemble her would be more for her own welfare and happiness than all that genius or intelligence could do. (125)

In that moment of contact with reality, Emma self-evaluates and understands that her natural gifts, of which she boasts, do not make her a better person since she does not always use them for good. Within this process of self-discovery, Emma perceives as superior to herself a young woman whom she surpasses in position, fortune, beauty, intelligence, etc., but not in dignity, since this does not come from personal characteristics, but from the way of acting and responding to various situations.

Emma is a complex character in continuous evolution. This evolutionary process corresponds partially with the hero's journey (Campbell 2008),

although we will not expand on this aspect, since it will be the central theme of another work. Emma's evolutionary process is marked by these moments of contact with reality and self-discovery that, as we said, suppose an improvement in her attitude of which the protagonist herself is conscious, being able to make a retrospective look and judge her behaviour with objectivity. Whether in the case of Harriet:

How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world (365).

Or the one of Jane Fairfax. On this occasion, it is not a question of having caused her an evil, but of having maintained a negligent attitude towards her, without fulfilling her obligations.

"This is very true," said she, "at least as far as relates to me, which was all that was meant--and it is very shameful.--Of the same age-- and always knowing her--I ought to have been more her friend.-- She will never like me now. I have neglected her too long. But I will shew her greater attention than I have done" (259).

In her evolutionary process, Emma is able to judge the situation objectively, recognizing what she should have done, her negligence and the consequences that result from it. And, as a result, a new way of acting is proposed, which means a new stage in her journey.

To close this section, we will briefly mention the culmination of Emma's change process, to which we have already referred, and which appears regularly in any study on this protagonist, so we will limit ourselves to commenting on what affects directly to our work.

In the famous excursion to Box Hill, which brings together almost all the relevant characters of this novel, Emma makes an offensive comment to Miss Bates, ridiculing her in front of the rest of the entourage. When they are ready to return to their

homes, Mr. Knightley looks for a way to be alone with Emma and reproaches her severely for her lack of respect. The young woman, aware of her misconduct, makes slight attempts to downplay it, but, before the unappealable arguments of the gentleman, accepts the facts and suffers in silence, unable to articulate an answer:

She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed—almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. 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! (336)

This definitive encounter with reality, in which Emma completely discovers herself, is a critical point in her evolution and, therefore, in the plot, since both go together. From this moment, Miss Woodhouse completely abandons her frivolous, self-sufficient and manipulative attitude, and focuses all her efforts on amending her behaviour and redeeming her faults, compensating with affection all those people she had offended in the past.

To not extend more in this section, we will end it with a quote that highlights the change made in the heroine of this story, which, from its new position, anchored in the real world, is able to analyze her previous attitude and summarize it in few words, while talking with Mr. Knightley about the final engagement of Harriet with Robert Martin, showing her approval to the gentleman's surprise.

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

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

## **7. Conclusion**

Throughout these pages we have carefully analyzed the character of Emma Woodhouse, with the purpose of deciding if her characteristics are typical of an antiheroine or a heroine. As already mentioned, some features of Emma are very similar

to those of several antiheroines in the novels of this author. However, Emma differs from all those characters in their evolutionary process.

All the antiheroines of Austen maintain a line of action that leads them to consolidate within that category, so that, at the end of the story, we continue to detect in them the same negative features they had at the beginning. Emma's case is completely different, as explained in the previous section, so it does not seem that we should include her in that group. However, the fact that she does not act like the antiheroines is not enough to justify her being defined as a heroine. So we will briefly provide arguments to support this claim.

In section 2 of this article, we have written about the figure of the hero in literature and have explained that, once he was dissociated from the notion of semidivine creature, the most relevant characteristic of this figure was the nobility, that is, his moral rectitude, his decision to act correctly. The hero, or in this case the heroine, is an inspiring character.

Throughout these pages, we have tried to emphasise three aspects of Emma's character that are the key to justify her definition as a heroine: her distorted perception of reality, her desire to seek the truth and the good, and, finally, the fact that she is a character in constant evolution.

As has already been said, at the beginning of the story, Emma meets some of the requirements of an antiheroine and, in fact, acts as such in her relationship with Harriet. But this is not due to a lack of qualities or a deficiency in the will of the protagonist, but it is the consequence of the education received, or, rather, of the shortcomings of her education, which corrupted her perception of the world. By acting as she thinks right, according to her mismatched parameters, her actions do not achieve the expected goal, but rather the opposite. However, the experience of these errors and the frequent indications of Mr. Knightley, who plays the role of mentor, cause, little by little, Emma's perception to approach reality. This process reaches its plenitude after the episode of Box Hill, culminating Emma's trip from antiheroine to heroine. After Mr. Knightley's correction, she finally



understands her error and, therefore, is able to objectively judge her previous attitude and rectify her actions.

As we have seen, Emma Woodhouse is a complex character in which we find negative and positive characteristics. In the novel which bears her name, her errors and the consequences that derive from them are depicted, but also her ability to recognize them, learn from them and evolve. Far from being a distant and unreal character, Miss Woodhouse is close and familiar to the public precisely because of her shortcomings and, through her continual search for the true and the good, she becomes a relatable and inspiring character, which, as we have just remembered, is the main role of the hero or the heroine.

#### WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Richard Bentley, 1841.
- Austen, Jane. *Lady Susan*. NoBooks Editorial, 2011.
- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Macmillan and Company, 1902.
- Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey - Second Edition*. Broadview Press, 2002.
- Austen, Jane. *Persuasion: An Annotated Edition*. Editado por Robert Morrison, Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Richard Bentley, 1853.
- Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. Richard Bentley, 1833.
- Austen-Leigh, Jame Edward. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. Richard Bentley & Son, 1871.
- Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. OUP, 2008.
- Barker, Hannah, y Elaine Chalus. *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850: An Introduction*. Psychology Press, 2005.
- Butler, Marilyn. *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Clarendon Press, 1987.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.
- Clark, Lorraine. "Influence and Interference: The Ethics of Attention in Emma." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 38 (2016): 56-65
- Culea, Mihaela, and Andreia-Irina Suci. "Between Grand Dreams and Big Failure. The Anti-

Hero in English Literature and Culture." *twentieth-century literature* (1999): 2.

- Edmonston & Douglas, editor. *The North British Review*. Edmonston Douglas, 1870.
- Ehrlich, María Teresa Ibañez. "El concepto de héroe y su desarrollo en la literatura española actual." *Céfiro: Enlace hispano cultural y literario* 9.1 (2009): 35-65.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., y Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2000.
- Hannon, Patrice. *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine's Guide to Life and Love*. New York: Penguin, 2005
- Hassan, Ihab Habib. *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades*. University of Alabama Press, 1995.
- Hughes, R. E. "The Education of Emma Woodhouse." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16.1 (1961): 69-74.
- Jonason, Peter K., et al. "The antihero in popular culture: Life history theory and the dark triad personality traits." *Review of General Psychology* 16.2 (2012): 192-199.
- Jordán Miguel Ángel, Kearns Sarah Rose. (2018) "Emma by Jane Austen: A Beautiful Picture of Imperfection". *Advance Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Discoveries*.31(4)pp. 24-31
- Jordán, Miguel Ángel. "Understanding Jane Austen". *The Esse Messenger*, vol. 26-2, Winter de 2017, pp. 18-26.
- Lauber, John. "Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Jane Austen's Novels." *The Dalhousie Review* (1972).
- Le Faye, Deirdre. *Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels*. Harry N. Abrams, 2002.
- Littlewood, Ian, editor. *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*. Psychology Press, 1998.
- Liu, Yan. "The Prosperity of English Literary Criticism in Multicultural Contexts: Jane Austen's Ideas on Kinships in Emma in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 4.3 (2014): 636-640.

- Lodge, David. *Jane Austen, Emma: A Casebook*. Macmillan, 1991.
- McGraw, Patrick. "The World Is Not Theirs": The Plight of Jane Fairfax in Emma." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 37 (2015): 218-225
- Meng, Brittany A. "The Enduring Austen Heroine: Self-Awareness and Moral Maturity in Jane Austen's Emma and in Modern Austen Fan-Fiction." (2010).
- Southam, B. C. *Jane Austen: Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park: A Casebook*. Macmillan, 1976.
- Thaden, Barbara Z. "Figure and Ground: The Receding Heroine in Jane Austen's 'Emma.'" *South Atlantic Review* 55.1 (1990): 47-62.
- Tóth, Zsófia Anna. "Emma: Jane Austen's Most Imperfect Heroine and Most Perfect Novel." *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat*. 2.1. Special Issue. (2012).
- Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2007.
- Waldron, Mary. *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Wright, Andrew. *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure*. Chatto and Windus, 1953.