

## EMMA BY JANE AUSTEN : A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE OF IMPERFECTION



### Original Research Article

ISSN : 2456-1045 (Online)  
(ICV-LT/Impact Value): 63.78  
(GIF) Impact Factor: 4.126  
Publishing Copyright @ International Journal Foundation  
Journal Code: ARJMD/LT/V-31.0/I-1/C-4/NOV-2018  
Category : LITERATURE  
Volume : 31.0 /Chapter- IV/ Issue -1 (NOVEMBER-2018)  
Journal Website: [www.journalresearchijf.com](http://www.journalresearchijf.com)  
Paper Received: 18.11.2018  
Paper Accepted: 28.11.2018  
Date of Publication: 05-12-2018  
Page: 24-31



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### Citation of the Article

Jordán MA, Kearns SR. (2018) Emma by Jane Austen: A Beautiful Picture of Imperfection.; *Advance Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Discoveries*.31(4)pp. 24-31

### ABSTRACT

Throughout history, different approaches dealing with the concept of beauty have been made and various aesthetic currents have occurred to analyze its manifestations. Some of these currents have defended the possibility of finding beauty in imperfection, both because of its connection with truth, and because of the uniqueness contained within these imperfect realities.

Jane Austen criticized the exaggerated perfection of the characters of some of the works of her time, since, from her point of view, these types of characters reduced the credibility of the story bringing about a rejection from the reader. For this reason, in all of Austen's novels, the defects of the protagonists can be readily appreciated. This is even more evident in *Emma*, since in this work, the heroine is an evidently imperfect young woman.

In the present article, we will analyze the way in which Austen designed the character of Emma Woodhouse, the strategies that she used to maintain the balance in reader's perception and the result of this creative work.

**KEYWORD:** Literary analysis, regency, beauty of imperfection, characters analysis

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick and wicked." (Austen, Letters, 208). In this way Jane Austen addressed her niece, Fanny Knight, on March 23, 1817. In a previous letter, the young girl had conveyed to her aunt the opinions that Mr. Wildman, her suitor, had expressed about one of Austen's novels, not knowing that she was the niece of the author. The young gentleman had expressed his reservations by finding some flaws in the heroine and other characters, and Fanny Knight had related this conversation to her aunt to observe her reaction. In the aforementioned letter, Austen affectionately reprimands her niece for having acted in that way, showing her compassion and sympathy for the young gentleman, who would undoubtedly feel uncomfortable when he knew the truth. Austen also states that Mr. Wildman and she could never agree on novels and heroines, since she could not stand those works in which the protagonists are a picture of perfection, completely removed from reality.

All the heroines of Austen's novels are ladies with great qualities, but also with noticeable defects. The protagonists of this author cannot be qualified as portraits of perfection in any case, since throughout each of her novels, different passages are shown in which their weaknesses are revealed. However, this does not prevent the reader of these works from being attracted by the personality that the author has conferred on each of her heroines. In fact, it is possible that these heroines are even more attractive precisely because of their imperfect condition, as this makes them more closely identified with and more accessible to the audience.

The present article will study the relationship between imperfection and beauty in a literary work, focusing in a special way on the role of the female protagonist. For this purpose, the most suitable heroine is Emma Woodhouse, protagonist of the novel *Emma*, since she is an obviously flawed character (Sabor 2015). Next, the concept of beauty will be reflected upon making use of various definitions. Subsequently, some aesthetic currents related to the beauty of imperfection will be explained briefly. This theoretical framework will serve as a reference when carrying out our analysis of the strategies used by Austen to manifest the beauty of an imperfect character.

## II. SOME APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY

This section will offer a brief list of definitions and approaches related to the concept of beauty. It is not our objective to delve into this topic, but only to create a reference or framework for the following sections that will study different aspects related to this concept.

According to the French poet and philosopher, Paul Valéry (1894), beauty has traits that make it indescribable and ineffable. It is not a physical reality that can be measured and analyzed, nor is it a univocal and limited concept that we can explain and define completely. This difficulty in defining beauty has been present throughout history, however, from the point of view of Plato (Giovanni 2005), this does not imply that it is a merely subjective or changing reality. Those who so qualify it, attending to the expiration of the elements that were considered beautiful in the past, do so moved by the error of looking at some concrete manifestations of beauty, but not at beauty itself, which is an immutable reality. The beauty that we can find in the sensible world has its origin in the Idea of Beauty, which is the reason why things seem beautiful to us by participating to a greater or lesser extent of its characteristics.

Santayana (1896), in an attempt to unify different distinctions and approaches, defines beauty as "pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing" (33) and explains that beauty is a value, not an isolated perception; it is an emotion of our affective and volitional nature, which is why it must necessarily be attractive, since something beautiful that does not interest anyone, would be a contradiction in itself. Santayana also emphasizes that beauty is a positive value. It is the presence of something good, or the absence of something bad.

In her article "An argument about beauty", Sontag (2005) displays different definitions and comments on beauty, and states that sometimes these attempts have either been limited to unite beauty to the object that possesses it, or to describe some of its characteristics, or to define it in an excessively general way, as it has happened when it has been identified with harmony. Sontag adds that given the impossibility of offering an adequate definition, it was decided to appeal to an ability to appreciate it in the arts. This capacity, which we call "good taste", is what detects the value in works of art and allows us to elaborate a canon of those works that deserve to be praised, since in art, unlike in the real world, beauty it is not always obvious.

The problem of beauty, according to Underwood (2016), is that being present in various facets of our daily life, it is easily banalized or subjectively understood. However, this does not prevent us from perceiving it as something profound, that escapes our understanding and that, in some way, helps us to delve into our human nature.

As it has been reflected in the previous paragraphs, it is easier to perceive beauty than to define it, but, in order to provide an explanation that will serve as a reference later, we will conclude this section by offering a definition that summarizes the different nuances of the definitions we have found in different dictionaries. "Beautiful" is that which by its qualities is pleasing to the eye, or to the ear and by extension to the spirit or the intellect. Since the concept of beauty is applied to very diverse realities, this definition can be adapted to a specific case, be it physical, artistic, moral, etc., so that the characteristics that make that reality pleasing can be analyzed in more detail.

## III. THE BEAUTY OF THE IMPERFECT

"When we say that something is perfect we mean that it is 'complete'. Beauty is measured by its completeness." (Plumb 77). The beauty of a reality, according to this statement, depends on the degree of perfection and, therefore, can be measured and evaluated objectively. As Plumb explains in her article, the birth of geometry in Greek culture, promoted the measurement of the aesthetic value of works of art based on geometric studies, which allowed it to give an objective value to various artistic manifestations. On the other hand, the Platonic theory of beauty, explained in the previous section, postulates that art can only achieve beauty based on proportion and harmony, by resembling the ideal of Universal Beauty that is independent and prior to all its appearances.

Beauty and perfection are frequently used as synonyms in everyday language, but they are not equivalent concepts since, as it was stated previously, a characteristic of beauty is the ability to produce pleasure to the one who perceives it, as a consequence of its positive traits. Beauty implies the presence of something good or the absence of evil. However, we can find some fulfillment in negative realities, which could be described as perfect, but not as beautiful.

We also find a certain disparity between beauty and perfection in some aesthetic theories to which we will refer briefly below. The common factor of these proposals is the possibility of finding beauty in imperfection, not in spite of it, but thanks to it.

If we follow Plato's teachings, which deny the possibility of achieving perfection, since it only exists in the World of Ideas, we can affirm that perfection and reality are two incompatible concepts in our world. This statement does not belong only to Platonic thought, but it is a generalized perception, the result of experience. Outside the field of geometry and similar disciplines, perfection is understood more as an ideal than as something attainable. For this reason, as Plumb states: "one explanation for an imperfect aesthetic could be due to the appeal of that which is authentic, that is truer to life and not an ideal form" (77). Authenticity and truth are values that can be associated with beauty, and that, due to the limitations of our human condition, are usually linked to imperfection.

William Gilpin introduced the aesthetic concept of “the picturesque” to defend the beauty of imperfection during the second half of the eighteenth century. This aesthetic classification, according to its theorists, combined Burke’s concepts of beauty and sublimity.

Because it possessed, for example, intricacy, irregularity, and roughness, it appeared to be distinct from either the vastness and gloom of Burke’s sublime or the delicateness and smoothness associated with his concept of beauty. Unlike the sublime, which drew upon terror for its effect, the picturesque, like beauty, produced pleasure. (Ross xiii)

In his essay *On Picturesque Beauty*, Gilpin explains his aesthetic proposal, which he applies mainly to painting, through a couple of examples. In the first he talks about the beauty of a properly decorated piece of symmetrical and well-proportioned Palladian architecture. Although it may be pleasing to the eye, by introducing it into a picture, it becomes a formal object and fails to please.

But if we introduce it in a picture, it immediately becomes a formal object, and ceases to please. Should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet instead of the chisel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a rough ruin. No painter, who had the choice of the two objects, would hesitate which to choose. (7).

The same happens when talking about a beautiful garden, in which all its parts come together in harmony contributing to its beauty. Despite its undoubted appeal, when taken to the canvas, says Gilpin, the garden is offensive. To show its beauty, one would have to transform the lawn into an uneven ground, plant rugged oaks instead of flowering shrubs, and break the regularity of the path. That is, instead of making the whole smooth, we should make it rough to confer on it the picturesque beauty, since it already possesses the other components of beauty.

The beauty of imperfection is also the central thesis of two Japanese aesthetic currents. The first, called Wabi-sabi, recognizes and appreciates the value and beauty of bodies and objects that suffer the consequences of the passage of time, and those that have some imperfections that make them unique (Buetow 2017). Therefore, Wabi-sabi criticizes the insincerity, uniformity and monotonous perception of the supposed aesthetic perfection.

It re-values and appreciates authenticity and humility out of mature respect for incompleteness, fragility and impermanence. These attributes of human life mean that the beauty of authenticity, though not always obvious, exists in subtle appreciation of truthfulness about its nature. The truth has an unselfconscious beauty that overcomes polarities like “beauty” and “ugliness.” (Buetow 3)

The fact that something is imperfect, fragile and fleeting does not imply, according to the theory of the Wabi-sabi, that it lacks beauty, but, on the contrary, the authenticity immanent to these characteristics can increase its beauty more than a feigned perfection, which would be hiding the inevitable defects that every created being possesses.

The second aesthetic vision is Kintsugi, which applies the proposals of Wabi-sabi when it is necessary to take some action to repair what has suffered some damage (Buetow 2017). Kintsugi is the art of repairing pottery, sticking its parts with gold-laced seams of epoxy, not in order to restore its original state, but a stronger one in which the signs of that rupture and repair are appreciated. The repaired pot shows its history; does not hide its defects, but shows its strength after being broken, recomposed and strengthened anew.

This aesthetic proposal is applicable to different fields, such as surgery when it entails the scar marked patient. "The scars may be seen to resemble the golden joinery of mended pots. Like footprints traveled by soldiers returning from battle, they tell stories of healing and learning." (Buetow 4). In this case, the imperfection could be perceived as something beautiful, since it is the reflection of an evolutionary process from a negative status to a positive one.

Both aesthetic currents invite us to study carefully the realities that surround us so as to avoid a hasty judgment that prevents us from appreciating their beauty, the fruit of their authenticity, and makes it impossible for us to understand that imperfections, in some cases, far from damaging an object, make it become something unique (Kauper 2015).

#### IV. PICTURES OF PERFECTION MAKE ME SICK AND WICKED: PLAN OF A NOVEL.

In the introduction to this article, we alluded to the letter in which Jane Austen affirmed her repudiation against the pictures of perfection, referring to some protagonists of the books of her time, who were represented with an excess of qualities and an irreproachable moral excellence. The purpose of these works was to offer examples that could guide their readers, especially young ladies (Waldron 1999). In their eagerness to educate youth, the authors of conduct books could fall into excess, portraying characters so excellent that they were unreal and, therefore, diminished the effectiveness of these works since, being away from reality, were not seen as role models for readers.

In her early writings, Austen imitated the grandiloquent style of some of her contemporaries, ridiculing the topics and excesses of those works, by recreating them in an exaggerated way in her own stories. It is interesting to note that, more than twenty years after the creation of the works, contained in the *Juvenilia*, Austen wrote her *Plan of a Novel*, in which, in a schematic and evidently parodic way, she draws the general lines of a new literary creation, which she had no intention of carrying out. *Plan of a Novel* is, in part, the fruit of her correspondence with the Reverend James Stanier Clarke, librarian of the Prince Regent, who, after accompanying Austen on her visit to Carlton House, the royal library, maintained a brief epistolary exchange with her (Le Faye 2004). In several of these letters, Reverend Clarke offered suggestions to the author on possible topics for a future novel. Austen, with exquisite delicacy, rejected all these suggestions and insisted on keeping to her style. However, led by her sense of humor, she wrote *Plan of a Novel*, which highlights, once again, the excesses of some of her time. For example, when presenting the main characters, Austen makes the following description:

He, the most excellent Man that can be imagined, perfect in Character, Temper, and Manners -- without the smallest drawback or peculiarity to prevent his being the most delightful companion to his Daughter from one year's end to the other. -- Heroine a faultless Character herself, -- perfectly good, with much tenderness and sentiment, and not the least Wit -- very highly accomplished, understanding modern Languages and (generally speaking) everything that the most accomplished young Women learn, but particularly excelling in Music.

As it can be appreciated, the idea of perfection appears repeatedly, expressed according to the style of some novels of the second half of the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Century. The style is clearly ironic and parodic, and highlights the author's opinion about it. Some paragraphs later, we find a new reference to the excessive characterization.

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The scene will be for ever shifting from one Set of People to another -- but All the Good will be unexceptionable in every respect -- and there will be no foibles or weaknesses but with the Wicked, who will be completely depraved and infamous, hardly a resemblance of humanity left in them.

In addition to insisting on the excessive goodness of the characters, the radical evil of the villain, who lacks even the slightest positive feature, is also depicted exaggeratedly even to the point that it does not resemble a human being.

"Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick and wicked". Both this forceful statement and the ironic descriptions collected in *Plan of a Novel* were made during the last years of the author's life, when the four novels printed in her lifetime had been published. So, it can be stated that she had this vision of characterization when writing her works. That is to say, at the time of designing her protagonists, Austen avoided their possible resemblance to pictures of perfection, far from the reality, and for this reason, she provided them, intentionally, positive and negative qualities. In the next section we will analyze the way in which this author designed the structure of *Emma*, so that, in spite of the heroine's evident defects, it could be effective. We will also explain the reasons why Emma's imperfections bring a greater beauty to her personality.

## V. EMMA WOODHOUSE: A PICTURE OF IMPERFECTION

Jane Austen started writing *Emma* after finishing *Mansfield Park*. At that time, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* had already been published. The manuscript of *Northanger Abbey* was finished, although it was not published until after the author's death, like *Lady Susan* and her other early writings. So *Emma* is the penultimate of the novels that Austen managed to finish, and the last one she saw published.

*Emma* is, therefore, the work of an experienced author, interested in knowing the reactions of her audience, as can be inferred from the fact that she decided to write down all the opinions she received about *Mansfield Park*. We also know that Austen was a firm defender of the novel as a literary genre and, at the same time, maintained a critical attitude toward the works of her time. For this reason, we find in her writings an interest to innovate and to face new challenges (Bander 2016). This could be an explanation to justify why after finishing *Mansfield Park*, whose protagonist stands out for the straightness of her behaviour, and for her shyness and discretion, Austen decided to take the risk of offering her readers a heroine, completely different, and obviously imperfect.

As it was stated previously, Austen harshly criticized the pictures of perfection offered by some contemporary authors and avoided falling into that error, designing protagonists with great qualities, but also with marked flaws. Even her more virtuous heroines, like Elinor Dashwood or Fanny Price whose moral values stand out throughout their stories, can be perceived by readers as characters with small imperfections. Elinor's self-restraint and Fanny's moral rectitude in certain parts of their stories could seem excessive. Therefore both heroines might deserve some light criticism that Mr. Knightley applies to Jane Fairfax: "Jane Fairfax is a very charming young woman - but not even Jane Fairfax is perfect. She has a fault. She has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife" (256). In fact, we could say that in all her novels, Austen makes an analysis of human imperfection through her characters.

Austen's heroines are complicated experiments in the delineation of human social error, an almost Hogarthian effort to render our general inner decay- and they are greater than Hogarth's portraits because, rather than stopping at caricature, they coax us into both loving these women as human beings and accepting our inevitable share in their flaws. (Potter 614)

By showing the shortcomings of her protagonists, Austen draws a realistic portrait of her characters and, at the same time, shows them closer to the reader, who can see in them a reflection of his/her own imperfect condition. However, when writing *Emma*, Jane Austen took a much greater risk than in her previous works, since this heroine is depicted with an antiheroine's qualities (Meng 2010). So when designing the character of Emma, Austen faced the challenge of capturing the readers's attention and interest with a particularly imperfect protagonist that could be repulsive to many of them. In fact, the issue of perfection is present throughout the novel.

Highbury gossips are preoccupied with each other's perfection or imperfection. In one of their quarrels about Emma, for example, Mr. Knightley agrees when Mrs. Weston asks, "'Can you imagine any thing nearer perfect beauty than Emma altogether?' 'I have not a fault to find with her person,' he replied" (39). In Emma's view, Harriet Smith "wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect" (23). Unable to perfect the person, she perfects her drawing of Harriet instead. Mrs. Weston mentions to Mr. Elton that Emma has improved upon Harriet's eye-brows and eye-lashes. "'Do you think so?' replied he. 'I cannot agree. It appears to me a most perfect resemblance in every feature'" (48). Harriet, in turn, "did think [Mr. Elton] all perfection" (142). (Bander 1999, 157)

These are some of the examples Bander offers in her article, highlighting Austen's intentionality to delve into the dichotomy perfection / imperfection. This evidence leads us to ask ourselves the reasons that led Austen to consider this question. Is it just the will to experiment with new strategies? Is it just a literary challenge to exercise her writing skills? The fact that Austen refers to the excessive perfection of the characters as a defect of some novels of her time leads us to think that, in writing *Emma*, she assumed the task of demonstrating that imperfection can be positive for the literary work .

### 5.1 A heroine whom no one but myself will much like

In the biography that James E. Austen-Leigh wrote about his aunt, it is related that when talking about Emma, Austen said: "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (148). Jane Austen was aware of the imperfections of her heroine and, for this reason, she had some doubts about the response of the public. However, she decided to describe the character of Emma as she had created her, with her virtues and defects.

Imperfection is a quality of the human condition, therefore, and by showing it in the protagonists, the sensation of reality in the reader is increased. This is one of the characteristics of Jane Austen's style (Jordán 2017), in whose works we always appreciate her interest in realistically delineating her characters, both by their attitude and behaviour, as well as by their way of speaking.

A realistic view implies that when talking about people, we speak of imperfection. But we must bear in mind that "imperfection is not necessarily a bad thing. The problem with perfection is that it is static, impervious to growth or change, rather like Mr. Woodhouse." (Bander 1999, 158). The characters described as perfect are static because they are already finished. Their personality does not change with the story, and as a result readers can perceive them as flat characters. However, imperfection is a dynamic state, so that imperfect characters can evolve and, in this way, acquire greater depth and become more interesting. By showing the imperfections of the protagonist, Austen confronts her readers with a feature of the human condition. "We may not like Emma," Stuart Tave observes, "but if she causes us to discomfort it is because we can not disown kinship with her" (210). Emma's shortcomings are a point of connection with readers, who may feel disgusted with their attitude, but at the same time, will perceive it as something real.

We can affirm, therefore, that the imperfections of the characters are an opportunity for the author to go in depth in their personality and show their evolution. These imperfections also lend credibility to the story and create points of union with the reader. However, the protagonist's excessive defects could cause rejection and distance readers from the story, reducing the effectiveness of the work. In the case of *Emma*, the challenge for the author is to amuse readers by means of the heroine's mistakes, and at the same time, awaken in them the desire that Emma will reform herself and in this way will become worthy of a happy ending .

If we fail to see Emma's faults as revealed in the ironic texture from line to line, we cannot savor to the full the comedy as it is prepared for us. On the other hand if we fail to love her, as Jane Austen herself predicted we would -if we fail to love her more and more as the book progresses- we can neither hope for the conclusion, a happy and deserved marriage with Knightley following upon her reform, nor accept it as an honest one when it comes. (Booth 96).

A protagonist like Emma demanded from her creator the ability to maintain a difficult balance throughout the work. On the one hand, she had to be able to show Emma's defects in a funny way, to achieve the comic effect, but on the other hand, she needed to avoid these imperfections so as not to bring about the reader's rejection, since, in that case, the argument would lose interest. But this is not the only challenge that Austen had to face. In addition to making readers feel attracted to Emma, despite her shortcomings, she had to plan the work so that these flaws were valued in their proper measure because, otherwise, the argument would also lose interest.

If readers who dislike Emma cannot enjoy the preparation for the marriage to Knightley, readers who do not recognize her faults with absolute precision cannot enjoy the details of the preparation for the comic abasement which must precede that marriage. (Idem 101)

To succeed, Austen had to provoke in the readers the appropriate reaction so that they were able to enjoy the novel. In order to achieve this reaction, she used different strategies that will be explained in the next section.

## 5.2 Some strategies

Most of the plot is told from Emma's point of view. Although Austen uses an external narrator, this is placed, usually, next to the protagonist and tells the facts from her perspective. Austen uses the free indirect style, characteristic of her style (Sabor 2015), so that Emma's thoughts come to us through the narrator and, at times, mixed with the narrator's voice. By telling the story in this way, several objectives are achieved. On the one hand, the reader advances in the story with the protagonist, knows her reasoning and her intentions, and this allows him to better understand her attitude and be more understanding with her mistakes. In addition, thanks to this perspective, the reader is also witness to Emma's repentance and her efforts to improve when she discovers her mistakes. That is, by positioning the reader next to the main character, the author facilitates the connection between the two, which, as we have seen, is essential for the effectiveness of the work. If Austen had decided to tell this story from another character's point of view, the effect of Emma's imperfections on readers would have been very different.

Seen from the outside, Emma would be an unpleasant person, unless, like Mr. Woodhouse and Knightley, we knew her well enough to infer her true worth. Though we might easily be led to laugh at her, we could never be made to laugh sympathetically. (Idem 97)

The same fact, observed from different points of view, can produce very diverse reactions. For this reason, when facing the challenge of writing a novel starring an obviously imperfect heroine, Austen decided to place the readers next to the protagonist, so that they could know her thoughts and intentions, and be understanding with her defects. In addition, as already mentioned, thus readers also witness more closely the repentance of Emma when she understands the damage she has caused to other people. This is another one of the strategies used by Austen to maintain the balance between Emma's imperfections and her positive characteristics. After each error of the heroine, we find a scene in which her repentance and her self-reproaches are shown.

The contrast between characters is another strategy that can be found in all of Austen's works (Copeland 2011). These contrasts cause a variety of effects, as will be appreciated in the following lines. It has been commented that the personality of Emma, described from the point of view of some characters would be much more unpleasant. Something similar would happen if the characteristics and thoughts of certain characters in this novel were described in depth. We are referring specifically to Jane Fairfax. It is very interesting to see how Austen usually keeps her in the background, offering only the essential information for the advancement of the plot.

It is not only that the slightest glance inside Jane's mind would be fatal to all of the author's plans for mystification about Frank Churchill, though this is important. The major problem is that any extended view of her would reveal her as a more sympathetic person than Emma her-self. (Booth 100).

To maintain the balance it is necessary to manage effectively the features of the characters that surround the protagonist, the information that is provided about each of them and their different appearances. As it has been mentioned, Austen avoids the contrast between Emma and Jane Fairfax for much of the story, to prevent the heroine's image from being too damaged. However, when Emma's imperfection has reached a high degree of evidence, the author introduces Mrs. Elton, who will provide a contrast from which the protagonist will benefit. This contrast is especially significant since, although both ladies share some characteristics, such as classism, the desire for notoriety, a manipulative tendency and an obstinate character, when they appear together, their differences and Emma's superiority are highlighted.

And by the end of the novel, compared to Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, Emma appears to be a model of openness, generosity, and remorse. Surely many readers who begin by disliking Emma will end, along with Mr. Knightley, by loving her in spite of her faults. (Bander 2016, 20).

While for much of the story the contrast between Emma and Jane Fairfax was unfavourable to Miss Woodhouse, in the final stretch, perspective is changed and, for this reason, Austen does not hesitate to bring Jane Fairfax to the foreground. The contrast between these two young women, on this occasion, highlights Emma's virtues, which justify that a gentleman with a proper moral outlook, like Mr. Knightley, is attracted to her.

That paradox is key to understanding Mr. Knightley's preference for the perfectly imperfect Emma over the imperfectly perfect Jane. Mr. Knightley, like Jane Austen herself, is bored by perfection. (Bander 1999, 159)

Mr. Knightley is a fundamental tool used by Austen to achieve balance in the perception of readers. This gentleman is the only person capable of reprimanding Emma for her mistakes. Through the character of Mr. Knightley, Austen verbalizes the readers' reaction when perceiving the defects of Emma and, at the same time, offers a positive point of view on the protagonist. Every time Emma behaves incorrectly, we hear a correction from Mr. Knightley.

But it has come from someone who is essentially sympathetic toward Emma, so that his judgments against her are presumed to be temporary. His sympathy reinforces ours even as he criticizes, and her respect for his opinion, shown in her self-abasement after he has criticized, is one of our main reasons for expecting her to reform. (Booth 104)

In this way, the author offers an objective and hopeful vision of the protagonist, with the intention that readers will share it. Austen manipulates readers' perception through the narrator, who is positioned next to the protagonist, and offering the points of view that can be more effective to achieve her goal.

Imperfections bring dynamism and depth to the character, and force the creator to deploy different strategies to achieve in her audience the expected reaction.

Austen knew that a reader's response to a complex literary character is dynamic, not static, and that the job of the author is to orchestrate readers' feelings of approbation or disapproval, sympathy or antipathy, liking or disliking -a job she does supremely well in Emma. (Bander 2016, 20)

An imperfect character is likely to evolve and, therefore, the public's reaction will depend on the outcome of that process of change. We have already discussed some of the strategies used by Austen to keep readers interested in Emma throughout this process. In the next section, we will analyze in more detail the results of Emma's evolutionary process.

### 5.3 Becoming "an heroine"<sup>1</sup>

*Emma's* argument revolves around the protagonist's education (Ruderman 1996) and her evolutionary process. As it is explained in the first paragraphs of the novel, Emma spent the first years of her life acting always according to her opinions and, due to the continuous praises of her friends and family, she forged a high self-image. Emma's educational deficiencies are the cause of her misperception of reality, which leads her to hurt the feelings of other people involuntarily. Despite her good will and her many natural gifts, at the beginning of the novel, Emma is in the first steps of her educational process, which she will complete throughout the work. For this reason, some critics have classified *Emma* as a *bildungsroman* (Kohn 1995), a novel about the protagonist's personal progress.

In a *bildungsroman*, the goal is maturity which the protagonist achieves little by little and with difficulty. The genre often emphasizes a main conflict between the heroine and the society. (Abrams 8)

From the beginning of the novel, Austen clearly describes both Emma's surroundings and her shortcomings, so that the reader gets to know the starting point, and therefore will be able to appreciate the different stages through which the protagonist will pass in her maturation process. Both the starting point and the goal that is reached at the end of the novel are marked by imperfection, since this is a condition of the human being. Therefore, the difference between some characters and others does not depend as much on their defects as on their intention to improve, on their effort to reach the truth.

Jane Austen depicts even the best minds as continually fallible, under the pressure of new evidence and potentially undermined from within by selfishness. Her only constants are abstract qualities –directness, honesty, sincerity, humility– the characteristics striven for by people who care about truth. She sees perfectibility as a condition of human life, but not perfection. (Butler 260)

During the first chapters of the novel, Austen describes various situations that show Emma's disconnection with reality justified by the characteristics of the education received and the limited environment in which she has always lived. Emma's persistence in assigning Harriet a noble origin and her misunderstanding of Mr. Elton's intentions, which were addressed to her and not to Harriet despite Emma's insistence, are two examples of her disconnection with reality. Keeping to her realistic style, Austen exposes these circumstances so that the reader understands that Emma's biggest problem is her distorted perception of reality, and as a consequence, although she is well-intended, she makes mistakes continuously, and hurts other people's feelings with her skewed decisions.

In order to understand Emma's role in the novel, we have to recognize her natural affinity with the truth. It is only a temporary perversity that leads her astray, a fact suggested by her firm, strong tone when she talks to her natural equal, Mr. Knightley. Not for her—or, at least, not then—the moral failings of the other female characters with whom she is compared: the soft palliations of Mrs. Weston, the constraint of Jane Fairfax, the mindless, characterless indecision of Harriet. (Butler 266).

Emma's imperfection does not consist of a weak or evil personality. The cause of her mistakes is the high self-concept and the confidence in the skills with which she fancies herself to be gifted. This self-confidence leads her to deny evidence and refuse advice. Convinced that she is doing the right thing, Emma is not aware of her mistakes until they are obvious. And, then, Austen shows Emma's affinity with the truth through the girl's repentance and her purposes of amending herself every time she realizes her wrong behaviour and its consequences.

Emma seeks goodness and truth, but, having a distorted perception of reality means that she is setting herself along a path to a bad end. For this reason, the character's progress, which is the central theme of the novel, consists of the process through which the heroine becomes aware of her mistakes and, little by little, acquires a correct vision of reality. Since she is a young woman with good intentions and positive qualities, her growth is not so much in acquiring new skills as in recognizing her mistakes. Although the protagonist's evolution develops throughout the plot, we can appreciate some turning points and a critical moment in this process.

The turning points are the various scenes in which Austen shows Emma's regret for having caused suffering to other people. In spite of the inconstancy of her resolutions, which is another of Emma's shortcomings, these moments of self-knowledge are a step forward in her maturation process, and they are preparing her for the critical moment, which is the well-known scene at Box Hill.

<sup>1</sup> No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be *an heroine*. (Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 37)



After having acted unfairly and disrespectfully with Miss Bates, Emma receives a strong correction from Mr. Knightley. Despite attempts to excuse her behaviour, she has no choice but to accept her mistake and, in doing so, a revelation of self-knowledge takes place that will be transcendental in her evolutionary process. Emma understands that her high position and personal qualities are not enough to be a good person. "At last recognizes that intelligence, wealth, and social preeminence require kindness, rather than contempt, toward Miss Bates. She awakens to the lion of her position" (Shannon 641). The awareness of her error and the suffering caused to an innocent person confront Emma with reality. After the scene at Box Hill, Austen describes the process of Emma's self-discovery and her decision to rectify, showing once again Emma's affinity with the truth and her search for the good. The consequence of this step forward in self-knowledge is that Emma, at last, is aware of her imperfection, not theoretically but in a concrete way.

Before Box Hill, Emma knew that she was not perfect, just as she knew, but would not own, that she had made Harriet too tall in her sketch, but she found it disagreeable to be told of her faults. After Box Hill, Emma finds it "unbearable" to be thought perfect by Miss Bates. This is a change indeed. (Blander 1999, 159)

After a long evolutionary process, in which the protagonist learns through her mistakes, the scene at Box Hill is an awakening of Emma to reality. And the person who has awakened Emma is none other than Mr. Knightley who, throughout the story, has acted as the heroine's mentor, pointing out her mistakes and the way forward. As it was stated in the previous section, Mr. Knightley is the character chosen by Austen to offer an objective point of view about Emma, and therefore it is Mr. Knightley who certifies Emma's improvement at the end of the book.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Without acknowledgment of one's imperfection, there can be no improvement, no growth toward perfection. Emma behaves badly, but she also acknowledges her imperfections, engages in reflection, expresses remorse, and undertakes reformation. This struggle is sufficient to make her a heroine worthy of Mr. Knightley's love, for human perfection is achieved not through faultless behavior, of which no mortal character (no, not even Fanny Price) is capable, but through a process of self-reflection and self-correction that all of Jane Austen's novels valorize and all of her heroines exemplify. Perfection, for Austen, is not being but becoming. (Bander 1999, 161)

It was explained above that perfect characters are static while imperfection is a dynamic state and can be related to the truth. That is, we appreciate imperfect characters' true nature, while in the apparently perfect ones there will always be a lack of sincerity. Perfect characters' lack of evolution is akin to Gulpin's proposal about the inadequacy of portraying perfect objects or images. In the same way that imperfection confers picturesque beauty to a landscape, it can also provide artistic beauty to a flawed character, making it more dynamic and round. For this dynamism to have positive consequences, the character must be aware of his/her mistakes and must have the intention to advance in his/her search for the good and the truth. It is this effort to reach a higher state that differentiates characters.

In the previous section, it was affirmed that Emma's main defect, during a large part of the novel, is her disconnection with reality. Through her various stages of self-discovery, Emma reaches a greater awareness of herself and, therefore, is able to recognize her mistakes, show repentance, and try to correct them. Each of these stages is a step forward in her maturation process, which allows her to perceive reality more accurately. After this slow and expensive learning process, Emma is able to look at the past with serenity and sincerity, and does not hesitate to criticize her previous attitude, when, in the final part of the novel, Mr. Knightley feels surprised for Emma's approval of Harriet Smith and Robert Martin's engagement.

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

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

Aside from picturesque beauty described in section 4 of this article, two aesthetic currents were explained that defend the beauty of imperfection: Wabi-sabi and Kintsugi. The statements of both currents are applicable to Emma's character and, therefore, to the entire novel, since Emma's education is the central theme of the work. Emma's imperfections make her a unique character, with a personality rich in nuances. At all times, the reader is aware that the author is showing this character in all sincerity, without hiding any information. Emma's imperfections, on the other hand, lead us to perceive her with more realism and proximity, since in her defects we can see our own human condition reflected. At the end of her learning process, Emma is stronger than at the beginning of the story. Figuratively speaking, we could say that throughout the plot, and mainly after her conversation with Mr. Knightley in Box Hill, Emma's personality is broken and, later, it is recomposed. Her perception of reality, her prejudices, her high self-concept and everything that prevented her from understanding those around her break down during this process of maturation, giving rise to a stronger personality, in which we can appreciate the passage of time and the footprints of that learning process.

When Austen wrote *Emma*, she took on the challenge of showing the beauty of imperfection through a heroine who was very different from her other heroines. More than two hundred years after the publication of *Emma*, although some readers dislike Mrs. Woodhouse's character (Wells 2017), those who have entered its pages are counted in the millions, and the number of viewers who have seen some of this novel's film adaptations is also very high. Readers' positive opinions about the novel *Emma* and its heroine are found everywhere, from the review traditionally assigned to Sir Walter Scott (1815), to reviews in our own times (McRum 2016). Therefore, we can say with confidence that that Austen achieved her goal: to show the beauty of an imperfect heroine.

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