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Spinsters and Widows in Jane Austen's Prose
Bachelor Thesis

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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Děkuji Mgr. Emě Jelínkové, Ph.D. za poskytnutí pomoci při zpracování této práce
a její odbornou asistenci.

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INTRODUCTION

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”¹ This is one of the most famous lines that Jane Austen ever wrote, but it makes one think if it could be applied the other way around. Could it be said that it is a truth universally acknowledged that every woman must be in want of a husband? Anyone who has ever read a book written by Jane Austen is aware that there are a lot of unmarried or widowed characters, and surely notices that there are those with no intention to marry. They range from Lady Russell from *Persuasion*, a widow with no intention of ever marrying again, to single ladies who, of their own volition, chose to remain single, such as Elizabeth Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice*, who refused two marriage proposals before she finally accepted Mr. Darcy’s suit, or Emma Woodhouse from *Emma*, a rich gentlewoman who saw no benefit in marrying anyone. These characters disprove the initial statement and hint that there is more to the matter than simply assigning a label of a spinster or a widow to someone.

By analysis of the prose of Jane Austen and her relevant female characters, I will prove that there are different types of spinsters and widows; those who are indeed in want of a husband, and those who are not; I will create a typology that will include characters of specific criteria based on my findings. As lives were different for each of Austen’s characters, I will attempt to find whether there is some common ground for her unmarried and widowed characters, or whether they are completely different groups with nothing in common.

Austen uses a range of different backgrounds, financial situations and social standings for her spinsters and widows, making each of them unique and distinctive from others. By comparing and contrasting individual characters, I will attempt to find what makes the characters the way they are, especially with regards to their decision-making processes.

There are numerous contradicting opinions regarding female characters in Austen’s prose and I will argue that some of them are misinterpreted by mentioning specific situations from the novels and giving counter examples of the statements made.

¹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 1.

While some of Austen's spinsters and widows change their status to married women in her novels, this rule does not apply to all of them. I will show there is also a dark side to being without a husband and protector by highlighting their struggles and things that make their lives difficult.

Austen—with the exception of *Persuasion*—does not cast spinsters and widows into the role of main characters, but they should not be overlooked. By making connection between heroines, spinsters and widows, and how they influence the main characters, I will determine whose role is more critical in the novels, or if they are unnecessary to the overall plot of the books.

The aim of my thesis is to analyse Austen's spinsters and widows and find connections between the relevant female characters while still showing the distinctions that make them unique. After considering every circumstance, I will create a classification that will apply to the characters in question.

Contrasting characters with others from the same novel or across the novels, I will show that as Austen's writing career progressed, her views changed and matured. By analysing her early writings and its characters with her later novels, I will prove that Austen's treatment of widows and spinsters differs greatly with regards to her early and later works. Although I will let everyone decide for themselves if it was for the better.

1. SPINSTERS AND WIDOWS

To better understand the characters in Austen's work, it is important to know what the lives of real life spinsters and widows looked like in the time of Jane Austen. She is known for her realistic portrayal of her characters as middle class people. The following pages briefly introduce the historical background of the relevant time period.

1.1. GENERAL INFORMATION ON SPINSTERS

Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter "OED") states that spinster is a "woman still unmarried, esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid."² For the purpose of this work, the average age for the middle class women to marry is set between twenty-three and twenty-seven. Any female character that passed this age is considered a spinster. In some cases, younger characters are also treated as spinsters or spinster-like characters.

Being a spinster was considered an anomaly by the society, because the main purpose of women at that time was to produce a new generation, which could only be done by marriage. Pregnancies outside the marriage bed were frowned upon, making it very difficult for single mothers to fend for themselves and their illegitimate children.

The main difficulty connected with remaining single was the lack of stability. In most cases, women did not have the means to support themselves, they were not financially independent. In many cases, being a spinster meant being dependent; on her family, on her friends, on the community she lived in.

As Bridget Hill states in her chapter on spinsters, "[M]ost fortunate were those single women who became mistresses of their own households."³ Alas, there were many who were not so lucky. In case they had a single, unmarried brother, or a widowed father, they might have been asked to keep their houses, but their situation dramatically changed once their father died or brother married. They might have found themselves without a roof over their head, without money or any way to earn it.

² <http://www.oed.com> Accessed 17 April 2017.

³ Bridget Hill, "Spinsters and Spinsterhood," in *Women, Work & Social Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 231.

It was possible for women of good education to become a governess, or a companion to some wealthy lady, the latter being suitable also for the not-so-well educated women. It provided a stable income, albeit small, and a place to live. Nevertheless, the positions were only temporary and depended on the good character of the woman in question. More so, it often resulted in the change of a status of the woman, because she effectively became a servant.

Being a spinster was generally considered a failure, and it was seen as threat by some people, as it was perceived to be an unnatural state. It is unsurprising that many women at that time period married not for affection, but out of necessity. Any husband was better than none. It was not acceptable for a woman to decide not to marry, because “[I]t was unthinkable that any woman could choose spinsterhood.”⁴ Being a spinster was simply seen as highly undesirable.

1.2 GENERAL INFORMATION ON WIDOWS

OED defines a widow as “a woman whose husband is dead (and who has not married again); a wife bereaved of her husband.”⁵ Depending on her situation, a woman in this position has two options; she can either remarry, or she can remain a widow and live without a husband. Hill, in her chapter on widows, states that “widows were less likely to remarry than widowers.”⁶ While women were used to being in charge of households, men left their homes in hands of their wives and did not know what to do if they were widowed, other than hiring a housekeeper or finding a new wife.

Widows were partially protected by law. They had a right to dower, which means that a widow was entitled to a part of her husband’s estate, mostly one third. She would not receive a dower if there was a marriage settlement in place. In that case, she would be entitled to anything that was agreed upon in the settlement, which in most case was less than what she would receive as a dower. Still, majority of widows did not have enough means to take care of themselves and their children, in case they had any. They were dependent on the help of their

⁴ Bridget Hill, “Spinsters and Spinsterhood,” in *Women, Work & Social Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 229.

⁵ www.oed.com Accessed 17 April 2017.

⁶ Bridget Hill, “Widows,” in *Women, Work & Social Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 242.

families or the parishes where they lived. They were unlikely to find a new husband, because they did not have much to offer. Their children from previous marriages were considered a burden; therefore childless widows had better chances of remarrying.

It was not easy to find a husband, even if children were not an issue. There were many single women on the marriage market, limiting the chances of widows. Regardless of their age, wealth, appearance and lack of children, it was probable that widows might never marry again. There were things to consider if widows wanted to take another husband. Widows would lose the freedom and legal identity which they gained by their husbands' death if they married again. In order to protect the children from previous marriages and their interests, widows could "lose their home and its content, their land, and even their right to reside in a son's household."⁷ Considering the legal identity of widows, they were able to own property. In some cases, a widow took over her husband's business after his death, if she wanted to. She had the option to either hire someone, or be in charge of the business herself, until her sons grew up and could take over.

Being a widow was more favourable for women of means. While wealthy widows were left to lead a comfortable, independent life, heading their own households, widows of no fortune were often forced by their situation to enter into service or, in better cases, become governesses or schoolteachers. It was not uncommon for widows who owned houses to rent rooms, which provided them with much needed income. As women without husbands, widows were vulnerable and often having no security, they had to depend on other people. Even though there were some advantages to being a widow, the disadvantages outweighed them in most cases.

⁷ Bridget Hill, "Widows," in *Women, Work & Social Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 251.

2. JANE AUSTEN

2.1 PERSONAL LIFE

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775. She was born into the family of Reverend George Austen and his wife Cassandra, née Leigh. The family was situated in Steventon in Hampshire. Jane Austen had six brothers and one sister. She was particularly close with her sister Cassandra, and her two younger brothers Francis and Charles, who were sailors with the Navy. Thanks to them, she was very knowledgeable on the subject and applied her knowledge while writing *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Persuasion* (1817).

“She was always very careful not to meddle with the matters which she did not thoroughly understand.”⁸ Austen wrote about the subjects she knew and always wrote about her own class, drawing on her own acquaintances while creating her own characters. Austen showed her insightfulness and creativity as well as wit and humour in her novels. She started writing very young, and while her early stories were not meant for publication, they helped to perfect her skills. Austen used some of her early characters as models for her future, more developed characters.

Her family was not wealthy, and although she was educated first by her father and later sent to schools, she received little formal education. She spoke French and knew little Italian. She played pianoforte, enjoyed dancing and singing. Jane Austen spent most of her life at the family living in Steventon. She spent twenty five years of her life there before her father’s retirement and their subsequent removal to Bath. Before that, she started to work on her first novels, earlier versions of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) under the title of *Elinor and Marianne*, and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) under the title of *First Impressions*.

The Austen family moved to Bath in spring 1801. Austen’s writing was affected by the move. She was unhappy about her current situation and suffered from depression. She wrote the segment of *The Watsons* (published posthumously with other minor works in 1871) while she was there. As Tomalin says in her book, “[t]he parallel with Jane’s and Cassandra’s situation is obvious”⁹, which shows that there are similarities between the story and reality. Austen shared her

⁸ James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoirs of Jane Austen: And Other Family Recollections* (Oxford World’s Classics) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18.

⁹ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 102.

ideas for the story with her sister, but the novel was never finished. Aside from *The Watsons*, Austen wrote nothing of significance for several years after their removal from Stevenson. The family lived in Bath until Austen's father died in 1805.

Contrary to what her family lead people to believe, her life was not as uneventful as they claimed. Claire Tomalin, in her Austen's biography, uncovers what the author's life really looked like. She often travelled during her life, especially after her father's demise. Having no permanent home, she visited her brothers and their families, as well as her friends, spending several months somewhere and then moving to different location. It was not until 1809 that she finally settled in Chawton with her mother and sister, after her brother Edward provided them with a house. Most of her novels were written there during the years of 1811 and 1816. Chawton was Austen's last home; she lived there until her death on July 18, 1817.

Even though Jane Austen died a spinster, she had her share of suitors. Aside from Tom Lefroy, a young Irishman and relative of Austen's dear friend—many authors, such as Jon Spence, believe he was romantically involved with Jane Austen—she was favoured by Mr Samuel Blackall, who was looking for a wife, in 1797. However, she showed disinterest and he subsequently married another woman. When she was twenty seven years old, she received her one and only marriage proposal. Her friends' brother, Mr. Harris Biggs-Wither, asked for her hand in December 1802 and she accepted, although he was five years her junior. She changed her mind the very next day, declining the offer of practical marriage. Despite her refusal to marry him, she remained friends with his sisters and they often visited each other.

Austen remarked, in connection to her friend's upcoming wedding, that “[s]he was learning to see that spinsterhood, a condition which had for so long looked fearful, could be a form of freedom.”¹⁰ After she declined to marry Mr. Biggs-Wither, Austen accepted the life of a spinster and maiden aunt. Her sister Cassandra had lost her fiancé by then, and subsequently decided never to marry, so the sisters could plan their lives as spinsters together, enjoying the limited freedom it offered.

¹⁰ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 207.

“What Jane Austen wanted from the life around her, she took and used, finely and tangentially.”¹¹ Austen never wrote an autobiography, but she often drew inspiration from what was happening in her life. After she attended a string of weddings, weddings became the focus of her early stories. She also used the experience of her relatives. “Love and Freindship” [sic] was inspired by the life of her cousin Eliza, to whom she dedicated the story, and “Catherine, or the Bower” reflects the story of Eliza’s mother.¹² *The Watsons* show some autobiographical traits, which might have been the reason for Austen’s abandonment of the story. Furthermore, some of Austen’s heroines resemble the author herself, even if by accident. Austen was, especially after her father’s demise, “penniless, dependent on her brothers, and obliged to accept whatever living arrangements were chosen for her.”¹³ She placed Fanny Price from *Mansfield Park* into a similar situation and Fanny is definitely not the only heroine in need of funds. *Persuasion*’s Anne Elliot received a second marriage proposal (she broke her first engagement when she was nineteen years old), and she married at the same age as Austen herself accepted her suitor, albeit only for a short time, and Mrs. Smith’s health reflects that of the author, who was, by the time she wrote *Persuasion*, seriously ill and an invalid herself.

We can look at Austen the way her family wanted us to—they wanted the readers to see her in the most favourable light, even if it meant embellishing the truth and destroying most of her letters, which would show her real character—or we can accept the more recent picture of Jane Austen which is less favourable. Either way, Jane Austen’s work is fascinating and deserves the attention of readers, regardless of which version of her life is closer to reality.

2.2 EARLY WORKS

Austen started writing very early in her life. Her juvenile texts were written for her family’s amusement and ranged from youthful stories, dramas, letters and poems. She began to write them in 1787, when she was eleven, and she continued until she was seventeen years old in 1793.

¹¹ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 102.

¹² See Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life*, 82.

¹³ Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life*, 192.

As Juliet McMaster states in her article *Young Jane Austen: Author*, which was published as part of Blackwell's *A Companion to Jane Austen*, the readers can see parts of her earlier stories in her later works. The main difference is that she treats things differently in her early texts than she does in her novels. She could openly express her opinions and views in her juvenile writings, as they were never meant for publication and their purpose was to entertain her family. As such, Austen could get away with making fun of things such as spinsterhood or drunken behaviour of widows; she was unbound by conventions she later needed to apply in order to get her books published.

In "Frederic & Elfrida", one of her juvenile stories, she deliberately sets a trap for her readers; she leads us to believe that the Fitzroys are young ladies when the opposite is true. Miss Rebecca is six-and-thirty and her sister is even older. By that time, they would normally be considered out of the marriage market, but Austen treats age differently in this story. Miss Rebecca is considered to be too young to marry by her mother. Elfrida, the main heroine herself, remains unmarried much longer, way past her child-bearing years, which was defined by some people as the beginning of spinsterhood.¹⁴

Marriage and spinsterhood go hand in hand as far as Austen is concerned. Either you marry, or you become a spinster. In "The Three Sisters", "a distinctly brutal story about mercenary matchmaking"¹⁵, the importance of marriage is discussed by Mary Stanhope who is debating whether or not she should marry a wealthy man she hates. Charlotte Lucas faces a similar dilemma, and the same might be said about Jane Fairfax. They all have to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of their matches and decide whether it is better to marry their chosen men or find a different purpose, a different way of fending for themselves, something that might be more agreeable for them.

As a young woman, Austen did not see spinsterhood in the same light as she did later in her life, influenced by her own experience. In fact, she directly mocked the characters in "Frederic & Elfrida", making them seem silly for being so old and still unmarried, yet treating it as perfectly ordinary at the same time. The progress is to be seen when contrasting her juvenile texts with her later

¹⁴ Bridget Hill, "Spinsters and Spinsterhood," in *Women, Work & Social Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Taylor & Francis e-library, 2005), 225.

¹⁵ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 80.

works. While she makes fun of spinsters in her teenage years, she seems to have matured in her views and regards it with more seriousness in her novels, which can be seen in the example of Austen's final novel, *Persuasion*, which shows spinsterhood in the most serious light. The heroine herself is a spinster and it deals with the concept of the marriage market, the willingness to remain unmarried rather than marrying for the wrong reasons, and the—arguable—better marriage prospects of her elder sister.

Austen's treatment of spinsterhood, among other topics in her early stories, reflects her young age, as well as her inexperience and naivety. That being said, it does not mean that they are not worth reading or reflecting upon, as they give solid background to her subsequent works.

There is an abundance of widows in Austen's juvenile fiction. Some of them are there just to fill in the role of a chaperone, such as Lady Halifax from "Catherine, or the Bower", others are there to provide links between characters, such as Lady Percival from "Sir William Montague", who Sir William, her former fiancé, plans to use to gain access to his current love interest; or Mrs. Willis from "Evelyn", the amiable landlady who, by providing information to Mr. Grover, might have contributed to his happiness. As shown on the example of "Love and Freindship" [sic], a story written in epistolary form, Austen does not mind making widows out of women at the drop of a hat. Laura and Sophia, two young friends, both lose their husbands in the matter of one letter.

Lady Williams, from "Jack & Alice", is a walking contradiction. She is a wealthy, handsome widow who is known as a generous, polite woman who possesses every virtue. Although said to be virtuous, she does not behave that way and during the party in the beginning of the story drinks excessively, just like everyone else. Later, when corresponding with her young friend Lucy, she says she is against Lucy's marriage to the Duke, but already plans for Lucy to spend his money in the next sentence. Lady Williams shares Charlotte Lucas' view on marriage; you can marry a man who is disagreeable, as long as he provides you with something you want. As long as Lucy is free to spend the Duke's fortune, Lady Williams does not mind that he is an elderly, illiterate man without principles. Furthermore, although she is said to be "too sensible, to fall in love

with one so much her Junior”¹⁶, she marries Charles Adams, a man so much younger than her, in the end.

Eliza, from “Henry and Eliza”, who is used to living in high style and spending more than she has, is left without means after her husband’s death. She returns to England—she eloped with Henry Cecil and then went to the Continent to avoid the rage of Duchess of F.—with her two children who she has to provide for. She is very unpractical and unthinking when regarding money. She unwillingly sells her clothes, but instead of buying food with the money, she buys toys and a gold watch for herself. After reuniting with her parents, it is shown that she has a vengeful streak, as she sends an army to destroy the Duchess’ soldiers, who she blames for her misfortune.

There is another widow in “Henry and Eliza”—Duchess F. She represents a stereotypical titled woman; she is polite, has good manners, but she shows her true colours when she feels betrayed by Eliza; she is rude, vengeful and behaves in a very unladylike manner. She is self-entitled and thinks she is better than most. When analysing her character, we are reminded of Lady Catherine from *Pride and Prejudice*, who she shares some traits with. It is possible that Duchess from this story was a model for the latter Lady Catherine.

2.3 LATER WORKS

Jane Austen’s serious writing started when she finished the revision of *Elinor and Marianne* into *Sense and Sensibility* in November 1797. After she was finished with the revisions, she begin to write her other story, *Susan* (later known as *Northanger Abbey*), which was the first novel that Austen sold to a publisher in 1803, but it was not published until much later, after the success of her other novels.

Austen wrote the short segment of *The Watsons* probably in 1804, while residing in Bath, but she abandoned the story after her father’s death. After settling down in Chawton, she started the process for the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which was the revised version of her earlier story *First Impressions*. The story of the Dashwood sisters was first published in 1811, after which Austen started to plan her next novel, *Mansfield Park*, as well

¹⁶ Jane Austen, *Juvenilia* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2008), 14.

as the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, which was published in 1813. During the same year, she finished writing *Mansfield Park*, which was published the following year. By the time of its publication, Austen was already in the process of writing *Emma*, which was finished and published in the year of 1815.

Austen's health began to decline in 1816, but her illness did not stop her from writing another story. She was writing her last completed novel, *Persuasion*, and she bought back her manuscript of *Susan* and revised it into its current form of *Northanger Abbey*. The next year, Austen moved to Winchester along with her sister Cassandra, who helped and nursed her. She started to write *Sanditon*, but she was unable to finish it due to her declining health. She died in July 1817. Her novels *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published posthumously in the same year.

Austen as a writer was influenced by many things; among those influences were her own experience as a daughter and sister of clergymen, her close relation to the Navy due to her brothers, her father's death, her own health problems toward the end of her life, her mother's experience as a widow, or her sister's tragic loss of a fiancé, and last but not least, her own experience as a spinster.

She started with simple, less complicated stories and plots, but as her writing career progressed, she started to write about more serious topics, use more complex characters with more complicated backgrounds; she started to write about minor, redundant characters that other writers seemed to overlook. In her last novel, she was not afraid of making her heroine a veritable spinster and making her story much more enjoyable than if the central character was a spirited young girl. Her writing improved, as well as her choice of topics and themes with each written novel, which is the reason why so many people have enjoyed reading her stories and why her novels are popular to this day.

3. SPINSTERS

You can have a literary spinster outside the work of Jane Austen, but you cannot have a Jane Austen novel without a spinster. A spinster is an often-used type of character in her work; a fact that was also influenced by the author's own life. A literary spinster offers Austen a lot of possibilities. Her spinsters have different backgrounds and they will never appear in the same circumstances.

Almost every Austen's novel has at least one character that is a spinster or is spinster-like. Starting with her collection of short stories and other literary works, spinsters are often placed in the centre of attention, even if they are not the protagonists of the story.

Northanger Abbey is a unique novel among Austen's other works. It was an experiment which main purpose was to mock other Gothic romances, which was a very popular genre at the time of its creation, and as such, it differs greatly from her other novels and cannot be regarded in the same light. There is no need for a spinster or a spinster-like character in a Gothic novel; as a result, there are none in *Northanger Abbey*.

Austen often puts the lives of different, yet somewhat similar characters in contrast, and *Pride and Prejudice* provides a perfect example for that. Elizabeth Bennet and her refusal to bend her will to the wishes of others, even if it means her choices would lead to spinsterhood, stands in contrast to her older friend's life. Charlotte Lucas has to choose between having "a comfortable home"¹⁷ yet sharing her life with a person she is indifferent to, or staying single for the rest of her life, as she is expected to "[die] an old maid"¹⁸ by her family and neighbours.

Emma shows different sides to being a spinster while contrasting two characters who could not be more different. Considering Austen was already settled into her life as a spinster when she wrote *Emma*, she was well-aware of the precarious position of single, unmarried women; therefore the treatment of spinsters is also a very important theme in this novel. Focusing on Emma, a wealthy and young girl, and Miss Bates, a middle-aged spinster of no means, there is a visible difference between their lives. While rich and high-spirited Emma remains unmarried by choice, Miss Bates is robbed of this option by her circumstances as her family lacks in fortune and connections. Miss Bates and her

¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 121.

¹⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 118.

invalid mother struggle to survive on almost no income and they have to depend on the kindness of other inhabitants of Highbury. Miss Bates has to balance being a spinster and trying to be important to others. It is a difficult thing to achieve, yet she does not give up and becomes one of the iconic spinsters in Austen's novels.

Miss Bates and Emma's different circumstances are evident in their treatment of people and each other. Miss Bates is always respectful and civil to everyone, acutely aware of her place. Emma, on the other hand, is often self-entitled and impolite, which is clearly demonstrated on the example of the Box Hill outing. Not only does she insult Miss Bates' intelligence—agreeing that she can only come up with “three things very dull indeed”¹⁹—but she rudely accuses Miss Bates of being a chatterbox. Emma has the higher standing; as a wealthy, independent woman, she can afford to make that statement, while Miss Bates can do nothing to defend herself, unless she wants to alienate the people she is dependent on. She can only “try to hold [her] tongue”²⁰ and swallow the humiliation.

Two sisters who are still unmarried, even though they passed the usual age for marriage, yet their lives completely differ—that is the story of *Persuasion*. Elizabeth and Anne Elliot are both spinsters, but it is their perception of their situation that separates them. Anne is resigned to her fate and her future whereas Elizabeth still believes she will marry someday, although she is aware of “her approach to the years of danger.”²¹ It is ironic that in the conclusion of the novel, the “unmarriageable” heroine reunites with her former fiancé while the “marriageable” older sister still remains husband-less.²²

3.1 SPINSTERS IN JANE AUSTEN

Marriage and family are very important subjects and themes in Austen's works. As Julia Prewitt Brown states in her book *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form*, “[M]arriage is the highest form of self-fulfillment [sic] in Jane

¹⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 360.

²⁰ Austen, *Emma*, 361.

²¹ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 5.

²² See Dashielle Horn, “An Early Loss of Bloom: Spinsters, Old Maids, and the Marriage Market in *Persuasion*” (Thesis, Lehigh University, 2012).

Austen.”²³ The question is whether spinsters could have a fulfilling life without marriage.

Unlike Charlotte Lucas from *Pride and Prejudice*, who sees her unmarried state as a burden, Miss Diana Parker—one of the Parker siblings from Austen’s unfinished novel *Sanditon* and “the embodiment of ‘Activity run mad’, who cannot stop talking and organising other people’s lives”²⁴—does not seem to mind her situation as a single woman. On the contrary, she is content with it, because having a husband and a family of her own would only mean restrictions to her life. She is free to live her life of a hypochondriac, to encourage her sister Susan—a spinster as well, unlikely ever to marry due to her delicate constitution and poor health—and her youngest brother Arthur to do the same, and to command others as she sees fit. She does not see her life as unfulfilling, and she finds self-fulfilment in finding new illnesses and “struggling” through them to be of help to other people.

Unlike Diana Parker, not all female characters in Austen have the opportunity and means to find meaning outside of marriage; Miss Bates from *Emma* is a good example of that. Although she comes from a genteel family, she is poor, with no hope for a change in her fortune or status. Past the age for marrying and having a family of her own, she is resigned to spinsterhood and tries to make the best of her life. She takes care of her elderly mother, and she takes pleasure in her niece’s company and accomplishments.

In contrast to the character of Miss Bates, there is Miss Taylor, who used to be Emma Woodhouse’s governess—one of the alternatives for unmarried women of good education at that time—and later companion, until she married and became Mrs. Weston. About the same age as Miss Bates and with no real prospects of her own, she ended up being a mistress of her own house, therefore changing her situation as a spinster, who had to depend on other people for her livelihood, to that of a married woman with a family of her own.

Jane Fairfax, a spinster-like character from the same novel, was to become a governess as well. She is not a spinster yet—because there is still hope for her on the marriage market—but her situation in life makes it difficult for her to

²³ Julia P. Brown, *Jane Austen’s Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), 86.

²⁴ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 266.

concentrate on husband-hunting. She is an orphan, her family consists of a poor aunt and an elderly grandmother, and she does not have many connections of her own, nor does she possess a fortune. Despite her many accomplishments, she was not able to find a husband, therefore it was decided she was to become a governess—“the English equivalent of the slave trade”²⁵—which would be the first step toward spinsterhood for her. It was not common for a governess to marry. In the end, Jane is given a choice to avoid this fate after receiving a marriage proposal from Frank Churchill, who is her inferior in many aspects. She weighs her options and makes the same choice as Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*; she decides that being married to Frank Churchill is better than not marrying at all.

Family and marriage market are important themes in one of Austen’s unfinished novels, *The Watsons*. Emma Watson—complete opposite of Jane Fairfax, because she “. . . would rather be a teacher . . . than marry a man [she] did not like”²⁶—discusses marriage with her elder sister, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, nine years older than Emma, has a different opinion than her naive and inexperienced sister. Elizabeth has been out in society for ten years and understands the need to marry, especially when a woman is not provided for. After all, “. . . it is very bad to grow old and be poor and laughed at.”²⁷ In this regard, Elizabeth Watson, unlike her sister, shares the view of Jane Fairfax and Charlotte Lucas; any husband is better than no husband at all.

In Austen’s novels, there often appear characters that refuse to see themselves as spinsters, despite their age. Elizabeth Elliot from *Persuasion* still believes in her good prospects on the marriage market, and she is sure her marriage it will happen sooner or later. The same might be said about Miss Anne Steele. She is almost in her thirties, and her marriage prospects are questionable, even though she does not act like a spinster.

Every Austen’s character is different in some way, and their circumstances and situations in life often greatly differ. To have a better understanding of that, the following pages will deal with the characters in more details.

²⁵ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 248.

²⁶ Jane Austen, *Lady Susan and Other Works* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2013), 233.

²⁷ Austen, *Lady Susan and Other Works*, 233.

3.2 TYPES OF SPINSTERS

3.2.1 Matter of Choice

Spinsterhood is regarded as undesirable by society, but there may be some women who choose this way of life. Although they may have had good prospects on the marriage market, it was their choice to remain single. In comparison to those who had the means and opportunity to make this choice for themselves, there are the women who simply did not have any other choice but to become and remain spinsters. They are women whose situation in life is less than fortunate; they lack wealth, social standing and other desirable traits. This type of spinsters often provides a comic relief, as they are usually portrayed as silly, odd women, somehow different from others.

Emma Woodhouse is a privileged young woman and “the wealthiest and most secure out of all Austen’s heroines.”²⁸ She is a self-proclaimed spinster and one of the spinster-like characters in *Emma*. She is only twenty-one, still young enough to find a husband and not old enough to be a spinster yet, but it is her determination not to marry that makes her spinster-like. Emma, unlike Miss Bates and some other spinsters in Austen’s works, has a choice; she can marry if she wants to, but she deliberately chooses not to. She states clearly her opinion on marriage:

I have none of the usual inducements of woman to marry . . . I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistresses of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s.²⁹

Emma Woodhouse is right; marriage does not offer her the advantages that it offers other women. She is independently wealthy and she already has a house to manage. She does not need to fear that her position will change after her father’s death because she stands to inherit Hartfield. Her position in the community is superior in comparison to other people, and she does not believe it is going to change much in the future, even if she remained unmarried.

²⁸ Brenna Neubauer, “This Old Maid: Jane Austen and her S(p)i(n)sters,” *Midwest Quarterly* 56(2) (2009): 135.

²⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 81.

Her situation is similar to the situation of *Persuasion*'s Elizabeth Elliot. Both of them manage their father's households, and they are proud of it. Unlike Elizabeth, who is not going to inherit after her father's death, Emma's future is secure, with or without a husband. On the other hand, Elizabeth sees her current state as a temporary one, which will change after she marries. In contrast, Emma has no desire to marry; she is satisfied as she is now—taking care of her father, maintaining the house and spoiling her nieces and nephews. Also, there is no threat to Emma's future, no one to jeopardise it, because Mr. Woodhouse has no intention to marry again.

Emma has nothing to gain by marrying anyone. In her case, marrying would most likely mean lowering of her own position and giving someone else the control over her life which she now possesses herself. She wishes to remain unmarried, and her father supports her in this decision, because he hates any change in his life and he would essentially lose Emma if she was to marry. Emma's view on the world and marriage is that of a spoilt young woman. She is self-centred, and she often does not think about the consequences of her actions. She has not thoroughly considered about all the ramifications of living as a spinster, which made her insecure about the future she chose. This essentially projects in her rude and insulting behaviour on Box Hill toward Miss Bates.

In contrast to Emma Woodhouse stands the character of Anne Steele from *Sense and Sensibility*. She is by no means a spinster by choice, even if she likes to pretend otherwise. Miss Anne Steele—or Nancy, as she is often called—is nearing thirty years of age, and she is already past the usual age for marriage. She is described as plain looking, which in combination with her silly and foolish behaviour and lack of fortune means she does not have a fair prospect on the marriage market. She lacks common sense, as witnessed in many scenes in the novel, and she also lacks conversation skills and substance. The only topics she is able to talk about are gossip and her beaux. She is not a heroine, she is not a villain. She is one of the characters that Austen uses in her novels for the comic relief, which is, in this case, provided by Anne's incessant chattering and nonsense. Despite her age, she does not act as if she was a spinster just yet. On the contrary, she acts like she has her share of suitors, as if it is by her decision only that she has not chosen one of them so far. The question remains whether she is

still as marriageable as she thinks she is. There is no evidence supporting it, other than her instant talking about Dr. Davies, one of her possible suitors.

Elizabeth Watson from *The Watsons* is another character who had little choice with regards to marriage. She is a twenty-eight year old spinster and she was not successful on the marriage market, although she has been out for many years. In her own words, “[she] could do very well single”³⁰ but she is aware that she would be without means after her father’s death, because he cannot provide for her. She mentions the importance of marriage to her sister, showing how aware of her current situation she is. Elizabeth Watson shares some similarities with Elizabeth Elliot from *Persuasion*. Both of them were attached to young men and hoped to find a match in the past, but it never happened. In case of Elizabeth Elliot, the same circle repeated once more after Mr. Elliot’s reconciliation with her family. Elizabeth Watson also shares Charlotte Lucas’s view that it does not really matter who you marry, as long as you marry. She does not seem much inclined to marry, but sees it as a necessity. Like Charlotte, she is very practical, which is supported by her statement that “. . . very few people marry their first loves. I should not refuse a man because he was not Purvis.”³¹ This shows her desperation to marry and proves that she would prefer marriage of convenience to being a penniless laughingstock.

Elinor Dashwood, a spinster-like heroine from *Sense and Sensibility*, did not make the choice to remain single; she was forced into her current position by the situation and partially by her mother’s lack of interest in taking care of the household and family after her husband’s death. Elinor, being only nineteen years old, is practically the head of the family. Being the “sensible and discreet”³² one in her family, she takes care of the most important things instead of her mother. Mrs. Dashwood, in her temper and feeling identical to her younger daughter, is a good mother, but she is not the most practical person alive. She is still grieving the death of her husband, and she is more than happy for Elinor to take charge. It is the responsibility for her family and their well-being that effectively makes Elinor a spinster-like character. She takes care of her family; in this regard, she can be compared to Miss Bates from *Emma*, as well as Emma Woodhouse,

³⁰ Jane Austen, *Lady Susan and Other Works* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2013), 233.

³¹ Austen, *Lady Susan and Other Works*, 233.

³² Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 109.

because all of them take care of their parents and all of them are spinsters. Above all, Elinor strives for stability in her life. As all young women her age, Elinor wants to marry, but she knows that she is not the most desirable match. She does not have a big fortune, nor does she have the happy and carefree manners of her younger sister. Her chances are limited not only by her circumstance, but also by Elinor herself.

Apart from Emma Woodhouse, there are other characters that made the choice to lead a life without a husband. Worth-mentioning are the Parker sisters, Diana and Susan, from Austen's last unfinished novel *Sanditon*, who decided to dedicate their lives to something different than taking care of their families and maintaining their houses. In contrast to Miss Bates, who does not possess the means to be independent, the sisters lead comfortable lives and they do not mind their lack of husbands.

3.2.2 Eternal spinsters and "late bloomers"

Jane Austen's spinsters can be viewed in the regard of their future prospects; therefore they can be divided into eternal spinster and "late bloomers". For the purpose of my thesis, an eternal spinster is a character that never marries, regardless of the reason—be it the lack of fortune, good looks, or entirely by choice. The characters labelled as eternal spinsters are unlikely to receive a marriage proposal in the future; there is no hint as to their potential marital prospects in the novels. On the contrary, "late bloomers" are characters already considered to be spinsters or spinster-like, who change their destiny later in their lives and accept a proposal. Some characters can be also considered "late bloomers" if they had no intention to marry but later changed their minds; they "bloomed" into the idea of marriage.

"A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid!"³³ Miss Bates is a typical old maid and eternal spinster. She has little to no income and she is no longer on the marriage market. She is in the middle of her life and she is a complete opposite of Emma, because she is "neither young, handsome, rich."³⁴ Her inferior status makes her unable to stand up for herself,

³³ Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 82.

³⁴ Austen, *Emma*, 18.

because she is afraid she might anger the people she depends on for their help. Miss Bates leads a very confined life. She does not take an active role in the social life in Highbury; due to her circumstances, she has to wait until someone invites her to be a part of it. She is well aware of her place in the hierarchy of the community, but she still tries to make the best of her life. She is poor and without means, but she does not have the option of going into service. She has to take care of her elderly mother, who is dependent on her daughter, and also due to her status of a gentlewoman. She cannot become a governess either, because she lacks the education and intelligence to become one. She is destined to live her life as a destitute spinster, who has to depend on the help of others.

On the other hand, as Hall states in her book, Miss Bates has an important role in Highbury. She is the recipient of the charitable efforts of the more fortunate people who live there. If Miss Bates and her mother were not there, the families in the neighbourhood would not know the importance of charity and helping others. In case of Emma herself, she would most likely never realise how narrow-minded and selfish her opinions and actions were, which makes the minor character of Miss Bates an essential part of the development of the heroine. Although Miss Bates is one of the comic characters in Austen's novels, she deserves the sympathy of the readers. She is ridiculous and her constant chattering makes her annoying and disagreeable, but her rambling is her way of getting attention. She struggles to remain visible in the community of people who are luckier in their circumstances than her, and she tries to make herself useful to them in any way possible. Miss Bates is grateful and obliged to anyone, which stands in contrast to the selfish and rude behaviour of some of Highbury's residents.

In comparison to Miss Bates, Elizabeth Elliot might not be the first one to come to mind when discussing eternal spinsters, but she is one nonetheless. Despite her beliefs of an advantageous match happening in the near future, she is still unmarried and there is next to no ground to support her opinion. As a result, she is viewed as an eternal spinster—a character who would remain single in the months and years following the end of the novel. Elizabeth Elliot is well-aware of the fact that she should marry soon, and she “would have rejoiced to be certain of

being properly solicited by baronet-blood within the next twelvemonth or two.”³⁵ Despite her age, she believes she has a fair chance of finding a husband, mainly due to her attractiveness and the family name. Elizabeth Elliot provides an interesting comparison to her younger sister Anne; both can be viewed as spinsters, but while Elizabeth is an eternal spinster, Anne is a perfect example of a “late bloomer”, a spinster that ultimately marries.

The Elliot sisters and their situation provide a topic for discussion for many people. In her thesis, Dashielle Horn argues that while Elizabeth Elliot is two years older than Anne, it is the younger of the sister that is in fact a spinster, while the older one is still desirable on the marriage market. She considers the factors that make a spinster and applies them to the situation of the Elliot sisters. According to her, it is dependent on “a combination of age, beauty and health, financial situation, and even position in the family.”³⁶ Admittedly, Anne is a spinster, but Elizabeth’s marriage prospects are not much better, therefore it makes sense to consider her to be a spinster as well. While it is true that she is undeniably superior to Anne in beauty and that her position in the family as the eldest daughter is better than Anne’s, which might be of some consideration for her future suitors, there is not much more that makes them different. Elizabeth does not stand to inherit the Elliot estate in case of her father’s death, so the financial situation of both of them is similar. While it is definitely true that Elizabeth is considered to be more attractive than Anne and is popular among the other sex— as “men are all wild after Miss Elliot”³⁷—there is no clear indication of her real chances of marriage.

Comparing the sisters’ marriage prospects, Anne does not lack in suitors in the duration of the novel, even though she is considered to be unmarriageable. Although Elizabeth might boast about catching Mr. Elliot’s eye when he first came to Bath, it is ultimately Anne who is the object of his affections. It is never said if Elizabeth had ever received a marriage proposal, a fact that makes her suitable to be called an eternal spinster. Her unmarried status, at nine-and-twenty, is the result of her high standards and her father’s expectations, because he wants her to marry at least a baronet. Still, Anne seems as the more desirable sister in

³⁵ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 5.

³⁶ Dashielle Horn, “An Early Loss of Bloom: Spinsters, Old Maids, and the Marriage Market in *Persuasion*” (Thesis, Lehigh University, 2012).

³⁷ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 162.

comparison. She became engaged early as a young girl and she was later proposed to again, which she refused. She received two marriage proposals during the second volume of *Persuasion*, while being considered a spinster, a woman destined not to marry; it corroborates my statement that it should not be said that Elizabeth is more marriageable than her younger sister Anne.

Anne Elliot is a unique character, a “late bloomer”. She is in her late twenties, much older than other female protagonists in Austen’s novels—the oldest of them all, in fact—and she is a confirmed spinster. Similar to Emma, she made the choice not to marry herself; for Anne, it was a decision influenced by her broken heart. Anne is twenty-seven years of age and she is dismissed by her vain relatives, who only value people based on their beauty and attractiveness, because “her bloom had vanished early.”³⁸ As Brown states in her book, “Anne’s situation defines her more than her personality does.”³⁹ She is not recognised for her kindness, willingness to help others and quickness of mind or sweet character. She is not attractive enough for her eldest sister and father to be considered their equal. She is the unattractive, disposable spinster who will do what she is told, simply because she is told to do it. For her sister Mary, she is just a useful person who will take care of her when she is indisposed. Although Anne does not mind it—because she likes to feel useful and have something to do—they should not think that she is required to do those things just because she is a spinster.

Anne is possibly the most complex character in Austen’s prose. She suffered loss in her life—the death of her mother and the loss of her fiancé—which affected her emotionally as well as physically. Some people see her early loss of youthfulness as a result of her suffering, which might be supported by her gradual change in appearance in the second volume of the novel, when she seems to “bloom” again after she is finally reunited with Captain Wentworth and undergoes the transition from a spinster to a late bloomer married woman. Even though Anne Elliot faces an uncertain future as a wife of a naval captain in the end, she is rewarded for her suffering, for her—this time—steady character. Her past behaviour and actions are forgiven as she is reunited with the man she loves.

³⁸ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 4.

³⁹ Julia P. Brown, *Jane Austen’s Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), 144.

She is finally free from her family, who could not appreciate her character, and surrounded by people who love her for who she is.

The above mentioned characters are the most prominent example of eternal spinster and “late bloomers”, but they are not the only ones. When talking about eternal spinsters, the Parker sisters from *Sanditon* and Charlotte Lucas from *Pride and Prejudice* should not be overlooked. Contrasting them, Diana and Susan deliberately chose their future, while Charlotte had no choice in the matter until her friend, Elizabeth Bennet, refused the suit of Mr. Collins and therefore provided her with the opportunity to marry him herself. Even though Charlotte marries in the end, she still remains a spinster because she tries to separate her life as much as possible from her husband after her marriage.

Apart from Anne Elliot, who is also a “late bloomer” with regards to her age, there are other characters that fit the profile of a “late bloomer”, such as the heroines from *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*. At first, Emma Woodhouse can be seen as eternal spinster, someone content with spending their lives in spinsterhood, but the opposite is true as she later falls in love and decides to marry, which makes her a ‘late bloomer’ in spite of her young age. It is the example of the development of a character. Eternal spinsters and ‘late bloomers’ are not mutually exclusive, they can complement each other; and in case of Emma Woodhouse, they are interconnected. The same can be said about Elizabeth Bennet. Her refusal of several marriage proposals makes her an eternal spinster as she clearly shown her intention to avoid the married state, but she ultimately belongs to the category of “late bloomers” as she decides to marry Mr. Darcy in the end.

3.2.3 (Dis)contentment

With regards to this category of spinsterhood, there are two types of female characters in Austen’s novels; those who are resigned to their situation in life, maybe even happy with it, and those who would do anything to avoid spinsterhood.

Diana and Susan Parker are perfect examples of women who do not mind their status as spinsters; they never thought it necessary for them to find husbands. Past the usual age of marrying, neither of them seem to mind the fact that they are

husbandless and without families of their own. They have a different purpose, which they see as satisfying as having a family, if not more. They revel in illnesses. Both of them are in poor health, constantly battling different health issues. They are true hypochondriacs and they are both content with their lives, never once complaining about the difficulties of being spinsters. On the contrary, they prefer their current status, as being married and having children would most likely mean they could not invest their time in what truly makes them happy—being hypochondriacs and “collecting” various illnesses.

In contrast to the Parker sisters stands Lucy Steele from *Sense and Sensibility*. This beautiful, well-mannered woman portrays the kind of woman who desperately wants to avoid becoming a spinster. Lucy is manipulative and calculating. Even after her secret engagement to Edward Ferrars is revealed, and it is obvious that his affections for her are long lost, she insists on marriage. Later, knowing that Edward is disinherited, she finds his brother Robert a better alternative and marries him instead. She is a classic example of a social climber, a trait she shares with Isabella Thorpe from *Northanger Abbey*, another character who would do anything to avoid remaining single. She has no fortune to tempt a future husband, but she tries to hide it under her charming and amiable behaviour. She is dissatisfied with the prospect of living in humble conditions and with little money to spare, and she manages to alienate the people who care about her, along with her fiancé, in her quest to find a more suitable match. Isabella Thorpe is one of the characters that view spinsterhood in the worst possible light, not finding anything positive about it.

Pride and Prejudice provides another contrasting example of two characters that see their fates in a different light. Comparing the characters of Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth Bennet, the distinction between their thinking is clearly shown. While one sees spinsterhood as something to be avoided at all costs, the other is aware of the consequences an unhappy marriage can bring and prefers becoming a spinster over marrying an unsuitable man.

Charlotte Lucas is a typical example of a spinster; at about twenty seven years of age, she has been unsuccessful on the marriage market so far, her prospects are not good, considering her plain looks and lack of fortune. Charlotte is perceived as intelligent and sensible by other people and she does not lack common sense. Despite that, she has not been fortunate in finding a husband and

many people believed that “there was no chance of [her ever marrying].”⁴⁰ Charlotte seems very rational and logical in her opinions and views, but also completely unromantic in comparison to other female characters in the novel, for instance Jane or Elizabeth Bennet. Although Elizabeth is equally rational and logical as her friend, Charlotte seems to be overly cynical in comparison.

Without thinking highly either of man or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.⁴¹

This passage describes Charlotte perfectly. As stated by Hall in her book, “[Charlotte] is not romantic, because she cannot afford to be.”⁴² She is the eldest of her siblings and old enough to be considered a burden to her parents. She needs to be practical and she sees marriage as a necessity, therefore deciding that any husband will do. Charlotte views Mr. Collins as an eligible match, and for her, he is. He has a stable income, good living, and some connections. His prospects are bound to improve due to the fact that he is the heir to the Bennet estate. As far as she is concerned, he is as good as any man. She cannot find one reason why she should refuse his suit; on the contrary, she is the one encouraging it to happen. She knows she is unlikely to receive another proposal, thus she does not allow herself to be discouraged by her friend, and she accepts his hand. She marries—settles for—Mr. Collins because he can provide her with stability and “a comfortable home”⁴³, which seems to be her single objective. In doing so, he also saves her from remaining a spinster and future dependency and instability.

Charlotte’s views on matrimony are known from the beginning. When talking to Elizabeth, she says that Jane should not miss the opportunity to “fix” Bingley while she can. She then continues to highlight that it is better if you are ignorant of the faults of the person before you marry him. Contrary to women who seek to find happiness in marriage, Charlotte sees marriage as a transaction, a practical arrangement between two people. She strictly seeks the advantages and comfort that marriage might bring, not caring about marital happiness, which she

⁴⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 95.

⁴¹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 118-119.

⁴² Lynda A Hall, *Women and “Value” in Jane Austen’s Novels: Settling, Speculating and Superfluity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 77.

⁴³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 121.

supports by saying that “[H]appiness in marriage is entirely a matter of choice.”⁴⁴ It explains her acceptance of Mr. Collins’ proposal. She believes she will be happy with him because she chooses to be.

In contrast to Charlotte’s character stands her friend Elizabeth Bennet. Even though she is too young to be called a spinster, she is not against the idea of spinsterhood; quite the contrary. She shows no inclination to marry—which she confirms in her statement “if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband. . . .”—which indicates that she is not much interested in husband-hunting. That and her behaviour make her a spinster-like character. Despite that, she cannot agree with Charlotte’s views. Elizabeth does not share the same calculating, scheming streak that Charlotte appears to have; and even though she is not once to be led only by her emotions, she believes in marriage of affection rather than one of convenience and she would rather remain unwed than marry someone she has not the slightest regard for, which shows later in the novel when she refuses to marry Mr. Collins. She stands to lose much more by this decision than Charlotte. In the worst case scenario, Charlotte would remain husbandless, live with her family or find an employment as a lady’s companion or a governess. She might even find a better man to marry. Elizabeth, on the other hand, loses the stability she would have, were she to accept Mr. Collins’ proposal. Nonetheless, his comfortable income and future prospect are not enough for her, because she is looking for much more in marriage than being content and resigned to a life with a nonsensical man.

Although Charlotte is by no means the only woman to accept a practical marriage, her choice is unfortunate and her future unhappy and unsatisfying, especially when compared to that of Elizabeth Bennet, who stood true to her convictions, refused to marry the foolish Mr. Collins, even though the marriage would secure her and her family’s future livelihood and home. She does not think it acceptable for her to sacrifice her happiness, and she makes a far better match than Charlotte in the end.

⁴⁴ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 21.

3.2.4 Anne Elliot: A Spinster or a Widow?

“Separated from the one man she wished to marry, Anne joins Mrs. Smith and Lady Russell in the social role of widow.”⁴⁵ It is Laura Fairchild Brodie’s belief that the character of Anne Elliot can be seen as a spinster. In her essay, she calls Anne a metaphorical widow and gives several bases for her claim. She explains Anne’s metaphorical widowhood in terms of her behaviour throughout the novel. According to Brodie, Anne is focused more on the past than the future, which is typical for widows, and she suffered a loss of a fiancé and spent subsequent years mourning him, just like a widow would.

Although Brodie provides the readers with a new thought to contemplate, I do not believe that Anne Elliot should be seen as a widow. While her claims are sound and logical, every action of Anne Elliot and her behaviour can be explained in terms of her spinsterhood. She is a spinster and while Anne’s apparent wish not to marry might seem similar to that of a widow who decided not to marry again, it can be easily explained by her past experience. She loved once and did not find another man to love, which led to her current state as a spinster.

The positions of spinsters and widows are similar in many respects, but there are differences and those two states should not be confused. Brodie is correct in her observation that Anne shares some traits with widows, but that does not necessarily mean that she is a widow, metaphorical or not. Anne’s loss of her fiancé in her youth is not enough for her to be considered to be a widow. Besides, her loss is only metaphorical, as her fiancé did not actually die, but it symbolises her lost hope of their future together. Moreover, Anne did not lose a husband and therefore a provider, which is the case of widows, because her father still provided for her. She only lost the promise of having a husband and while her feelings and determination not to marry might be comparable to that of a widow, her situation is different. Anne’s loss is purely emotional, while being widowed affects women in every aspect of their lives.

Even though Anne’s future is uncertain after she marries and there is a possibility of her being widowed early in her life, the reader should not see her as a widow from the beginning, but view her as a unique heroine—a complex woman who, despite her spinsterhood, finds herself and her place in the world.

⁴⁵ Laura Fairchild Brodie, “Society and the Superfluous Female: Jane Austen’s Treatment of Spinsterhood,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 34(4) (1994): 711.

4. WIDOWS

In the same way you cannot have a day without a night, a Jane Austen novel would not be complete without at least one widow. There is no exception to this rule. Yet widows in Jane Austen's novels are not as prominent and important to the stories as spinsters are, despite being greater in number. They have their own role and purpose, but they do not influence the plots as much as spinsters do. Widows are frequently the background characters working behind the scenes, supporting the plot, but they are not instrumental to the main storyline. Widows are never protagonists in Austen's stories, but they are still commonly occurring characters.

On the contrary, Austen regularly uses widows as antagonists who make the lives of the main characters more difficult. Either they stand in the way of happiness of the main characters, or they manipulate the protagonists to make choices they would not make on their own. They use their influence, the threat of disinheritance, or they apply to the sense of family obligations, whatever they can to achieve their goals. However, not all of the widows assume the role of villains. Some of them are kind and instrumental to the development of the protagonists and their realisation what really matters in life.

4.1 WIDOWS IN JANE AUSTEN

Widows are frequent characters in Austen's prose. There is a difference in how important for the story they are or how much influence they have, but they can still be divided into several categories.

One of the commonly used types of a widow is a wealthy and titled widow. Starting with Lady Williams in one of her juvenile texts, she later used this type for Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Russell and Lady Dalrymple in *Persuasion*, and, at last, with the character of Lady Denham in her unfinished novel *Sanditon*. Their wealth and high social status often lead to the feelings of self-entitlement and self-importance, which can be witnessed in the novels.

Lady Susan is also titled, but she does not belong to the first category. Unlike the aforementioned widows, she is not wealthy and she fights against her poverty with her sexuality. She represents another type of widows—a merry

widow. Although Lady Susan is the only merry widow in Austen's stories, some of the characteristic traits can be seen in different characters in her fiction.

There are widows who are rich, but not titled. Similar to the first type, mainly with regards to their self-important nature, this category applies best to the characters from *Sense and Sensibility*, especially Mrs. Ferrars. Mrs. Smith is another wealthy widow who, despite her being a very minor character, plays her role in the story. Mrs. Jennings is also independently wealthy, which makes her one of the fortunate ones, but she differs from the other rich females in the story. She is good-natured and she treats everyone the same, regardless of their fortune, which can be supported by her behaviour toward the Dashwood and the Steele sisters. Mrs. Rushworth from *Mansfield Park* also fits into this category.

Leaving fortune behind, there are widows whose lack of means make them dependent on the help of others. Mrs. Bates from *Emma* is a prime example of this type of widow. Mrs. Bates and her daughter are forced to rely on their patrons in Highbury for their livelihood because of their dire financial straits. Mrs. Dashwood from *Sense and Sensibility* is in a similar situation. She does not have enough money to support herself and her daughters; therefore she is glad for the help of Sir John Middleton when he offers her the cottage.

Mrs. Thorpe from *Northanger Abbey* does not have enough money to be considered wealthy, but she is not poor either. She lives a comfortable life within her means, which is enough for her to wear fashionable clothes and frequently visit Bath. Although Mrs. Norris' situation in life is not as good as Mrs. Thorpe's, the widow from *Mansfield Park* has no reason to complain. She has a steady income, which is enough to support her. She is stingy and saves every penny she can. Despite her constant want for more money, she does not really need them.

Austen introduces a new type of widow in her last novel, *Persuasion*—young and poor. She gives us two such widows, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Clay. Although they share some traits and their situations are similar, they could not be more different. Mrs. Smith's goal is to gain what is hers, and although she uses whatever means she can to achieve it, her intentions are not harmful to others. Even though her actions are at times questionable, she does not seek to promote herself at the expense of people who help her. Unlike Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Clay's mercenary quest to better her social standing and current position is deplorable, and it makes her one of the antagonists in the novel.

Widows in Austen's novels differ in personality. Some of them are partially based on the characters from her early stories, but otherwise, they should all be treated as individual characters. Even though they often share personal traits—for instance, most Austen's widows are manipulative—there is always at least one difference which separates them.

Austen often uses widows as minor antagonists, such as Lady Catherine from *Pride and Prejudice*, who tries to prevent the marriage of the main character, or even Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Ferrars from *Sense and Sensibility*. Although indirectly, they are responsible for the choices the characters made or for their behaviour. For example, Willoughby might have behaved honourably toward Marianne Dashwood if he was not afraid of Mrs. Smith's disapproval and possible disownment, and Edward Ferrars might have turned out differently if his mother allowed him to have a profession, which would give him the stability he needed.

Widows are usually portrayed as superfluous, redundant women, but Austen's different types of widows show that this perception is not always true, and that widows have their place in the society for a reason.

4.2 TYPES OF WIDOWS

4.2.1 Matter of Wealth

“Money, money, money, again. There was no freedom for a woman without it, married or unmarried.”⁴⁶ Having a fortune makes a big difference in the lives of all people, not to mention widows. If they have a fortune, they can afford to live comfortably, they can afford nice things and nice dresses, visits to different cities or the London season, but most of all, they are independent and do not have to answer to anyone. They do not have to beg other people for help, nor do they have to consider another marriage if they do not want to. If a widow is left with means to support herself, she will most likely not be looking for a new husband; if she remarried, she would lose the independence she gained after her husband's death.

Widows of means are Austen's favourites and she used widows often in her early stories and later in her novels. Mrs. Jennings, a widow of considerable fortune from *Sense and Sensibility*, is “a good-humoured, merry, fat, elderly woman, who talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar.”⁴⁷ She has

⁴⁶ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 81.

⁴⁷ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 34.

a good sense and she is a good judge of people, as shown in the situation when she talks about Fanny Dashwood, not finding her very agreeable. She is fond of company, especially made of young people, and she likes to meddle in the lives of others. Having married off her two daughters, she makes it her mission in life to “marry all the rest of the world.”⁴⁸ She has a matchmaking tendency and she tries to pair off every person who comes near her. Despite her faults and shortcomings, she is a very caring person. She loves her daughters and her family and she immediately takes a liking to the Dashwood family, mainly the two older sisters, and she takes under them her wings. She is also very fond of Colonel Brandon; she would like to see him happily married and settled.

Unlike some widows in Austen’s novels, Mrs. Jennings is independent and does not need to rely on her family. She has her own fortune, which she is not afraid to spend. She is generous, as proven by the fact that she invited Elinor and Marianne to accompany her to London. Overall, she is a well-meaning character, if slightly unaware of her impoliteness at times. If Emma Woodhouse was older and widowed, she might very well be Mrs. Jennings. They both share the meddlesome tendency to match make everyone in their vicinity and they are both dismissive of the opinions and feelings of others.

Mrs. Jennings is not the only wealthy widow in this novel. Mrs. Ferrars owns a considerable fortune as well, but unlike the amiable Mrs. Jennings, she is not a very likable character. She is “a very headstrong proud woman”⁴⁹, ill-humoured, she lacks good manners and she is rude to people who she considers to be beneath her. She is unkind and disapproving, which is supported by her treatment of Elinor, a woman her eldest son took liking to. Mrs. Ferrars is a very wealthy, independent, extremely manipulative widow who likes to control the lives of others. She likes being indispensable. She controls the purse strings, which makes her sons being dependent on her with regards to money. She thinks this gives her the right to meddle in their lives. Although she wants the best for her sons, the problem is that she thinks she can tell them—or rather order them—what the best thing is, and she expects them to act accordingly. This autocratic trait is something she has in common with the last wealthy widow from *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Smith. Although Mrs. Smith plays a very minor role and does not

⁴⁸ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 36.

⁴⁹ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 140.

appear in person in the novel, she has a considerable influence over her relative, Mr. Willoughby, therefore making a difference in the lives of many people.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh from *Pride and Prejudice*, another widow who likes to order people and meddle in their lives, is wealthy, influential and she is the best-known widow of Austen's novels. Lady Catherine is a proud-looking woman, "tall, large . . . with strongly marked features, which might once have been handsome."⁵⁰ She is a well-connected, proud, patronising woman. She is an elitist and she judges people based on their rank rather than who they actually are, which is something she has in common with Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Russell from *Persuasion*. This shows in the way she treats Elizabeth when she first meets her—dismissively, condescendingly and arrogantly. She is disagreeable and she does not bother to try to make the best impression on people. She is dismissive of the opinions of others; she thinks she knows everything best and her rank and fortune make her better than people who are beneath her in status and wealth. Lady Catherine is one of the antagonistic widows, as she tries to manipulate other people's lives to her advantage.

Lady Russell is a rich and titled widow and also a character that leaves the readers with mixed feelings. She is the person who is always there for Anne and who cares about her, as opposed to Anne's family. She loves Anne as if she was her own daughter, because she sees her late mother in her. She does not care for the way Elizabeth and her father, and even Mary, treats the heroine. She is genuinely fond of Anne and she wants the best for her. On the other hand, she is a bit of an antagonist of the story. In her quest to see Anne respectfully and happily settled, she unknowingly leads Anne to her solitary existence as a spinster. She uses her influence over Anne and becomes "the woman [who] persuades a young woman to refuse the man she loves"⁵¹, which shows her interfering and meddling nature.

Lady Russell is one of the wealthy and influential widows in Austen's stories. Like Lady Catherine, she is convinced that people's characters depend not only on the person's traits, but also on their family, rank and financial situation. She saw Wentworth's lack of fortune as a good enough reason to interfere in

⁵⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 157.

⁵¹ Julia P. Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), 38.

Anne's life and get her to break the engagement. However, wealth and good social standing are not the only things she deems necessary. She admires clever, educated people, which is why she did not want Anne to link her life with Charles Musgrove.⁵²

Although Lady Russell is an elitist, she is not as bad as Sir Walter and his eldest daughter. Even though she prefers the company of her peers herself, she does not discourage Anne from renewing her friendship with Mrs. Smith, unlike Sir Walter who takes it as insult that Anne prefers the poor nobody to their important relatives. However, Lady Russell does not like Mrs. Clay, who also represents a character of a poor widow. This is caused by the fact that Mrs. Clay poses a threat to Anne while Mrs. Smith is just a harmless acquaintance. Lady Russell is rightfully suspicious of Mrs. Clay's intentions toward the family, and she is aware that she is treated better than Anne by the Elliots, which is something she cannot stand.

She promotes Anne's possible match with Mr. Elliot because nothing would make her happier than see Anne take her late mother's place as a mistress of Kellynch. She is oblivious to Mr. Elliot's true character, seeing just an elegant young man who is clearly interested in her friend. As he is the heir to Sir Walter and a wealthy widower in his own rights, she thinks he can make Anne happy, which is the thing she wishes the most. This shows that Lady Russell is easily blinded by the social standing and fortune. While she condemns Wentworth as Anne's suitor, she encourages her friend to consider the cold-hearted and unscrupulous man as a future husband. At last, she finally realises that Anne's happiness is linked to Wentworth; she comes to terms with their marriage and is part of the circle of their closest friends. She overcomes her prejudice and she is forgiven for her past actions. In the end, she gets what she has always wanted—to see Anne happy.

In this regard, Mrs. Dashwood is similar to Lady Russell, even though they could not be more different in regards to their social status and their financial situation. While Lady Russell is a wealthy widow, Mrs. Dashwood has very little income and is dependent on the help of others for her well-being. Despite that, all

⁵² Anne is the most similar to her mother, Lady Russell's late friend, which is the reason why Lady Russell prefers Anne to Elizabeth, and why she did not stop Mary from marrying the man she saw not worthy enough for her goddaughter Anne.

she wants is to see her daughters happy, which is the case of Lady Russell with regards to Anne Elliot. Mrs. Dashwood is the most prominent widow from *Sense and Sensibility*, because she is the mother of the two main characters. She lost the stability and home when her beloved husband died, and she could not cope with it, which led to her leaving all the responsibility to her eldest daughter, Elinor. She is looking for an escape, which is one of the themes in the novel. She is looking for an escape from her responsibilities, her former home, which is full of memories of her husband, and the disagreeable company of Fanny and John. That is the reason why she accepts Sir John Middleton's offer of help, to escape from Norland Park, the place where she was "degraded" from its mistress to a mere visitor, even if it means accepting the help of her relative.⁵³ Although her circumstances could be better, Mrs. Dashwood is still more fortunate than the invalid Mrs. Bates from *Emma*, who is entirely dependent on the Highbury's residents.

Mrs. Smith from *Persuasion* is a character unlike any other in Austen's novels. She is a young and impoverished widow. She made an imprudent match when she was young and she widowed early. Mrs. Smith is an invalid and she has very little means to live on. Fighting to keep her place in the world and dealing with her disability, she is shown as a character deserving the reader's sympathy, regardless of her actions. Mrs. Smith stands on the edge of society; she is ill, poor, and unlikely to marry again, despite the fact that she is only in her early thirties. This makes her desperate and willing to do whatever it takes to achieve her goal, regardless of the means.

She is left to her own devices and she has to be resourceful in order to survive, which leads to her sometimes questionable ethics. She is well-aware of Mr. Elliot's true character, but she still encourages Anne to make the match. She hopes that as her friend's husband, Mr. Elliot will not refuse to help her recover her rightful property in West Indies, as he did once before when she asked for his help. She is selfish and self-serving, and once she realises that Anne is never going to marry Mr. Elliot, she feels free to reveal his true nature and his past

⁵³ Mrs. Dashwood is not the only character in the novel that is looking for an escape. Her daughters are trying to cope with the current situation by escaping; Marianne to the arms of the charming Mr. Willoughby, where she can pretend that their lives were not completely changed, where she can escape the constant boredom. Elinor attempts to escape her feelings by always trying to be in control, never letting other people see what she really feels and thinks.

deeds, making it seem like she was trying to warn Anne about him from the beginning.

Although the reader can clearly see the negative side of Mrs. Smith, she is portrayed seen as a villain. As Hall states in her essay *A View from Confinement*, Mrs. Smith represents what could happen to any Austen's heroine. She married young and she enjoyed life with her husband, living beyond the means of their income. She did not expect that she would become a widow so early, nor did she think that her health would deteriorate this soon. She represents the life Anne might have lived if she married Wentworth when he first proposed, before he earned his fortune. Even though she is shown as mercenary and after her own interest, she is forgiven and she gets back her late husband's property with Wentworth's assistance, and she is included in the new family Anne Elliot created in the end.

4.2.2 Matter of Attitude

After the death of her husband, a widow has a choice to make; either she will marry again or not. Her decision is influenced by her situation, her financial means and her wishes. Unlike spinsters, who are viewed as anomaly and whose unmarried states are to be avoided at all costs, it is perfectly respectable for widows not to marry again. Widows are free from the influence of their husbands and free to make their own decisions. Depending on their means, they can have independent households, live with relatives, or rent houses.

When faced with the choice to marry again, a widow with means to support herself will more likely decide to stay a widow than find a new husband. This is also the case of Mrs. Dashwood. Even though her income is small and she is barely able to support her family, it is unlikely that Mrs. Dashwood will ever marry again. She is very emotional, sentimental, and she was strongly fixated on her husband. She is led by her emotions rather than reason, which does not make her a very practical person. She is an extremely dependent person; first she fully depended on her husband, later on her daughter Elinor. Apart from that, Mrs. Dashwood is a likable, good-humoured character. She is sweet-tempered, but she is a little absent-minded at times. She has good manners and always acts properly, regardless of her current feelings. She has a temper very similar to her middle daughter. As stated in the novel, "[T]he resemblance between [Marianne] and her

mother was strikingly great.”⁵⁴ Just like Marianne, she is prone to acting without thinking, but unlike Marianne, she can be easily persuaded to see reason.

Another Austen’s widow who does not plan to remarry is Lady Russell. Although she had a choice to find another husband, she chose not to. She has means to lead a very comfortable life with many indulgences, and she has more freedom than married women. There is little incentive for her to marry again, which is something she shares with Lady Catherine and other widowed characters.

Both Lady Russell and Mrs. Dashwood made a choice not to marry again, but not every widow can afford to make this choice. This is the case of Mrs. Clay from *Persuasion*, a young impoverished widow with two children. She needs to marry again and consequently better her situation because she is unable to support her family. Her ambition is also an important factor. She plans to achieve her goals by scheming and linking herself to the Elliot family. Sir Walter seems to be her target, even though he is nearly destitute at the moment. Marrying a baronet would bring her a title, and if she were to have a son, he would eventually inherit the title and the estate.

Mrs. Clay’s negative personal traits are confirmed later in the novel when she becomes involved with Mr. Elliot. Seeing him as the better option, as opposed to marriage to Sir Walter, she ultimately destroys her good position in the family and their good opinion of her character, as well as her chances of becoming Lady Elliot. Penelope Clay portrays a mercenary kind of widow, one that would do anything to better her situation. She is not wealthy; she cannot afford to remain a mere widow. She sees an opportunity and she takes it, but she ends up worse than she started due to her own actions.

Lady Susan from *Lady Susan* is another antagonistic widow who is mostly seen in negative light. She is the main character of the epistolary novel and possesses all the qualities of the merry widow: “vivacity, elegance, flirtatiousness, extravagance, and a scorn for country manners”⁵⁵; and she “displays aggressive desire and is driven by sexual jealousy to compete with younger woman.”⁵⁶ This

⁵⁴ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 6.

⁵⁵ Jay Arnold Levine, “Lady Susan: Jane Austen’s Character of the Merry Widow,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 1(4) (1961): 26.

⁵⁶ Laura Fairchild Brodie, “Society and the Superfluous Female: Jane Austen’s Treatment of Spinsterhood,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 34(4) (1994): 701.

character type is first introduced in the short stories in Austen's juvenile texts and later developed into the character of Lady Susan.

Lady Susan is a selfish woman in her mid-thirties and she is a "female predator"⁵⁷. She uses her good looks to attract young men, with the intention of seducing them. She is immoral and has no boundaries, as shown by her affair with a married man and her success in breaking the engagement of two people, which she did for her daughter's benefit. She is an intelligent, manipulative woman. She invites herself into her brother-in-law's home and abuses his hospitality. She manipulates her sister-in-law into changing her opinion about Lady Susan's character and manages to lure her brother Reginald into thinking himself in love with her. In many respects, the readers are reminded of Mary Crawford from *Mansfield Park* when considering the character of Lady Susan. They are both scheming women who try to find the best match on the marriage market, and both of them tend to behave in an inappropriate manner. Like Lady Susan with regards to her feelings toward Reginald, Mary does not seem to feel true affection for Edmund.

4.2.3 Other Widows

Widows play their part even in the short segment of *The Watsons*. The rich and titled Lady Osbourne stands opposed to the widowed sister of Mr. Howard, Mrs. Blake. Mrs. Blake's position is in sharp contrast to the life of the wealthy Osbournes. Due to the fact that she does not have the means or station of the other widow, she has to tolerate their "insults" and ill-treatment—such as Miss Osbourne's rude behaviour to her young son. Mrs. Blake is well-aware of her situation in life and she adjusts herself accordingly. She is good-humoured and has good manners. What she might lack in fortune, she makes up for in the way she treats other people and how she behaves. If only those qualities were considered, she would come up as a much better person than Lady Osbourne.

Lady Denham, a widow from Austen's last piece of work *Sanditon*, is a unique character definitely worth mentioning. The fact that she is the only character that was widowed not once, but twice, is something that makes her different from the other widowed characters in Austen's novels. Her first marriage

⁵⁷ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 84.

happened quite late in her life. At thirty years of age, she was already a spinster, but she found an elderly man who married her. He was a man of property and she accepted his suit, although he was several decades older than her. She married him for her own financial gain. Mr. Hollis died soon after the wedding and left her all his fortune and property, Sanditon House being one of them. Her second marriage was a marriage of convenience. She married Sir Harry Denham for his title; he married her for her money. When he died, she was not only a wealthy widow, but a wealthy and titled one.

Lady Denham is a sharp rich widow and “the great lady of Sanditon”⁵⁸. She comes from a family of means, but her education is lacking. She is Mr. Parker’s partner, as she helps him with his schemes of developing Sanditon and making it an attractive place for people to visit, but she is far more careful and sceptical than he is. She is described as “a very rich old lady who buried two husbands, who knew the value of money, was very much looked up to and had a poor cousin living with her.”⁵⁹ She is said to be a good-humoured, friendly neighbour, ready to oblige, but Charlotte Heywood, the heroine of the story, perceives her as mean. Lady Denham is certainly very satisfied with her life and position, and as such, she thinks she can meddle in the lives of others. She is very insistent that her relatives, from Sir Edward to Miss Esther and Miss Clara, must marry people of means. Although she has enough money to give, she is not willing to part with her fortune for them.

In contrast to Lady Denham’s penny-pinching character, there is Mrs. Thorpe, a widow who is by no means wealthy and independent, but she lives comfortably. It is apparent that if she had more money, she would not save them, like her stingy counterpart, but spend them on her family. She is a “good-humoured, well-meaning woman, and a very indulgent mother”⁶⁰, but she blind to the fault of her children, who could not wrong in her opinion. In comparison to some other widows in Austen’s prose, Mrs. Thorpe leads a good life and she has enough money that she can afford to go to Bath with most of her family. Her situation could be better, but also worse.

⁵⁸ Jane Austen, *Lady Susan and Other Works* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2013), 279.

⁵⁹ Austen, *Lady Susan and Other Works*, 279.

⁶⁰ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 23.

Mrs. Bates from *Emma* is one of the widows who are dependent on the help of other people. She is an old lady, poor, deaf, and she has to rely on her daughter for everything. Mrs. Bates is a widow of the late vicar in Highbury and she is in dire financial straits, therefore she requires the help of her kind neighbours. The dependency on other people is something Mrs. Bates shares with another widow from Austen's stories, Mrs. Dashwood, who also has to rely on the help of her cousin; otherwise she would hardly be able to live on her small income.

Austen uses a range of poor and rich characters in her novels. In contrast to the less fortunate Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Dashwood, there are the wealthy widows, such as Lady Dalrymple from *Persuasion* or Mrs. Rushworth from *Mansfield Park*. Mrs. Norris, a more prominent widow from the same novel, is neither rich nor wealthy; she is somewhere in between.

Mrs. Norris is one of the antagonistic widows and she is "one of the great villains of literature, almost too horrible to be comic."⁶¹ Even though she is a widow, she possesses some qualities of a spinster as well. Aside from that, Mrs. Norris is manipulative and meddling and she uses the generosity of other people to her advantage; she is also very skilled in persuading others to do what she wants them to do, as shown on the example of inviting young Fanny Price to live with them. She suggests the idea, which makes her seem as a generous, concerned aunt, but she immediately refuses to take the responsibility of her niece, leaving her to the care—and expense—of Sir Bertram. She is a very frugal woman, but "[S]he lives meagerly out of niggardliness, not necessity."⁶² She refuses to have Fanny live with her because it would mean additional cost to the household, which is something she is unwilling to accept. On the other hand, she does not have anyone else to support but herself; she could very well afford to keep Fanny in her house. As she does not have any children herself, it would seem obvious that she would bestow her favour on her poor niece, eventually leaving her the money she saved as an inheritance, but she favours Fanny's already rich cousins instead. She fails to see the good qualities in Fanny, such as her generosity, good spirits and kindness, and her treatment of Fanny is in sharp contrast to her

⁶¹ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2012), 232.

⁶² Julia P. Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 85.

behaviour toward the Bertram children. She dotes on her nieces and is very fond of her nephews, but she never forgets to remind Fanny about her inferior position in the house.

Mrs. Norris is very concerned with money and rank. She is the chaperone of the Bertram girls in their mother's stead and she wants her nieces and nephews to marry well, into respectable and wealthy families. She approves of anyone who belongs to these categories, regardless of their character. Fanny's lack of fortune and good prospects is one of the reasons why she is so dismissive of her and why she often treats her like a servant. She spoils and encourages her Bertram nieces, never denying them anything, such as doing the theatrical. Maria's wild behaviour and lack of common decency proves to be the result of Mrs. Norris influence in the end; living in exile with Maria in another country is her punishment.

CONCLUSION

Jane Austen included many different types of spinsters and widows in her texts, ranging from eternal spinsters to “late bloomers”, independent spinsters and women wanting to avoid spinsterhood at all costs; from self-important widows of means to completely dependent widows, from widows seeking to marry again to those whose days as married women definitely ended with the deaths of their husbands. Austen assigned different roles and importance to her characters, but some of her husband-less characters proved to be instrumental to her stories. While comparing and contrasting circumstances and lives of all spinsters and widows in Austen’s prose, I established three universal criteria that can sort characters into categories, regardless of whether they are spinsters or widows. By making this discovery, I proved that there is a common ground among those two groups of literary characters in Jane Austen’s texts, despite the fact that the lives of widows and spinsters are different in many aspects.

I was successful in creating a typology that would apply to both spinsters and widows. This typology is based on the following three criteria: choice, opportunity, and feelings. With regards to widowhood, the category of choice is concerned with the choice of either marrying again, or remaining a widow. While some widows may not have any other choice but to marry again, such as Mrs. Clay from *Persuasion*, the other option—remaining a widow—is much more diverse. The reasons for staying a widow can vary and mostly depend on the attitude of the widows in question. Women who entered into the marriage of convenience and gained freedom by their husbands’ deaths are unlikely to marry again if there is no need for them to do so. In contrast to them, there are the sentimental widows who loved their husbands and simply refuse to marry again. When talking about choice in connection to spinsterhood, it means two distinct things; either a woman had a choice in the matter and decided to remain unmarried, like Emma Woodhouse or Diana Parker, or they had no other choice but become spinsters due to their lack of fortune, good looks and connections.

The second criterion I considered was opportunity. By being wealthy, a widow could chose how to live her life without considering the consequences, and while Mrs. Dashwood chose to remain a widow, she lacked the opportunity to live a comfortable live. Therefore, Mrs. Dashwood belongs to the first group, a

category of choice, but not to the category of opportunity. The same rule applies to spinsters; while some of them, like Emma Woodhouse, had the stability that gave them the option to make the choice of staying unmarried, Elizabeth Bennet did not have the opportunity to make the choice she did, therefore she belongs to the category of choice, but not to the category of opportunity. The last criterion to consider is feelings and/or strength. It deals with the matter of whether or not the character is strong enough to stand on her own, without a husband and protector. Lady Catherine or Lady Russell had the choice, opportunity and also the strength to remain widows, as shown in the novels, while Mrs. Clay displayed the inability to stay without a husband. She lacked feelings, which along with her inconsiderable income made her want to remarry rather than live on her own with her children. When regarding spinsterhood, the best examples of feelings are the Elliot sisters. While Anne is strong enough to be a spinster, a state she is resigned to, Elizabeth does not have the strength to live the life of spinsterhood and dependency, nor does she want to.

As demonstrated on several examples, the three categories are not mutually exclusive; they are interconnected. By applying the rules and criteria, I proved that even characters that seemingly have nothing in common can share similarities and vice-versa; characters that appear similar in many aspects are shown as different in the light of the criteria.

By analysing the characters and their choices, I determined that there is a variety of reasons for women to choose their fate as unmarried or widowed women. Loss of freedom and independence played a big factor for widows when considering a second marriage. Widows of means often chose not to marry again and they rather settled into their new lives without husbands, as shown by several examples of widows not willing to remarry. Some widows, such as Mrs. Dashwood, do not consider another marriage because of their affection for their late husbands. On the contrary, a second marriage is appealing to widows of little means, such as Mrs. Clay, who have no other way of supporting themselves. As for spinsters, the idea of an unhappy marriage played a big role in their decisions, although some women were afraid of being old and left alone and rather chose marriage of convenience over the other option.

After analysing all spinsters and widows in the prose written by Jane Austen, I came to the conclusion that spinsters and widows have their place in the

novels, as proven by many of her spinsters and widows and the roles they play in the lives of other characters. I also discovered that the role of spinsters is more important in the books, which is supported by the relevance of Miss Bates in the development of Emma Woodhouse. In contrast, widows are often placed in the role of antagonists in Austen's stories, a fact that is supported by Lady Catherine's character from *Pride and Prejudice*, or Mrs. Norris from *Mansfield Park*. Some of them hold the influence over the characters, such as Lady Russell in *Persuasion*, but it is Anne's own decision that eventually leads her to happiness, not the advice of her older friend. Unlike widows, spinsters tend to have a more direct influence over the heroines. Charlotte Lucas' marriage stands as an example for Elizabeth Bennet not to make the same practical choice as she did, and the threat of becoming Miss Bates makes Emma change her mind and marry in the end.

Considering the development of characters, I proved my point that Austen's style and treatment of spinsters and widows changed and matured. Although the character of Mrs. Dashwood is not to be belittled, her later widows are more complex and diversified than the early grieving widow from her first published novel. By the time she wrote *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, her mother became a widow, which influenced the author and projected in her work. *Persuasion*, a novel with an abundance of widows, clearly shows the development of Austen's characters, and she even comes up with a new type of widow in her last novel. The same can be applied to spinsters as well. Even though she used the character of a spinster before and it gradually changed, her Anne Elliot is the most elaborate and promising of all spinsters, worthy of being the heroine of her own novel.

RESUMÉ

Má bakalářská práce je zaměřená na prozaická díla Jane Austenové, od její rané tvorby až po její nedokončený román *Sanditon*, s důrazem na staré panny a vdovy. Cílem práce bylo analyzovat postavy a vytvořit jednotnou typologii, do které by se jednotlivé postavy daly zařadit, a dále pomocí analýzy a srovnání postav poukázat na podobnosti a rozdíly v životech starých pan a vdov a zjistit, jaké okolnosti vedou k tomu, že jsou jejich životy tak odlišné.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na popis doby, ve které autorka žila, a zejména na to, jaké bylo postavení skutečných starých pan a vdov v této době. Na základě reálných faktů v práci dokazují, že Austenová popisuje danou dobu ve svých románech autenticky, jak je o ní všeobecně známo, a věrohodně zachycuje podmínky, ve kterých v té době běžní lidé žili.

Druhá kapitola je věnovaná osobnímu životu Jane Austenové, který se částečně projevil v jejích dílech. Kritická byla její vlastní zkušenost coby neprovdané ženy, kterou využila při psaní svých pozdějších románů. Důležitou roli v její kariéře hrála její rodina, díky které měla blízko k církvi a námořnictvu; Austenová později použila své znalosti těchto oblastí při psaní svých knih. V kapitole je rozebrána její raná tvorba, na kterou později navázala při psaní románů, a také historie publikací knih Jane Austenové.

Třetí kapitola je zaměřená výhradně na staré panny a poukazuje na jejich důležitost v románech Jane Austenové. Analýza postav a jejich vzájemné srovnávání je součástí této kapitoly a vede k závěru, že ačkoliv Austenová používá staré panny často, každá z nich je něčím výjimečná a žádné dvě nejsou totožné. Velká pozornost je věnována zejména typologii starých pan. Na základě výzkumu jsem zjistila, že postavy je možné rozdělit do kategorií podle různých kritérií. V rámci typologie jsem si vytvořila následující kategorie a zařadila do nich prominentní představitelky.

Jedna z těchto skupin obsahuje postavy, které jsou svobodné z vlastní vůle, díky vlastní volbě, jako například Emma Woodhousová, nebo naopak ty, které na výběr neměly, z nich je významná především slečna Batesová. Další rozdělení se věnuje těm, které zůstaly starými pannami, a takzvaným „pozdním nevěstám“, které se nakonec přece jen vdaly. Tato část se věnuje zejména románu *Anna Elliotová* a postavám Anny a Elizabeth. Do následující kategorie jsou

zařazeny postavy z hlediska jejich rozdílných názorů na staropanenství, kdy na jedné straně stojí sestry Parkerovy, které se vdát nechtějí, a na druhé straně například Lucy Steelová, která udělá vše proto, aby starou pannou nezůstala. Poslední část je věnovaná spekulativní postavě Anny Elliotové, na kterou autoři pohlížení z různých úhlů, ať již jako na starou pannu, nebo na vdovu.

Ve čtvrté kapitole se věnuji vdovám, které se bez výjimky objevují v každém románu Jane Austenové. Ačkoliv tyto postavy nejsou příliš důležité pro hlavní dějovou linii (snad s výjimkou Lady Russellové z románu *Anna Elliotová*), i přesto hrají svou roli. Stejně jako v předchozí části jsou postavy analyzovány a rozděleny podle společných znaků. Postavy jsem zařadila do kategorií s ohledem na jejich finanční situaci, postoj k dalšímu manželství a další důležitá kritéria.

Život bohatých vdov jako Lady Catherine či paní Ferrarsová jsou srovnány s postavou paní Smithové a dalších, které jsou nějakým způsobem odkázané na pomoc druhých. Jakožto vdova, která aktivně hledá nového manžela, aby si zlepšila svou současnou situaci, je paní Clayová protikladem paní Dashwoodové, která stále truchlí pro svého muže a nemá v plánu se v budoucnu znovu vdát. Za zmínění stojí také postava Lady Denhamové, která je výjimečná tím, že jako jediná z postav Austenové je dvojnásobnou vdovou.

Jane Austenová používala velmi často postavy vdov a starých panen ve svých románech, kde se objevují takřka bez výjimky. Jejich důležitost se liší, ale po důkladné analýze děl jsem dospěla k závěru, že ačkoliv vdovy mají v dílech svou roli, jsou to spíše staré panny, které jsou kritické pro vývoj hlavních hrdinek. Charlotte Lucasová má větší vliv na postavu hlavní hrdinky Elizabeth Bennetové než postava vdovy Lady Catherine a na vývoji Emmy Woodhousové má největší podíl slečna Batesová, zdánlivě nedůležitá a ostatními často opomíjená stará panna. Pomocí analýzy a srovnávání postav jsem vytvořila typologii, kterou jsem následně aplikovala na jednotlivé postavy, nejprve na staré panny, poté na vdovy. Během svého výzkumu jsem dospěla k názoru, že existují tři základní kategorie, do kterých patří každá ženská postava v dílech Jane Austenové, ať se jedná o postavu vdovy či staré panny. I když jsou jejich postavení a životy velmi odlišné a není možné zaměnit postavu vdovy a staré panny, na obě skupiny postav je možné aplikovat tři stejná základní kritéria: možnost volby, příležitost a postoj k věci.

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ANNOTATION

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Abstract: The focus of this thesis is on spinsters and widows and their types in Jane Austen's prose, from her early writings to her last unfinished novel *Sanditon*. Jane Austen's personal life and influences on her work are discussed in connection to her novels. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the character types of spinsters and widows, compare and contrast them, and subsequently create a typology of those characters, as well as comment on the change in style and treatment of characters in Jane Austen's later works.

ANOTACE

- Autor: Monika Ruprechtová (F15049)
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- Abstrakt: Bakalářská práce je zaměřena na analýzu prozaických děl Jane Austenové, počínaje její ranou tvorbou a konče jejím posledním nedokončeným románem *Sanditon*. V práci je rozebrán osobní život Jane Austenové a důležité faktory, které měly vliv na její romány. Cílem práce je analyzovat a srovnat postavy, vytvořit model typologie postav a poukázat na změnu ve stylu a ve vývoji postav v dílech Jane Austenové.