

A Critical Evaluation of Jane Austen's Emma

“Emma” was first published by John Murray in December of 1815. It was the last of Austen's novels to be published before her death, and, like her earlier works, was published anonymously. Shortly before the publication of “Emma,” Austen was invited to meet with the Prince Regent's librarian, who encouraged her to dedicate her next novel to the Prince Regent a great admirer of her work. Although Austen was not particularly fond of the Prince, she chose to follow the librarian's suggestion and later satirized her meeting with him in “Plan of a Novel, according to hints from various quarters.”

There were two thousand copies of “Emma” printed in the first edition, but more than a quarter remained unsold after four years. The novel was generally well-received by the public. Unfortunately, Austen earned very little from its publication: most of the profits were used for the ill-timed printing of a second edition of “Mansfield Park” a few months later, and she ultimately only earned 40 pounds from the novel in her lifetime.

“Emma” was a departure for Austen because, unlike her other novels, the work focuses on a wealthy and beautiful heroine with no financial concerns or need to marry. The quest for financial security and an appropriate husband is central to her other works and adds a serious element to their narrative structures.

“Emma” has a generally lighter tone because it lacks this dramatic conflict. The heroine of the novel is also unique because of her seeming immunity to romantic sensibility. It is only at the end of the work that Emma succumbs to love; before that point, she shows minimal romantic interest in any of the male characters.

Because Austen's works were published anonymously, they received little critical attention during her time period. Although her books sold well and were favoured by prominent figures in British society (such as the Prince Regent and

his daughter), Austen received only a few short reviews. After her death, her works continued to be steady sellers but were not widely popular among readers in the 19th century. In general, audiences preferred the dramatic style of George Eliot and Charles Dickens over Austen's mild forays into British society.

However, Austen's work was still highly praised by prominent literary scholars. Authors Sir Walter Scott and Henry James and philosopher George Henry Lewes lauded Austen's narrative style; Henry James, in particular, compared her writing to that of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Henry Fielding. After James Edward Austen-Leigh published his biography of his "dear aunt Jane" in 1869, Austen was introduced to the wider public, who clamored for new editions of her works. Austen-Leigh's biography also spurred a rift between the literary elite, who called themselves "Janeites," and the larger public, who was presumed not to properly understand her works.

In the 20th century, Austen's works began to receive major scholarly attention, specifically with the publication of A.C. Bradley's essay on Austen in 1911. The 20th century also saw a surge of adaptations of Austen's works, including films, prequels, sequels, and revised novels (such as Seth Grahame-Smith's "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies"). "Emma," in particular, has been adapted for film multiple times, including the 1995 film "Clueless" with Alicia Silverstone, and revised as comic horror novel "Emma and the Werewolves" by Adam Rann.

Austen's Protagonist

In Jane Austen's novel, **Emma**, protagonist Emma avoids her own transformation by her attempts to transform others. However, Emma experiences her coming-of-age through the stable characters of those around her. Austen reveals how self-transformation is necessary in maturing and establishing self-awareness. Emma Woodhouse possesses qualities that many

would envy: beauty, intelligence, wealth, and youth. However, the positive aspects of Emma are equally contrasted by her personality. The novel begins with a description of the protagonist, "The real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation where the power of having too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself: these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments." (Austen 1). Having a conceited nature, she only tolerates following her own advice, as well as frequently acting upon her instincts regardless of the consequences, especially when it comes to match-making. Emma believes that she is able to match any two people whom she deems compatible. Even though Emma is self-centered, she ironically refuses to tend to her own feelings. Speaking to her father Emma states, "I promise you to make none for myself, papa; but I must, indeed, for other people. It is the greatest amusement in the world!" (Austen 7). Her view of interfering in others' lives as "amusing" supports Emma's feelings of superiority over those around her. In the novel, Emma is often shown as being similar to characters who share the same selfish nature as her, such as Frank Churchill and Mrs. Elton. But, what isolates Emma is not her sense of superiority, but her longing to feel superior; she is not able to be a part of a relationship where she is not placed first. The first relationship the readers see Emma develop is with Harriet Smith, a girl similar in age and beauty, but lacking intelligence and wealth. Only out of sympathy and boredom does Emma decide on taking Harriet in as her friend, "She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from bad acquaintances, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and manners. It would be a kind undertaking, highly becoming her own situation in life..." (Austen 17). Despite Emma's seemingly good intentions, she now views Harriet's feelings almost as a game. Emma becomes determined to improve Harriet's reputation and match her with a gentleman, and Harriet, inferior to Emma, is easily swayed by her opinions. Harriet shares her feelings for Mr. Robert Martin, a farmer, with

Emma, and of course Emma persuades her to reject him. After Harriet agrees with Emma to refuse Mr. Martin, Emma responds by saying, "Perfect, perfectly right my dearest Harriet; I kept my opinions to myself, but now I have no hesitation in disapproving." (Austen 44). The relationship between Emma and Harriet shows how Emma is blinded by ignorance because she will only associate herself with people of her class, and therefore she feels the need to mould others to become like her opposed to undergoing change herself. Austen's inclusion of similar characters like Frank Churchill, as well as opposite personalities, like Mr. Knightley and Miss Bates, emphasize Emma's transformation throughout the novel.

As a character with the same nature, Emma meets Frank Churchill and is sure that they will be a perfect match; both are wealthy and superficial.

However, Emma quickly dismisses the idea of an attraction to Frank Churchill when she sees that he only cares for himself. Emma is particularly critical of Miss Bates because she is everything which Emma is not. Miss Bates is kind, poor and average looking; essentially inferior to Emma. However, Miss Bates could be considered to have more than Emma, because of her happiness and her ability to see the good in everyone. In the beginning of the novel, Mr. Knightley is a total opposite to Emma, and they never seem to agree because of their opposing views. Mr Knightley is the only person who dares to criticize Emma, and really the only criticism that the reader sees because he is the only person that Emma will listen to (Thaden). The first time the Mr. Knightley is seen speaking negatively about Emma is when he says, "She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding." (Austen 29). Even though Mr. Knightley cares for Emma, he is still willing to recognize Emma's flaws, and he makes an effort to better her. The other characters in Emma's life, specifically her father, are oblivious to her self-centered nature and continue to affirm her, preventing her from maturing.

Through Mr. Knightley 's critiquing of Emma, his discernment is seen because he sees both Emma 's good and bad traits.

Despite their differences, Emma finds herself gradually falling for Mr.

Knightley and becomes more aware of her feelings toward him. Mr. Knightley proves to be a static character throughout the novel due to his unchanging honesty, and because of his honesty, Emma 's character is improved upon.

When all of the family and friends go on a picnic at Box Hill, Emma and Frank decide to play a game with everyone. The game is to say one clever thing, two moderately clever things, or three very dull things. Miss Bates states that she could say many dull things, with which Emma responds, "Ah! ma 'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me, but you will be limited as to number—only three at once." (Austen 320). Following Emma 's rude remark to Miss Bates during the Box Hill scene, Mr. Knightley is brutally honest with Emma, thus leading to her ultimate change, "...I must, I will—I will tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel and trusting that you will sometime or other do me greater justice than you can do now." (Austen 325). His comment to her sends Emma into a week-long depression, during which she evaluates herself and realizes how hurtful she has been to others. Also, both Emma and the reader know that Mr. Knightley is the only person who is able to see Emma's flaws and call her out on them, which is why his opinion is so effective in changing her. Emma begins to realize the consequences of her actions once someone whom she respects and loves points out her mistakes. Denying herself the ability to have a change of heart for so long, she finally has a moment of realization and acknowledges her wrong doings, "A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress; she touched, she admitted, she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill?... It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley

must marry no one but herself!" (Austen 353). The "whole truth" being that she loves Mr. Knightley, but more importantly, that she hurt the people who care about her the most. Also, Emma sees how her manipulation of others lives was purely out of selfish motives. While Emma thinks that Harriet is in love with Frank Churchill, Harriet confesses that she is actually in love with Mr. Knightley. Emma is astonished and angered by this truth, and sees the severity of tampering with others feelings now that her own are involved. "With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. She proved to have been universally mistaken; and she had not quite done anything—for she had done mischief." (Austen 358). Being truthful with herself was only the first step to establishing her self-awareness. Through her moment of clarity, Emma is able to see the extent of the trouble she has caused. Her acknowledgement was only the first step to her establishing her new self-awareness, but she still needed to come to an understanding with those whom she had hurt.

Emma speaks with Mr. Knightley first and expresses her self doubt to him. This results in the two confessing their love for each other. When Mr. Knightley proposes to Emma he says, "I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it. Bear with the truths I would tell you now, dearest Emma, as well as you have borne with them." (Austen 373). She felt strongly about going against Mr. Knightley's opinion for most of the novel, yet because of his opinions, she and him are alike. Since they have both come to a point of understanding, Mr. Knightley hopes for their marriage to be built upon honesty and equality. Emma and Mr. Knightley have been equal in ways like intelligence and social status, but they now are equal in the way that they view each other. Through the help of characters similar to Emma as well as characters who contrasted her

personality, Emma is able to become a dynamic character. Although Emma's change was not sudden and dramatic, it was realistic. With each instance where Emma finds an error in her judgement, she becomes closer to realizing her reality. Austen uses Emma's progression to show that self-transformation does take time, but it is an essential step in maturing and becoming self-aware.