

# How does austen represent women's agency in emma essay



**ASSIGN  
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The term 'agency' is used to signify the 'ability or capacity to act or exert power' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013) therefore when referring to 'women's agency', one implies the feminist philosophical idea of women's capacity for independent choice and action. Jane Austen's *Emma* was published in the early 19th Century (Whalan), an era in which women had an especially rigid role in society that often confined them to the desires of men. In this Georgian period therefore the idea of female agency would be considered a controversial concept.

However Jane Austen's works are often considered as 'representative of what critics have called the 'feminist tradition' in the English novel' (Brown, 1973 p. 321), with her novel *Emma* found to follow this feminist tradition by recognizing the 'identity and social functions of a woman' (Brown, p. 321). The novel *Emma* is named after its female protagonist, a character who in numerous ways defies the social conventions attributed to a woman of the 19th Century in favour of a more dynamic role.

The character of *Emma* is shown as independent, authoritative and multidimensional and who, in juxtaposition with the novel's other characters, is a tool in exposing the social expectations of women in the isolated Highbury society. *Emma* manifests the philosophical idea of women's agency hence this essay will discuss the ways by which Austen uses *Emma* to represent the qualities of female agency and explore the conditions of this concept.

The archetypal 19th Century woman was almost entirely controlled by men, she would transition from dependency on her father to being dependant on

her husband. This was largely due to the fact that women often had no means of financial support and 'men held all the resources and women had no independent means of subsistence' (Wojtczak, 2008). In light of this Emma is a character who defies this social expectation as although she lives with her father in the family estate, she is the 'real ruler of the household and Hartfield' (Butler, 1975 as cited in Austen, p. 385) and possesses a large family fortune.

Additionally due to her father being a 'valetudinarian' (Austen, 2012) and Emma's governess Miss Taylor, who 'sixteen years had' (Austen, 2012) she been with the Woodhouse family just having married and leaving the family, Emma is left caring for him. To an extent, due to the ailments of her father, she is constrained in that she is unable to leave Hartford as she is required to persistently care for him, however in this fact Emma is made independent, she is caring for the person who typically would care for her.

Emma's opinions of marriage are also atypical of the Highbury society as seen in her conversation with Harriet in Volume I Chapter X, Emma states how she has 'very little intention of every marrying' (Austen, 2012 p. 62), to which Harriet replies 'it is so odd to hear a woman talk so!' (Austen, 2012 p. 62). Through this we are able to see how the character of Emma contrasts with the other women of the novel in the fact that she exhibits independent thought, she is 'unique among Jane Austen's heroines' (Butler, as cited in Austen, 2012 p. 385).

Harriet, on the other hand, conforms to Myer's 'post-Freudian' schema' (Brown, p. 322) supposes that a 'woman is endowed with and aware of her

inner structure and capacity to produce and nurture a child' (Myer, as cited in Brown, p. 322). Describing Harriet in this manner justifies her thought that marriage is an essential part of being a woman hence her character embodies the social norms imposed on women.

However it can be argued, as Emma does, that 'a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable' (Austen, 2012, p. 62) hence she believes that due to her comfortable economic situation, announcing herself a spinster would not make her a 'ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid!' (Austen, 2012, p. 62). Therefore it seems that Austen is suggesting that in the society of Highbury, a condition of women's agency is financial independence, a 'fortunate lifestyle' allows Emma 'the luxury of independence' (Batchelor, 2008). Throughout the novel Emma asserts her authority in different ways, her character is such that she assumes 'entitlement to independence and power' (Johnson, as cited in Austen, p. 418). Emma's character is outspoken and argumentative.

She often argues with Mr Knightley, a gentleman of high status in Highbury, and through their bickering, perhaps Austen is illustrating a microcosm for the conflict between the sexes. In Volume I chapter VIII, Emma and Mr Knightley quarrel over Harriet's reply to Mr Martin's 'offer of marriage' (Austen, p. 43). It seems that although Knightley has a 'thorough regard for' (Austen, p. 43) Martin, Emma disagrees, announcing that she 'cannot admit him to be Harriet's equal' (Austen, p. 44). Through this dialogue Austen depicts the pressures put on a woman to marry 'anybody who asks her' (Austen, p. 44) simply because that is part of the convention.

Therefore through this debate with Knightly, Emma rebuts the convention and in its place asserts her authority over Knightley, as Emma finally manages to manipulate Harriet to refuse his initial offer. This type of manipulation is common throughout the novel as Emma is frequently involved with the love life of the other characters. Emma not only assumes power over her own destiny, by choosing not to marry and rejecting Mr Elton's proposal, but also over the destinies of others (Johnson, as cited in Austen, p. 418) and hence ' she poaches on what is felt to be male turf' (Johnson, as cited in Austen & Justice, p. 418).

Emma encourages Harriet to pursue Mr Elton and take a ' commanding...role in pursuing a man for herself' (Butler, as cited in Austen, p. 385), this in itself works against the social taboos which would have prevented women from being assertive in this manner (Butler, as cited in Austen, p. 385). Emma believes that Harriet needs the social leverage offered by Mr Elton's high status in society. Emma asserts that one ' ought to be particularly careful as to your associates' (Austen, p. 23) as the fact that Harriet is not the daughter of a gentleman would allow people to ' take pleasure from degrading [her]' (Austen, p. 23).

This depicts Austen's view of the importance of status within a society a factor that could potentially be a way by which a woman may be liberated from her social constraints. Additionally through Emma's manipulation of Harriet to decline the Mr Martin's marriage proposal, Austen brings forward a notion that allows for the agency of women, namely their power over marriage.

Therefore although marriage in this era was seen as the only way a woman could achieve emotional fulfilment, namely through 'sexual dependency and motherhood' (Brown, p. 323), Austen suggests that a way by which women may assert authority and agency is through the acceptance or declination of a marriage proposal, a power women will always have over men. The character of Emma is distinctive from the other female characters of the novel in that they are all largely depicted as one-dimensional.

Despite the female characters, such as Harriet and Jane Fairfax, being important in shaping the novel and used as tools by Austen through which Emma is compared, they are static figures. Although their lives seem to change more frequently and rapidly than Emma's, their intellectual development and self-realisation remains unchanged whereas throughout the novel Emma is seen to mature. As mentioned previously, Emma expressed how she was not going to marry, as well as making her an independent woman, it can be said that due to Emma's habituation to having Miss Taylor around her, who is 'intelligent, well-informed, useful, gentle... and peculiarly interested, in herself' (Austin, p. 6), once she moves away Miss Taylor is replaced by Harriet who is 'a flatterer in all her ways'.

In light of this, it is not very surprising that Emma, who is happy to plan a marriage between others, is hesitant to contemplate it herself (Butler, as cited in Austin, p. 386). A marriage would mean that Emma would be 'submitting to continued moral assessment by a mature man' (Butler, as cited in Austin, p. 386), therefore she is 'more attracted to her self-indulgent spinsterhood' (Butler, as cited in Austin, p. 386).

However Emma's ideas of marriage seem to mature as the novel progresses, Emma finds herself in love with Knightley suggesting that she has overcome her self-indulgence in favour of love. Another way the character of Emma matures is through her ability to recognise errors in her actions and attitudes. In Volume III, Chapter VII, Emma unsubtly insults Miss Bates on the trip to Boxhill by suggesting that it would be difficult for the very talkative Miss Bates to find something to say when she is 'limited as to number-only three at once' (Austen, p. 256).

However once Knightley confronts her and asks her 'How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates?' (Austen, p. 258), Emma recognises the mistake she made and experiences 'anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern' (Austen, p. 259). Emma displays her ability to admit to her faults making her a character who the reader has a 'peculiarly intimate relationship with...as with the fallible side of ourselves' (Trilling, 1957, p. 54-5).

The novel depicts Emma's personal growth and through this, perhaps Austen is exposing the true meaning of what it is to be an agent, namely the ability to self-reflect. Self-reflection indicates independence of thought and through this Emma is able to accept who she is by acknowledging her faults.

Therefore the character of Emma can be said to show Austen's view of women's agency by describing the conditions of agency in oppressive 19th Century England as well as the features that embody it.

Austen exposes how if a woman desired to exhibit agency it was essential for her to be of high status and to have financial independence. Additionally

Austen's view of what female agency entails, is embodied in the character of Emma. She is shown to be outspoken, intelligent, argumentative, multidimensional and self-reflective indicating that a female agent would exhibit assertiveness and independence of thought. However it may be argued that although it is indicated that Emma's agency ultimately lies in her self-reflection, this self-reflection is attributed to Knightley.

Therefore Emma's personal growth is largely due to Knightley's confrontations that hence forced her to be self-reflective and realise her faults, essentially her personal growth is therefore centres around a male. Additionally, Emma finally conforms to what is expected of females of Highbury and marries although she was determined not to. Perhaps this indicates that women who exhibit agency in this society and era would eventually be forced to conform and become docile in order to function successfully in the community.