

Taking emma seriously



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“ Emma herself is never to be taken seriously, and it is only those who have not realised this who will be ‘ put off’ by her absurdities, her snobberies, her misdirected mischievous ingenuities” Do you agree? In Jane Austen’s Emma the eponymous heroine is “ handsome, clever, and rich” but she also suffers from arrogance and self deception. With the good judgement of Mr Knightley, and her own self scrutiny, Emma experiences a movement of psyche, from arrogance and vanity through the humiliation of self knowledge to clarity of judgement and fulfilment in marriage. The tone of the novel and the episodes where Emma is self deceived progresses from the light comedy of Mr Elton’s gallantry and the eventual mortification to the sombre depression of Emma’s belief that she has ruined her own chances of happiness by bringing Mr Knightley and Harriet together. Although at times the reader is able to laugh at her mistakes, as she moves slowly and uncertainly to self knowledge and maturity, the reader, like Mr Knightley, comes to take her seriously, for in the novel serious moral and social issues are dealt with, issues which directly concern her. While we may be ‘ put off’ by her mistakes, and flights of illogical fancy, these are also the very qualities which endear her to us. Perhaps the only character in the novel who takes Emma seriously is Mr Knightley. As the moral centre of the book, he has is an exemplar of good judgement and Emma’s moral tutor. He has Emma’s interests at heart and a genuine concern about her moral development. Not blinded by egotism or vanity, honest in all his dealings with her, Mr Knightley exposes Emma’s faults for what they are, and helps to reader to see this. Under his influence, Emma comes to an awareness about her own mistakes and blunders, and finally attains the maturity to be able to find fulfilment in marriage. Though she defies him on many occasions, she

has a “ sort of habitual respect for his judgement” and her willingness to be guided by good principles helps her to reform. Mr Knightley is ‘ put off’ by Emma taking on Harriet as a protegee, for she is simple minded and ignorant. He does not take her matchmaking powers seriously “ you made a lucky guess; and that is all that can be said”, and tries to discourage her from further matchmaking, knowing that “ Elton will not do”. He is highly mortified at recommending Mr Martin propose to Harriet, and angry that Emma has intervened in the affair. He tells Emma that she should make more of an effort to be nice to Jane Fairfax, a more suitable companion for her than Harriet, for she matches and even surpasses Emma in talent. Mr Knightley is also ‘ put off’ by Emma’s inappropriate behaviour with Frank Churchill at Box Hill. Here Emma and Frank “ flirted excessively”, breaking social convention, and because Mr Knightley takes Emma seriously he believes that she is in love with Frank. Emma’s cruel remark to Miss Bates, prompted in part by the high spirits of Frank, elicits strong reaction from Mr Knightley, who rebukes her for this because Miss Bates is poor and has declined in social circumstance. This shows his strong sense of duty and good judgement. Miss Bates also, at this point, takes Emma seriously, but has the generosity and ‘ candour’ to forgive her. Though at the time, Emma says it was done in jest, she later feels Mr Knightley’s rebuke “ at heart”, and is able to respond by visiting Miss Bates the next day to atone for her cruelty. Frank Churchill uses Emma as a veneer for his clandestine affair with Jane Fairfax, and this is because he does not take her seriously. He can see that she is not disposed to be in love, and thus he can affect to pursue her and deceive others. He is not ‘ put off’ by her snobberies and misdirected judgement- in fact, he encourages them. He puts the word “ Dixon” in front

of Jane to provoke her, a shared secret between he and Emma. She voices her opinions on Jane Fairfax, unaware that he is actually engaged to her. He supports her suspicions by criticising Jane and fuelling Emma's imagination that Mr Dixon gave Jane the piano and was in love with her. The reader has the privileged view of observer to all that is going on: we are able to see the mistakes she makes, able to laugh at her mischievous plots, while she is unaware of her blunders. As the novel progresses, however, the reader comes to take her seriously, because of the nature of the issues addressed in the novel, and while at times we may be 'put off' by her snobberies and claim to omnipotence, Austen has written in such a way so as to secure our sympathy for her. Emma is a character neither so good as to be uninteresting, nor so wholly cruel as to forfeit our sympathy. By presenting things from Emma's point of view for the most part of the novel, the reader is able to gain an insight into her inner thoughts and unexpressed feelings. Despite Austen declaring that she would create a heroine "whom no one but myself should much like", the reader does like Emma by the end, or at least we appreciate her capacity to change for the better. But although we may laugh at her vowing never to match make again, or her viewing "the lovers", Mr Elton and Harriet, at certain points in the novel the reader is forced to take her seriously. When she rebukes herself for her blindness and her encouragement of Harriet's affection for Mr Elton, we appreciate her concern for Harriet: "could the effects of her blunders have been confined to herself." While we are 'put off' by her snobbery shown to the Martins and the Coles, Emma is taught a lesson and comes to regret her actions. Emma's encouragement of a romance between Mr Elton and Harriet nearly wrecks the prospective marriage between Harriet and Mr Martin, the match which is

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socially right. The aura of illegitimacy which surrounds Harriet encourages Emma's imagination about Harriet being the daughter of a rich aristocrat; Mr Knightley, like the narrator, knows Harriet is the "natural daughter of Somebody", and lucky that Mr Martin does not object to this. When Emma is happy that Harriet finds a match in Mr Martin at the end the reader knows this happiness to be genuine: for Emma's plots have almost prevented this from occurring. When Emma rides home in the carriage in tears after Mr Knightley's rebuke at Box Hill, she henceforth decides to act more rationally, and acknowledges that "With common sense, I am afraid I have had little to do". It marks the climax in her moral education, and now that she has become aware of her "insufferable vanity" and "unpardonable arrogance", she can judge rightly and act efficaciously. The reader can appreciate her honesty about herself, her willingness to reform, and we take her self-scrutiny seriously. Like Mr Knightley, where "his eyes received the truth from her's, and all that had passed of good in her feelings were at once caught and honoured", the reader takes her attempts to repent with Miss Bates and Jane sincerely, for they are met with none of the self-congratulation and complacency of previously. Though we may have felt that Emma was lacking in tenderness and social caution when she makes the cruel remark, and are put off by her snobbery, the reader also feels that she shows genuine contrition for her sins. Emma dislikes Jane Fairfax because she presents a challenge to the heroine's own immaturity, and because she is cold and reserved. Yet Jane has not the "open temper a man would wish for in a wife" and despite Emma's mischievous character and her snobbery, this good and evil blended in her appear more real and human than the negative Pharisaism of Jane. Her faults, though fewer than Emma's are more serious.

Emma is “ faultless in spite of her faults”, and after she realises her mistakes she displays an honesty which unites her to Mr Knightley. The consequences of her absurdities, snobberies and misdirected mischievous ingenuities as well as her habit of self examination (seen after each of her mistakes) and Mr Knightley giving her his good judgement, are what prompts Emma to experience a moral rebirth, under the impetus of self knowledge. Mr Knightley as the ‘ moral yardstick’ of the novel is the standard by which Emma and the reader evaluate other characters in the novel, and because Mr Knightley takes Emma seriously, the reader too comes to have a concern for Emma’s moral development and education, and so take her seriously as the novel progresses. Though sometimes put off by her snobbery and vanity, her imagination and fancy, these are the qualities of Emma which are reformed when the pressure of events forces her to face the truth about herself. These are also the very qualities which make her such an interesting character. Because Emma is a comedy, a story of success, Emma’s suffering and punishment will only last long enough to secure her emotional as well as intellectual acknowledgement of her errors and their consequences. Austen shows that although Emma in some respects represents not only a threat to members of the community of Highbury, but also a threat to herself, the situation is rectified and Emma finds and accepts her proper place. This is perhaps why some are of the opinion that Emma should never be taken seriously, for everything turns out in the end. However, it is shown that Emma’s mistakes involve important human and social relationships and moral issues and her deficiencies could have had serious consequences for the characters involved. The reader is inclined to follow Mr Knightley’s judgements on events and people, for he is secure in his social position and

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as Emma's moral tutor has the reputation of being a worthy person. Because he takes Emma's mistakes seriously, the reader does also. Though we might laugh at some of her absurdities and misdirected plots, at other times we feel much sympathy for her. Emma is a character who must be taken seriously because her mistakes have potentially harmful outcomes. She cannot be taken as a character who can be dismissed, her opinions and actions disregarded. But despite being 'put off' by some of her less becoming attributes, these are the characteristics which make Emma so unique as a heroine and by the end of the novel the readers too, rejoice in the "perfect happiness of the union" between Emma and Mr Knightley.