

The quiet radicalism of jane austen's emma



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence...with very little to distress or vex her.” (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 1)

This opening character summary of the heroine in Austen's novel Emma should instantly set off alarms in the minds of any avid Austen reader. In Emma, we have an Austen heroine who is attractive, wealthy, and even described as possessing “ the best blessings of existence”; this seems far too good to be true. Indeed, Emma is unlike all other Austen heroines in that she is both financially independent and lacking most of the romantic sensibilities plaguing the young ladies of her time in that she does not see marriage as a goal worth aspiring to. Her wealth gives Emma the privilege of marrying solely for love, and not in hopes of attaining financial security. Yet, despite Emma's nonconformity to the standard Austen protagonist, she still finds happiness in matrimony at the end of Emma. One interpretation of the frequent, happily-married endings in Austen novels might be that they belie Austen's feminist stance on the patriarchal nature of marriage in the nineteenth century. In nineteenth century literature, marriage is often presented as a gendered hierarchy that requires the submission of the female protagonist to her male counterpart, losing a part of herself in the end. However, further analysis of Emma suggests that Austen actually subverts the marriage trope such that marriage actually adds to Emma rather than subtracts from her. Austen uses pedagogy and self-development to track the emotional growth of her protagonist. Through her descriptions of Emma's childish machinations before and after she realizes her love for Mr. Knightley, Austen implies that Emma's maturation is the sole prerequisite to

her finding true love with Mr. Knightley. In doing so, Austen makes the point that marriage itself is not the focus of the story and not the goal of her protagonist, supporting the feminist interpretation of Emma.

To properly assess Emma's maturation throughout Emma, one must first understand Emma's initial shortcomings as a character, as well as her motivations behind befriending Harriet Smith. For a woman of her time, Emma has an extraordinary amount of financial independence and societal agency, especially compared to her fellow Austen heroines. Thus, one of the first things we learn about Austen's protagonist is that Emma sees no point in marriage for a lady of her station, saying to Harriet,

" I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure 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 mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield..." (Emma, V 1, Ch. 10)

Not only is Emma under no financial compulsion to marry, she also considers being in love out of her " nature", and doubts that it will ever be within her nature. Emma also seems to eschew the power dynamic inherent to marriage, doubting that the household power she would have as a married woman would parallel her unquestioned power as " mistress" of Hartfield. In fact, the narrator tells the reader that the only " real evils" plaguing Emma " were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to

think a little too well of herself." (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 1) In short, these quotes reinforce Emma's power within her household, her power in her community, and her power over the people closest to her, such as her father and her former companion, Mrs. Weston. With the problems of economic and social disparity disqualified as possible sources of conflict for this novel, one is left to wonder what Austen could possibly use to plague her heroine. Actually, it is Emma's mistreatment of those less fortunate than her that highlight her character flaws, mark her character's improvement throughout the novel, and pave her path to true love.

Harriet Smith, Emma's ill-fated protégé, is the first source of conflict in the novel. Harriet is the "natural daughter of somebody" (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 3), and a parlour-boarder at the local boarding school. It is Harriet's beauty that first catches Emma's attention, and thus Emma decides that,

"She would notice her; she would improve her...detach her from her bad acquaintance, introduce her into good society...form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers." (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 3)

Emma's intentions, though probably kind-hearted, are quite condescending, a fact that is apparent to the reader but not to Emma herself. Emma's savior complex masquerades as righteousness as she resolves to "notice" and "improve" Harriet. Emma also believes that her "situation in life, her leisure, and powers" qualify her for the role of mentor. However, her faults as a mentor quickly become apparent. As the director of Harriet's reformation,

Emma often steers her protégé down paths that make Emma's life more interesting, without using Harriet's best interests as a compass. For instance, Emma encourages Harriet, a woman of little wealth, to forget her "course and unpolished" (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 3) farmer Martin. Emma convinces Harriet to, instead, look beyond her social class and aim for a wealthier husband so that she can remain in Emma's social circle. But her plans go awry when the chosen vicar Mr. Elton jilts a heartbroken Harriet. Emma's naiveté stems from her privilege, and it blinds her from seeing the harm this social climbing project could do to Harriet. Though Emma is right in believing that, as a woman with the power and resources she has, it is her responsibility to help those less fortunate, Emma fails to realize her social function and potential as a leader. She instead toys with Harriet's fate solely because her reformation would be an "interesting undertaking". The problem with Emma is that she is incapable of seeing the weight her actions carry, and the long term implications they could have on Harriet's future happiness. Though Mr. Martin truly cares for Harriet, he is not part of the fun project Emma has in mind, and is thus useless to her.

What saves Emma as a heroine in the eyes of the reader is the fact that Emma does not hate Harriet; her ignorant machinations seem to stem from a genuine desire to help her friend. Emma hopes that her matchmaking will lay the foundation for Harriet and Mr. Elton's relationship, and in her heart she truly believes that Mr. Elton is "in the fairest way of falling in love, if not in love already" (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 6) with Harriet. Her good-natured ignorance keeps the reader invested in the growth of her character, hoping Emma will gain the maturity she needs to put her intelligence, wealth, and social

consequence into good use. The reader certainly supports Mr. Knightley when he berates Emma by saying that whoever had raised Harriet surely did not “ plan to introduce her into what you would call good society... [they] thought [Mr. Martin] good enough for her; and it was good enough” (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 8). He caps his statement by announcing that Emma has been “ no friend to Harriet Smith” (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 8). At the time, Emma “ did not repent what she had done” (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 8), but after Mr. Elton proposes to her and not to Harriet, Emma’s attitude changes. She says, “ The first error, and the worst, lay at her door. It was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was...assuming too much...she was quite concerned and ashamed, and resolved to do such things no more.” (Emma, V. 1, Ch. 16). In this quote, Emma both recognizes the implications of her actions and, most importantly, is repentant, even though her repentance is belated. This guilt stemming from a girl who once had “ very little to distress or vex her” is remarkable growth indeed. Not only does she call her actions “ foolish” and “ wrong”, she also admits that her role as matchmaker “[assumes] too much”, implying that there are things she should not control even though she has the power to. In the end, Emma’s inaction finally allows Harriet to happily marry her Mr. Martin. Her friendship with Harriet teaches Emma that she has the power to affect the lives of others, positively and negatively.

However, her friendship with Harriet is not the last lesson Emma must learn before her maturation process truly comes to its conclusion: her treatment of the Bates family also forces Emma to acknowledge her social consequence and ability to influence society. The narrator describes Miss Bates as being in

the “ very worst predicament in the world for having so much public favour” (Emma, V. I, Ch. 3): after having lived an unexceptional youth and middle of life, she remains a spinster throughout Emma, and is financially dependent on her mother’s paltry income. Though her and her mother are in Emma’s social circle, their wealth is diminishing quickly and thus they rely heavily on the charity of other Highbury residents. Austen sets up Miss Bates as a pitiable, likeable character, and Emma admits that as a resident of Highbury she has a subtle duty to “ contribute what she ought to the stock of [the Bates’] scanty comforts” (Emma, V. II, Ch. 1). However, it is a duty she often shirks because she finds it “ very disagreeable...a waste of time...tiresome women” (Emma, V. II, Ch. 1). Because the reader pities Miss Bates, Emma’s apathy is jarring and immediately rejected in the eyes of the reader. In the first chapter of Volume II, Emma brings herself to visit the Bateses, even though her reasons for the visit are slightly selfish. Throughout her visit with the Bateses, Emma finds Miss Bates’ loquaciousness extremely tiresome, and ends the visit quickly. Her inner derision does not become a true problem, however, until later in the novel. At a Box Hill picnic scene, Emma’s internal dislike of the Bateses becomes an external matter. As part of a picnic game, Miss Bates, Emma, and the other picnic attendees are tasked with saying one statement that is clever, two that are moderately clever, and three that are dull. As Miss Bates prepares to say three dull statements, Emma quips “ Ah! ma’am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once” (Emma, V. II, Ch. 7). Austen prefaces Emma’s cruel remark with “ Emma could not resist,” making the author’s intention in highlighting the compulsory nature of Emma’s remark

unclear. Thus, the reader is left to wonder whether Austen means to reprimand or excuse Emma's insensitivity.

However, one thing is clear: Emma cannot resist using her privilege and intelligence as leverage to make fun of those less fortunate. Rather than responding with anger at the obvious quip, Miss Bates responds by saying, "Ah!—well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means... and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend" (Emma, V. II, Ch. 7). Though Emma's observation is the truth, it is a truth that her social circle has implicitly agreed to ignore in the name of decency and out of respect for Miss Bates. Another reason for their forbearance is revealed in Mr. Knightley's reproach of Emma's actions as they wait for their carriages after the picnic. He says, "Emma, I must once more speak to you...How could you be so.... insolent in your wit to a woman of [Miss Bates'] character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible... Were she your equal in situation—but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case... You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honor, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her—and before her niece, too—and before others, many of whom (certainly some,) would be entirely guided by your treatment of her." (Emma, V. II, Ch. 7)

Mr. Knightley, as usual, gets to the root of Emma's cruelty; the reason why Emma's quip was so inappropriate was because, not only is Miss Bates not her equal in status, wealth, or intelligence, but also because Emma's

elevated social status could set a precedent for how the rest of Highbury society treats Miss Bates. Mr. Knightley aptly points out that Emma's actions and words carry enough weight to give her power, and her power has the ability to hurt Miss Bates. Despite the brashness of her comment, there are signs of growth in Emma's character that were absent in her dealings with Harriet. Different from the instance with Ms. Smith, as soon as Mr. Knightley begins talking, Emma "recollected, blushed [and] was sorry," (Emma, V. II, Ch. 7). As she ruminates on the incident privately she feels "vexed...never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life... How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!" (Emma, V. II, Ch. 7) The weight of her social consequence and responsibility finally dawns on Emma: as a leader of her society, she has the power to set a standard of behavior. Often, a sign of maturity is being able to shift one's focus away from themselves and fix onto those around them. Towards the end of Emma, our heroine sincerely pays a visit to the Bateses, no longer prompted by duty but by her new-felt responsibility to her community. Miss Bates played an important role in Emma's maturation process and journey towards self-knowledge.

Throughout the novel, there is one character that functions as Emma's moral compass, holding her accountable for her actions and words: Mr. Knightley. He articulates a vision of individualism for Emma, both recognizing and working to amplify her power. Early in the novel, he explains his function by saying that correcting Emma when she missteps is something he considers "a privilege rather endured than allowed, perhaps, but I must still use it. I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance" (Emma, V. II, Ch. 7).

Within the novel he often speaks for the reader, recognizing Emma's potential before she does. As he reprimands Emma's treatment of Harriet, he says, " Emma, to hear you abusing the reason you have, is almost enough to make me think so too. Better be without sense, than misapply it as you do" (Emma, V. I, Ch. 8). He never doubts Emma's potential to grow, but instead laments the misapplication of her " reason" and " sense". He never shies away from telling her what he thinks she needs to hear, even if it earns him her scorn or hate. Emma's gradual maturation is exactly what makes her and Mr. Knightley's convergence at the end of Emma so fulfilling for the reader, because marriage to Mr. Knightley isn't submission, but rather a fulfillment of the power of Emma's individualism. Her sudden realization of her love for Mr. Knightley is especially touching: she says,

" It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr Knightley must marry no one but herself...there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear...She had herself been first with him for many years past. She had not deserved it; she had often been negligent or perverse, slighting his advice, or even willfully opposing him, insensible of half his merits, and quarreling with him because he would not acknowledge her false and insolent estimate of her own - but still...with an endeavor to improve her, and an anxiety for her doing right, which no other creature had at all shared" (Emma, V. II, Ch. 12). Her ability to finally acknowledge Mr. Knightley as a romantic figure, though sparked by her jealousy of Harriet, is only possible because she is able to see just how much of an instrumental role he has played in her maturation. Though she has been " negligent or

perverse”, often ignoring his advice and resenting his censure, he guided her “ with the endeavor to improve her”. Because he is the only character that has guided her towards self-development, her love for Mr. Knightley is the emotional manifestation of her maturation. To realize her feelings for Mr. Knightley, she had to learn to broaden her scope outside herself and find value in the needs of others, such as Harriet and Miss Bates. In this sense, love in Emma represents pedagogy and a guided maturation towards a better self for Emma.

Though Austen’s Emma might seem conservative in its feminist views by eventually marrying Emma off in the end, the novel makes a rather radical statement. This novel is about the representation of an individual, not about the subordination of a woman in marriage. No other character in Emma experiences personal change in the novel, making Emma’s growth all the more conspicuous. Austen does not make marriage, love, and courtship the personal goal of her protagonist, so by the end of Emma, our heroine’s marriage to Mr. Knightley seems almost incidental. Emma’s love story is only made possible as she gains a better understanding of herself, and the influence she wields in her community. Through her interactions with both Harriet and Miss Bates, Emma learns that a consequence of her privilege is that her actions and words carry weight, and thus she has the power to hurt those close to her. In other Austen novels, the fulfillment of the love and marriage narrative is often what the reader looks forward to the most towards the conclusion of the story. However, because Emma does not initially seek a husband and does not immediately view Mr. Knightley as a romantic figure, the reader is distracted from the love plot. Instead, in

Emma, it is the maturation of the heroine that the reader looks forward to most because her growth both salvages her character and catalyzes the beginning of her love story with Mr. Knightley.