

The understanding of the role of education in emma



Emma, Jane Austen's most comical and spirited novel, is well received for its lively characters and engaging narrative. In yet another story of society verses sensibility, Austen weaves together a myriad of incidents to illustrate how youthful presumptions can distort the bigger picture. In a sense, the storyline of events veils the novel's real plot, which is devoted to showing how experience is the schoolmaster of maturation. Austen's deeper purpose, therefore, is to demonstrate that the journey of self-discovery is completed through many forms of education. The education of Emma, the kind-hearted but closed-minded heroine, particularly relies on a combination of lessons that improve her social understanding and awaken her personal awareness.

On the surface, it seems that Emma Woodhouse is the blessed child. Austen first describes her as "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition" (3). She has never met with someone she could not charm, never encountered much that was able to "distress or vex her" (3). In spite of her good nature and attractive person, Emma suffers from "the power of having rather too much her own way," and is also inclined "to think a little too well of herself" (4). Her main problem, however, is that she is as insensible of these character flaws as she is comfortable with her life situation. All this considered, it is quite evident that Emma's world must be shaken for her complacency will dislodge itself. This earthquake comes when Emma's governess, Miss Taylor, marries. Emma's first and perhaps most challenging lesson, then, is to learn how to subdue her dependency on companionship and grow accustomed to the greatest solitude she has ever known.

Austen suggests that independence is the most pivotal education one can have. This concept of being alone may be Emma's first lesson, but it is also the most important one in her progress towards maturation. Until she no longer has the constant company of her former governess and best friend, Emma is blissfully ignorant of her own fear of being by herself. She is likewise unaware of her desire for a husband. In good humour, she allows that love might induce her to matrimony, but the idea of she would fall in love is as absurd as sunbathing in Siberia. Laughing at the idea, Emma heartily declares to Harriet "...I have never been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall" (78). What Emma omits saying is that it also embodies what she lives in horror of: being powerless. As Bruce Stovel infers, "Emma fears love because she considers it to be blind. Emma is exquisitely self-contained: the idea of being out of control, of losing her will in the grip of passion, disturbs her." Oddly enough, it is Emma's perception of love and marriage, the ultimate forms of companionship, which obscure her estimation of their inherent value. "If I were to marry," says she, "I must expect to repent it" (78). Any penitence on her part comes once the shroud of puerile individuality gives way to her sentiments for Mr. Knightley, the man destined to be her husband.

Before Emma can admit that she does both want and need a husband, she has to realize the social consequence of married status. To her mind, she will always be so highly regarded that she will gain nothing desirable in a marriage. Thus, she fixes her focus on improving the young Harriet Smith. Harriet, unlike Emma, is "not clever," and although she is both pretty and sweet-tempered, she has no idea of her family connections, meaning she has

no male relation to establish her station in society. Emma is initially drawn to Harriet by her beauty, but, also, by Harriet's impressionable character. More than anything, Emma seems to be enamoured with the idea of having her own protégée for whom she can "form her opinions and her manners" (20). The friendship she instigates, then, is Emma's expression of her desire for control, as well as her longing to be an irreplaceable person. Beyond that, Harriet's role in Emma's enlightenment is instructive because it opens Emma's eyes to her own inaccurate presumptions. Through Harriet's attachment to Mr. Elton, the young vicar of Highbury, Emma reaps the consequences of her foolish encouragement of Harriet's affections. This is a prime example of how Austen uses the power of influence as a form of education for her heroine. Emma gains a very keen awareness of how she can injure others, despite the good intentions she may have.

The Harriet-Elton debacle also teaches Emma about the barriers of social hierarchy. Mr. Elton's high hopes for social aggrandizement are palpable to nearly everyone but Emma and Harriet, who has absolutely no claim in society. As he says, "Every body has their level... I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith!" (122). Emma's frustration overshadows her own fastidious sense of rank. Once her disappointment for Harriet has subsided, however, she can think of nothing but Elton's impertinence in setting his cap at her. She is almost insulted that he "should suppose himself her equal in connection or mind," (125) and is convinced that "he must know that in fortune and in consequences she was greatly his superior" (126). In other words, Emma sees an impassable chasm between their social ranks—very much like the

one he perceives between himself and Harriet. Her conceit is, in many ways, just as pitiful as his. This similarity is yet another form of instruction that Austen uses for her disgruntled pupil. Remarkably, Emma does not realize the significance of this experience until she sees it as a reflection of her own misconceptions. As Bradbury puts it, “ Emma learns...by analogy.” In her moment of enlightenment, she begins to understand how “ If she had so misinterpreted [Mr. Elton’s] feelings, she had little right to wonder that he, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken hers” (126).

Mentorship is another form of education that Austen administers to her heroine. Mr. Knightley, the wealthy gentleman who owns the great estate of Donwell Abbey, best fulfils the role of Emma’s present counsellor. With his “ sensible” nature and sound judgment, Mr. Knightley is the one person who consistently forms accurate opinions of the people around him. It is Mr. Knightley who foresees the trouble that Emma might put upon Harriet, despite her well-meaning motives, and it is also Mr. Knightley who first suspects the secret relationship between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. Mr. Knightley is a good mentor indeed, for he “ is one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them” (8). As Emma jokes, “ Mr. Knightley loves to find fault with me” (8). This jest could not be further from the truth, however, because Mr. Knightley is as kind with his criticism as he is discerning of her flaws. Miss Taylor gave her principles, but Mr. Knightley gives Emma conviction. As he says, “ I will tell you truths while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel” (347). Mr. Knightley is, to any end, most dedicated to the cause of refining the moral character of his beloved Emma.

Austen's final and most compelling tutorial is to reveal the twists of fate to her unsuspecting heroine. This is both humiliating and life-changing for Emma, for although her vanity is consistently gratified, her judgment is exposed as a ridiculously fallible guide. Emma's list of erroneous conjectures is lengthy. She was mistaken about Mr. Elton, about Harriet's status by birthright, in her judgment of Mr. Martin too harshly; she allows herself to believe that Jane Fairfax might have an improper relationship with her friend's husband, Mr. Dixon; she convinces herself that she is in love with Frank Churchill and that he returns her affections; and, finally, she decides that Harriet is quite taken with Frank. As these suppositions prove false, she is able to see the truth. Furthermore, Emma's sudden clarity reveals to her that she loves Mr. Knightley.

In addition to studying the author's modes of education, it is worth noting how Emma reacts to her education. Emma's revelations are manifest in rapid streams of consciousness that interrupt the novel's general combination of narration and dialogue. These short, disjointed thoughts, accentuated by numerous hyphens and exclamation marks, flow from Emma's racing mind in a surprisingly cogent form. What is of interest, however, is the fact that each of these soliloquies denotes an ingestion of the truth. Her edification is, in essence, the summation of these epiphanic moments. Her maturing can be traced by how long it takes her to recover from these upheavals of distress and emotion. The first outburst, which occurs after Mr. Elton proposes to her, is "not poignant enough to keep [her] eyes unclosed" at night (127).

Emma's "youth and natural cheerfulness" are, at first, very hard to disturb for any great length of time (127). When Mr. Knightley reprimands Emma for

her insolence towards Miss Bates, however, she is so “forcibly struck” that “Time [does] not compose her” (347). Her conviction is so deep that she mopes about as though “she had never been so depressed” (347). Her disposition is similarly inflicted when she believes Mr. Knightley to be in love with Harriet, and in this particular reverie, we see how a crestfallen heroine trembles with shame and lovesickness.

As Austen takes Emma through her education, she proves that every experience in life is a lesson when one is willing to be educated. Austen also demonstrates the value of change by revealing the need for it. As she so eloquently phrases it, “Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken...” (399). This is very much the story of Emma’s life, which is little more than a comedy of errors until her maturation has softened the rougher edges of her character. It is, indeed, difficult to learn that favouring private assumptions, however well thought out they may be, is as dangerous as judging by appearances. This is the reason, therefore, that Austen uses a plethora of teaching techniques to edify her brightest pupil.