

## ∞ An Introduction to *Emma* ∞

Natalie Goldberg

Jane Austen's fourth published novel, *Emma*, opens as many Austen novels do—the equilibrium of the protagonist is suddenly changed. Emma's governess and confidante, Miss Taylor, has become Mrs. Weston, and Emma sees her remaining life as diminished and lonely. Emma, now almost twenty-one years old, is often described as spoiled. Her mother died when she was very young, her older sister is married and living in London, and Emma's doting father has, in effect, given her the woman's role in organizing Hartfield, the Woodhouse home. But she is still a young woman with no friends her own age. She is confined in a small town: Her father worries about imposing on the footman to take out the carriages for even a ride to the Weston estate; her father does not bring her to Bath or to London for "the season"; she has no opportunities to attend dances where young men and women her own age would be met. Her father is set against marriages, for they involve change. In the opening scene of the novel we hear Mr. Woodhouse again and again sigh, "Poor Miss Taylor"; he still occasionally sighs, "Poor Isabella," though his elder daughter has been contentedly married for years. Emma knows that her former governess is happier as a married woman with a good husband and comfortable home of her own, but she cannot help wiping away tears at the change marriage will make for their friendship. Close as they still live, they will not meet and talk as intimately as before.



Consequently, Emma needs a friend. For Emma, that friend will be someone whom she can control. She had been the domineering personality with her governess and her father; as a daughter in a wealthy family, she has a prominent role in the Highbury community. Pretty Harriet Smith, a natural child who has been indifferently educated, becomes Emma's project. Harriet's admiration feeds Emma's vanity, and so the two become companions. Emma does not befriend Jane Fairfax when she arrives at Highbury in part because Jane is hard working and more accomplished than Emma (Jane plays and sings beautifully), and in part because Jane herself is so guarded about her opinions and feelings. Emma will not draw closer to Jane when friendship was most needed. She learns how her own biting wit has hurt Jane and her family and values Jane just when Jane is leaving Highbury.

One other young woman Emma's age comes initially to offer friendship: Mrs. Elton, the former Augusta Hawkins. However, that woman's openly self-important air, a parody of Emma's attitude toward others, offends Emma. Perhaps Mrs. Elton's role in this novel is to make us like Emma better. While Emma is equally egotistical, she acts with propriety and shows great kindness

to her father, to her neighbors, and to the poor in her parish. Only once, at Box Hill, does she behave offensively to a neighbor, and she is made to regret her rudeness soon after. Not until the end of the novel, when Emma at last comes to understand herself, does she find a true friend and lover in Mr. Knightley, a man equally surprised by his need for Emma.

The novel was originally organized as three volumes, published simultaneously and usually purchased together. The actual events making up each volume are small:

**Volume one** concentrates on Emma's plans for Mr. Elton to marry her friend Harriet; a series of misunderstandings lead Mr. Elton to think the wealthy Emma is interested in him, though Emma thinks his interest is preferment for her friend. In the climax of this little plot, Mr. Elton proposes, he is refused, and both are insulted: Mr. Elton for Emma's presuming that a poor foundling is a suitable match for him and Emma for Mr. Elton's assuming that he was good enough for her. With the proposal, the two become cordial enemies, and Mr. Elton leaves to find a suitably wealthy and accomplished bride elsewhere.

**Volume two** opens with the arrival of Jane Fairfax, beautiful, accomplished, orphaned niece of the Bates family, and the later, more anticipated arrival of Frank Churchill, son of Mr. Weston, who is now married to Emma's former governess. Finally, with the return of Mr. Elton and his bride, the Highbury circle is complete. The events are the Coles's dinner party, a missed opportunity for a ball, and the Woodhouses's dinner party honoring the new bride.

**Volume three** includes three more social gatherings: The Crown Ball does take place, and the group goes strawberry picking at Donwell Abbey and picnicking at Box Hill. As the novel progresses, we learn just how restricted a life Emma has led. Emma had never been to Box Hill before, though this location is not far from home; also, she had not been to Donwell Abbey in two years, though Mr. Knightley is one of her closest companions and her neighbor. Once Mr. Woodhouse learns about the gipsy attack on Harriet, he makes Emma promise to go no further than the hedge on her walk. Her kindly father's age and hypochondria control her. She cannot bring herself to think about leaving him when marrying. A local robbery of a henhouse convinces Mr. Woodhouse that Emma married is good indeed, and he accepts the idea of Mr. Knightley moving into Hartfield.

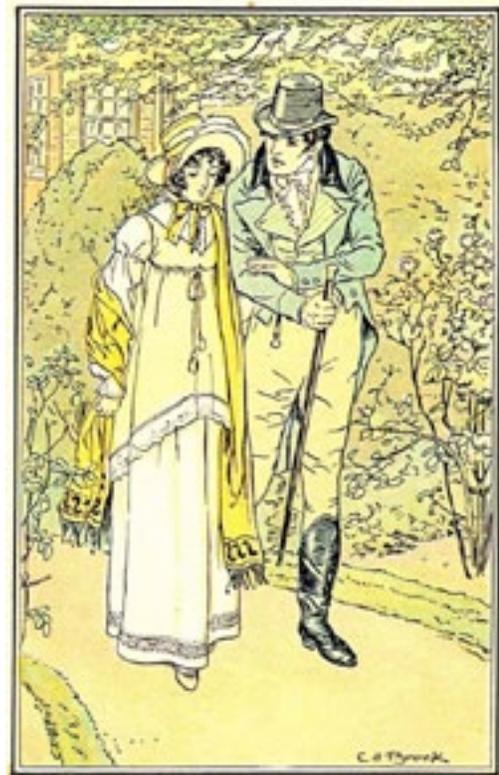


In Austen's novels, the most significant conflicts are examples of social aggression. Rules of propriety differed in Austen's society from contemporary American standards. Mrs. Elton's use of the familiar "Jane" in her conversations is publicly demeaning to Miss Fairfax and taken as an insult by Frank Churchill. The two rescues of Harriet Smith contrast a subtle cruelty at the Crown Ball with a melodramatic moment appropriate for romance novels. Mr. Elton's "gleeful" public refusal to dance with Harriet mortifies her and Emma. When Harriet is led to the dance floor by Mr. Knightley, their humiliation becomes a public triumph. Austen describes Harriet's "high sense of the distinction which her happy features announced. It was not thrown away on her; she bounded higher than ever, flew farther down the middle, and in a continual course of smiles." Mr. Elton's "retreat" to the card room suggests that this dance was a battle of sorts.

Mr. Knightley's language acknowledges a battle plan when he later addresses Emma, "They [the Eltons] aimed at wounding more than Harriet. . . . Emma, why is it that they are your enemies?" Mr. Knightley's gallantry leads Harriet to indulge in romantic fantasies, in marked contrast to Harriet's disregard of Frank Churchill's more melodramatic "rescue" from the taunting gipsy beggars.

Some critics see in the Jane Fairfax / Frank Churchill conflict a worthier focus for Austen's novel, with Jane Fairfax as "superior to Emma in most respects" (Booth 405). The tone would certainly differ. Frank Churchill's self-indulgence "pokes fun" at Emma but is "playfully cruel" to his fiancé (Harvey 456). While Jane's anguish could make a good novel, Emma is the better comic heroine. Ironically, she accuses others of faults recognizable in her: Robert Martin's lack of disciplined reading, Mrs. Elton's desire to dominate, Frank Churchill's playing with other people's feelings. Despite her flaws and her lack of intellectual discipline, Emma is lively, intelligent, curious, and basically desirous of doing good. Her misunderstandings form the comic texture of the novel, particularly her misreading of Frank Churchill and Mr. Elton. All of their scenes are "loaded with double meaning" and "her confident moral judgments act as a boomerang with Emma as the unsuspecting target" (Harvey 455). One comic moment is Harriet's gushing, "You . . . who can see into everybody's heart" just when Emma is about to discover how little she knows about Harriet. As W.J. Harvey explains, "In few other novels does the protagonist seem so much in control, and in reality be so little in control, of her 'human fate'" (456).

The plot has been described as one of Austen's Pygmalion novels: an older, wiser man educates and perfects a young woman and then falls in love with his prodigy. Mr. Knightley has been a neighbor and valued family friend for years; his younger brother married Isabella, Emma's elder sister. Mr. Knightley has watched Emma grow up and been the only person whose opinion and criticism she would take. Mr. Knightley helps Emma see herself clearly and become more genuinely charitable. Yet she never retreats from her self-confidence. At the end of the novel, Emma cannot believe Harriet was already engaged to Robert Martin; perhaps, she suggests, he was discussing "the dimensions of some famous ox"; Mr. Knightley fumes, "Do you dare suppose me so great a blockhead as not to know what a man is talking of? What do you deserve?" Her joking rejoinder is nonetheless true: "Oh, I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other; and, therefore, you must give me a plain and direct answer. . . ." Emma laughs at the way "such a Harriet" turns out, and she teaches George Knightley how to laugh, also, as well as how to see himself as a graceful dancer and affectionate lover who is willing to take a chance in proposing to Emma. In one of his closing remarks he tells Emma, "I am changed also," as he admits Harriet's good qualities.



The novel could be examined as a study of marriages: A marriage opens the novel, and by the novel's end, four young couples are married. Courtship is the answer to Mr. Elton's riddle, and who is courting whom becomes an ongoing riddle for Emma and the reader. We hear about one childless marriage and briefly meet with one marriage where the mother dotes on her children.

The relationship between Mr. Knightley and Emma is most intriguing. Mr. Knightley will move into Emma's home where Emma has ruled the household. Perhaps only he can move into her home without losing authority. As Claudia Johnson argues, "with the exception of Mr. Knightley, all of the people in control are women" (126).

The novel could be read as a criticism of women's education. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* argues for women's education as rigorous as that given to men. She questions, "How should a woman void of reflection be capable of educating her children?" (88) While published sermons idealized qualities of "meekness and docility . . . yielding softness and gentle compliance" (95) in women, Wollstonecraft notes that "beauty, gentleness, &c., &c. may gain a heart; but esteem, the only lasting affection, can alone be obtained by virtue supported by reason. It is respect for the understanding that keeps alive the tenderness for the person" (96). To Mr. Knightley, the docile, pretty Harriet Smith, educated at Mrs. Goddard's school, was inadequate as a wife for Robert Martin and inappropriate as a friend for Emma. Only later, upon closer acquaintance for Emma's sake, is he convinced that Harriet is "an artless, amiable girl, with very good notions, very seriously good principles." Austen's dominant male character in the novel would excite Wollstonecraft's admiration. It is Emma's lively mind that attracts Mr. Knightley, but her lack of discipline provokes his disapproval. He recalls Emma as a precocious child who would plan lists of books to read which could have given her mind more scope if only she had applied herself. Even as Emma's misreadings of the people around her is a source of comic irony, the novel focuses on her growing self-awareness. As Wayne Booth explains, "Jane Austen never lets us forget that Emma is not what she might appear to be. For every section devoted to her misdeeds. . . there is a section devoted to her self-reproach" (Booth 403).

We see this novel taking the moral, inner life of a young woman as its focus in an age when men debated whether women were capable of reflection. Critic Lionel Trilling notes, "The extraordinary thing about Emma is that she has a moral life as a man has a moral life . . . as a given quality of her nature. . . . Women in fiction only rarely have the peculiar reality of the moral life that self-love bestows. Most commonly they exist in a moonlike way, shining by the reflected moral light of men"

(Trilling 154). Susan Morgan examines "Emma's commitment to a personal vision" from the opening to the closing words, explaining that "the novel is not a lesson in humility . . . the moral of the story is not that Emma should think less of herself but that she should value the world more"(Morgan 24). Emma learns the relationship of her imagination to truth, but she never abandons her self-confidence. She has been called manipulative and self-serving. Yet a computer study of the pronoun use in Emma proves that while Emma Woodhouse talks more than twice as much as any other character in all six novels, she has the third lowest percentage of ME words (I, me, my, myself), just behind the meek Anne Elliot of Persuasion and Fanny Price of Mansfield Park (Johnson 265-267). Emma is vain, but not about her beauty, which is considerable. Mr. Knightley tells Mrs. Weston, "I think her all you describe. I love to look at her; and I will add



this praise, that I do not think her personally vain. Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it; her vanity lies another way.” As Susan Morgan explains, Emma’s vanity is more that of an artist than a god. Perhaps that is why Austen can make Emma’s playing at creativity such an attractive sin. A desire to make life vivid is surely possible to forgive (Morgan 37).

The novel could also be seen as a satire of “fancy” and the role of the imagination so important in this age of Romanticism. The opening sentence states that Emma is “handsome, clever, and rich” and blessed with an indulgent father and “happy disposition”—everything that should have assured a happy and useful life. Yet this young woman uses her imagination and cleverness in ways that bring humiliation and anguish to people she cares about. Dr. Johnson writes in chapter 44 of *Rasselas*, “Disorders of intellect . . . happen much more often than superficial observers will easily believe. Perhaps if we speak with rigorous exactness, no human mind is in its right state. There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason . . . it is not pronounced madness but when it comes ungovernable, and apparently influences speech or action. To indulge the power of fiction, and send imagination out upon the wing, is often the sport of those who delight too much in silent speculation. . . . By degrees the reign of fancy is confirmed; she grows first imperious, and in time depotick [sic]. Then fictions begin to operate as realities, false opinions fasten upon the mind, and life passes in dreams of rapture or of anguish. (S. Johnson 596)



Dr. Johnson’s argument for men governing their lives by reasoned reflection is opposed by the Romantic poets privileging the imagination and emotion over reason and duty. Austen’s contemporary, William Wordsworth, writes in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry is “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (Noyes 365). For Shelley, in *A Defense of Poetry*, “Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities. . .” (Noyes 1097).

Is Jane Austen supporting Dr. Johnson’s view that the imagination must be controlled? Or is Austen’s lively and imaginative Emma created to support the role of the imagination in giving meaning to experience? W.J. Harvey argues that “by Jane Austen’s time the imagination was well-established as an essential moral agent, necessary for the sympathetic identification of ourselves with our fellow human beings. Jane Austen so stresses this aspect of Emma that she coins a new word, *imaginist*, to describe her” (Harvey 453). Emma does indulge in “silent speculation” as she takes over Harriet Smith’s life and plans a match with Mr. Elton; Emma also specu-

lates on the source of Jane Fairfax’s secrecy. Both speculations prove wrong and hurtful. But, as Harvey points out, Emma is also quick to relieve Mrs. Weston’s guilt over her overindulgent imagination, and carries no grudge for Frank Churchill’s “imposing” on her (Harvey 454). While Emma mistakenly trusts her intuition about romantic attachments, rational Mr. Knightly correctly “reads” Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill. Yet the relationship between reason and imagination is complex in Austen’s novel. Emma is not wrong about everyone, and Mr. Knightley is not always right. Mr. Knightley needs Emma’s lively imagination in his life. While Emma seems more adult by the novel’s close, George Knightley seems to have grown younger.

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\*Note: The Eric Johnson study can be accessed via an Austen website; he is reachable by the following address,  
<<http://www.dsu.edu/~johnsone/austench.html>>.