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The Perfection of *Emma*

Introduction

A conundrum, by Mr. Weston:

“What two letters of the alphabet are there that express perfection?”

“You,” (to Emma), “I am certain, will never guess. I will tell you. M. and A. Emma. Do you understand?”

Jane Austen’s novel, *Emma*, is widely considered her most complex book. In fact, Paul Pickrel, in his essay “Lionel Trilling and *Emma*: A Reconsideration,” extends the field and calls *Emma* “the hardest easy novel in the language” (Pickrel 299). Not only is *Emma* a difficult book, but Emma Woodhouse, Austen’s titular heroine, is a difficult and complex character, not only in comparison to Austen’s other heroines, but also a unique character in literature due to the fact that her gifts and flaws are given equal weight. Up until this point in literature, it was easy for a reader to identify a novel’s heroes and villains, but Emma embodies both the hero and the villain in tension, and this allows her to learn and grow throughout the novel. She is not the standard-issue heroine identifiable in any genre; indeed, she sometimes resembles hero more than heroine, and it may be for this reason that Austen famously described Emma Woodhouse as “a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.” It is a truth universally acknowledged among Austen scholars that Emma Woodhouse is a stand-in for Jane Austen herself. What, then, is Austen saying in *Emma* about women, about marriage, about the larger community, about herself? Does there need to be a shift from the traditional mindset to a new, modern model? Emma Woodhouse seems to have it all, she does not need to marry for status or security. What does Emma (or

Austen) have to lose, and what does Emma (or Austen) have to gain? I believe Austen is using *Emma* as an emblem of modernity in woman, marriage, and country, and in this series of essays, we will explore Emma Woodhouse as a modern woman, as a romantic partner in a modern marriage, and as a member of a modern community. As well as being a complex book with a complex heroine, I wish to prove that Emma is perfection; “faultless in spite of all her faults,” perfect in all her imperfection. This flawed heroine was a new appearance in the English novel, and both *Emma* and Emma were tried in the fire and scrutinized to see if they would come forth as gold. The novel had mixed reviews upon publication, even from Austen’s own family. How could a reader root for such a self-satisfied, meddling, snobbish young woman? Could it be that Emma Woodhouse is a stand-in not just for Jane Austen, but for all of us mortals? Is Emma the modern heroine we all have a realistic chance to aspire to? Perhaps Emma is telling us that “perfection” is overrated, or at the very least needs an updated definition in an increasingly complex world.

The Perfection of Emma: Emma as Individual

Emma Woodhouse: what a woman! The opening line of Jane Austen's *Emma* sets us up for a remarkable protagonist, "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition seemed to unite some of the best blessings in existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen 5). The key word in that sentence may very well be "seemed," as nothing turns out to be as it seems, at least as it seems in the imaginative mind of Emma, who will become extremely distressed and vexed as the novel progresses! In Austen's own words, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." This literary heroine has been defined many ways by readers and writers in critical analysis; spoiled, selfish, vain, unlikeable, manipulative, self-deluded, self-important—in short: a snob. In the novel that bears her name, Emma is called an imaginist, angel, ready wit, one who can see into people's hearts, best daughter, good neighbor. Mr. Weston, in his conundrum, called Emma perfection. There seems to be a disconnect between the characters in *Emma*, who see no flaws, and the readers of *Emma*, who do.

This is the only novel of Austen's that uses her heroine's name as the title, so the author must mean for us to focus on Emma herself. Some have called her an emblem of England, many agree that Emma Woodhouse is a stand-in for the author herself, creating a novelist within the novel. I see *Emma* the novel as a progressive manual for modernity, and Emma herself as Austen's ideal of the modern woman: powerful, creative, confident, flawed, and a woman who claims the power to make her own choices; both angel and monster through a critical feminist lens.

The foundational work on feminist critical theory by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, first outlined in their book, *Madwoman in the Attic*, can be applied to Austen's Emma. Due to the

nineteenth-century cultural expectation that women embody the spiritual ideal of maternal, obedient, and passive femininity; their theory posits it is “debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (53). This comprehensive book about “the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination” talks about female authors and their work has two chapters devoted to Jane Austen, analyzing both Austen as an author, and also the heroines in her novels through this lens. The authors talk about the anxiety of the female author and the compulsion to dramatize the “necessity of female submission for female survival” even as she is critical of the patriarchal constraints on women. Many of the authors’ assertions are embodied in Austen’s novels, such as “the happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when a girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man...whose house can provide her with shelter...and derived status” and that becoming a woman means relinquishing achievement and accommodating oneself to men and the spaces they provide (Gilbert and Gubar 154). Austen’s works are quoted as support; for example, *Northanger Abbey*’s Henry Tilney, saying “a woman’s only power is the power of refusal.” While there are many instances in Austen’s works that follow this theme, *Emma* is a notable exception. Emma Woodhouse is both angel and monster; a modern heroine who, as Gilbert and Gubar declare, “is clearly the avatar of Austen the artist” (158). Emma does marry an older and wiser man but does not accommodate herself to a man’s space; indeed, Mr. Knightley accommodates Emma by moving into Hartfield, knowing it is the only way she will agree to marry him. While it is true that they will be living in her father’s house, Mr. Woodhouse is more dependent than patriarch. Emma possesses many stereotypically male characteristics, “Emma’s imagination has led her into the sin of being unladylike” (Gilbert and Gubar 160), and though made to suffer, I don’t believe Austen has mortified her heroine into complete submission.

If it is true that Emma Woodhouse is seen as a stand-in for the author, then perhaps Austen herself is both angel and monster, and wanted to create a world where a woman can hold both parts of herself in tension and still live a fulfilled life. Emma Woodhouse is intentionally flawed, self-confident, and self-deluded. Lionel Trilling, in his widely read essay on *Emma*, claims that this is the one novel of the six that is “fully representative of the author.” *Emma*, says Trilling, is a complex book and often misunderstood. He claims that “the book is like a person—not to be comprehended fully and finally by any person” (ix), and Emma herself is the trouble. According to Trilling, Emma is a snob of the first order. In addition, with all her energy and activity, Emma is never diffident, she has unfailing confidence and “self-love,” a trait usually found in a man. Trilling continues, “We understand self-love to be part of the moral life of all men; in men of genius we expect it to appear in unusual intensity and we take it to be an essential element of their power. 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” (Trilling x). Emma is rich and is already mistress of her home; she has no compelling reason to marry. That power to choose can be seen as a masculine trait; our heroine is more Mr. Darcy than Elizabeth Bennet. In thinking about what Trilling claims, I think that Austen may have been showing Emma Woodhouse as the idyll, a woman who had self-love, power, and choices (traits historically ascribed to a man), and that her courtship and eventual marriage could be considered a modern model for “intelligent love” (Trilling xxiv).

Paul Pickrel agrees with Trilling that *Emma* is difficult and complex; the “hardest easy novel in the language” (299). Trilling claims elsewhere in his article that Emma is a snob, and this is what motivates her in many situations. Pickrel, who wrote “Lionel Trilling and *Emma*: A Reconsideration,” asserts that actions Emma takes have their origins in different feelings than

elitism, because Emma does not know herself. He uses as examples Emma's concern that if Mr. Knightley marries, Jane Fairfax would be the mistress of Donwell Abbey, Emma's contempt of the "moderately genteel" Coles's party, which she would scorn to attend, and her snobby remarks regarding Robert Martin. Pickrel contends that the perceived snobbishness is a screen for feelings Emma is either ashamed of, that she is unaware of, or has a wish to disguise.

Pickrel also claims that though there are no true villains in Highbury, there are still moral positions that must be resolved among and within the characters. He sees Emma as a cross between Elizabeth Bennet and Lydia, and Jane Fairfax as a combination of Fanny Price and Maria Bertram. This assertion supports my view that Emma Woodhouse as well as Jane Fairfax embody both the angel and monster outlined in the feminist critical theory of Gilbert and Gubar. Based on this theory, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is an angel and Lydia a monster; Fanny is *Mansfield Park's* angel and Maria Bertram its monster. In Emma Woodhouse (and, it can be argued, in Jane Fairfax, a model of ladyhood but with a scandalous secret) the angelic and the monstrous dwell together, each making an appearance as Emma allows. The absence of a true villain or real danger in *Emma* does not mean moral judgments and choices are absent. I believe Austen is using *Emma* as an emblem of modernity in woman, marriage, and country, and this includes showing growing heroines in all their angelic and monstrous glory.

In the article "Reading *Emma* as a Lesson in Ladyhood" Denise Kohn calls *Emma* a type of female *bildungsroman* where the journey or development happens in a domestic setting and Emma Woodhouse's quest is to become an ideal lady. This being said, Jane Austen uses *Emma* to redefine what a true lady is, resisting the passive selfless ideal of that era. Kohn says, "Both male and female authors of popular conduct books of the period define a lady primarily through what she must lack: personal agency, ambition, desire, and vanity" (63). Through Emma's

journey, Austen redefines a lady by the qualities she possesses; self-assured, strong, and compassionate. Emma's quest then becomes the balance of power and propriety to fulfill this ideal. Emma is the opposite of passive and demure; indeed, she is defined by her energy and activity. Mrs. Weston described Emma (through use of free indirect discourse) as having "sense and energy and spirits," and Emma walks the half mile to Randalls, Mrs. Weston's new home, almost every day (Austen 15). Emma's energy is spent in creating comprehensive reading guides, but not in sitting down and reading. The only mention of Emma and reading in the same sentence was when she asked Mr. Elton to read to Harriet and her, because "she wanted to be drawing" (Austen 37). Regarding Emma, Kohn says, "As Austen's portrait of an ideal 'lady,' she is strong and assertive but is also more caring and sensitive to others" (64). Kohn references Carol Gilligan's human development theory and shows men tend to "view the world and relationships as a hierarchy," while women tend to view the world and their personal relationships as a "web of interdependence." The domestic heroine can achieve intellectual independence, but have no need to separate from family and friends in order to do so. She is willing "discover her true self within her home" (Kohn 65). The critics who dismiss Emma's growth and independence by pointing to her remaining with her father and marrying Mr. Knightley may be overlooking what constitutes a success, even in a domestic *bildungsroman*. Emma Woodhouse is the antithesis of the nineteenth-century lady, makes big blunders on her quest to help others and fulfill her own needs and desires, yet learns and grows in a way that she reaches her individual goals while remaining a valued part of her community, which is Austen's definition of a true lady.

Jane Austen coined the word "imaginist" to describe Emma, and the word is only used once, and not until Volume 3. By that time, however, we are well aware of Emma's imagination

and its machinations! Emma Woodhouse is richer and cleverer than her peers; a big fish in the small pond of Highbury. She has declared more than once that she would never marry, and yet right away we find Emma feels a sort of alliance with Mr. Weston's as yet unseen son, Frank Churchill, her equal in rank and most likely her superior in fortune. In anticipating his arrival and their introduction, she ponders on what the Westons would tell her about him, though almost rendered moot because "her own imagination had already given her such instinctive knowledge" of him (Austen 97). Emma has confidence in her imagination and gives what she conjures in her mind as much weight as what she sees before her. When her scheme to match Harriet Smith with Mr. Elton fails spectacularly, Emma, humbled by Harriet's grief, is resolved to be more discreet, "repressing imagination all the rest of her life" (112). But when Frank Churchill saves Harriet from the gypsies, Emma could not resist; she felt anyone would see the universe conspiring to make this connection. "How much more must an imaginist, like herself, be on fire with speculation and foresight!—*especially with such ground-work of anticipation as her mind had already made*" (263, emphasis mine). She blunders, acknowledges her error, yet cannot keep from using her imagination to fashion and adapt reality to her own purposes.

Emma Woodhouse's supreme confidence in her judgments of people, their motivations, and their romances spectacularly backfire on her. She takes credit for the happy match of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, then contrives to make a match for young Harriet Smith to elevate her status from a parlor boarder of illegitimate birth to a gentleman's wife. Emma is so completely oblivious to the many clues Mr. Elton leaves that her matchmaking between Harriet and himself is far from happening that she is utterly blind-sided when Mr. Elton, trying to elevate his own status through marriage, gives Emma herself a most unwelcome proposal of marriage. She never saw it coming. Her imagination did not allow for this possibility. Mr. Elton's "Everybody has

their level...I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance” brings a dose of reality to Emma’s imagination (Austen 105). Throughout the novel, Emma continually misreads a situation, acknowledges her errors when discovered, but does not seem to learn from her mistakes. Our imaginist is immune to hints that she might be mistaken in her assumptions and her confidence staggers the few (the Knightley brothers) who would presume to challenge her.

In Emma Woodhouse we find the dilemma of a woman who is both angel and monster in a world where angels are revered and monsters are subdued. Her family was first in social status and consequence in their small village of Highbury. Emma has no equal friend who would challenge her; indeed, most of her life she reigns alone. Her father, described as a valetudinarian, is more dependent on Emma than she is on him. Her mother died when she was very young, and her gentle governess could neither impose discipline nor see a fault in her. Emma was by far cleverer than her older sister Isabella, and became mistress of Hartfield, their home, when Isabella married. There was no one in her small society—excepting Mr. Knightley, who we will discuss later—who could guide or manage her.

Perhaps Emma’s failure to learn from her mistakes but still get her happy ending can be construed as a type of resistance to the patriarchal society that Austen lived in. Furthermore, Austen wrote an ending for Emma herself that she hoped a more modern, more equal England would one day accept.

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The Perfection of Emma: Emma as Equal Partner

As we look at Jane Austen's *Emma* and talk about Emma Woodhouse's growth journey and complexities of personality, let us not forget that the courtship plot, and the various romances, real or imagined, are what drives our heroine's growth. *Emma* is a first and foremost a romance novel, and we need to listen to what Austen says about marriage both through her characters and her liberal use of free indirect discourse.

The novel opens upon a family scene with Emma and her father talking over the day's event; Emma's governess-companion was married and has moved from Hartfield to her own home with her new husband. Both are bemoaning the loss of their friend; Mr. Woodhouse in his plaintive tones, and Emma silently to herself, while simultaneously trying to elevate his spirits. Enter Mr. Knightley, who has come to provide comfort and encouragement. As we move through the novel and we see Emma befriend Harriet and rejecting Miss Fairfax in quest of friendship and companionship, Emma is blind to the fact that her truest friend is Mr. Knightley, and just as that opening scene shows his constancy to both Woodhouses in their intimate party of three, the novel ends with the same party of three. In between, they both must discover that intimate friendship, where each can be open to the other, is the best basis for a companionate marriage.

In her book *The Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis defines and defends the romance novel as a genre and outlines the essential elements that comprise a novel. "The romance novel puts the heroine at the center of the book, at least coequal with the hero...her desires are central" (Regis 29). These essential elements, which must all be present but need not be consecutive, are society defined, the meeting, the barrier, the attraction, the declaration, the point of ritual death, the recognition, and the betrothal. This form is used "to free

their heroines from the barrier and to free them to choose the hero” (Regis 205). When we apply these elements to Austen’s novel, *Emma*, we discover that Emma herself— her flaws, her meddling, even her supreme overconfidence—is the barrier she must overcome, and she has brought her own romance to the point of ritual death through her misguided, self-deluded schemes. Much of the attraction and recognition of the love between Emma and Mr. Knightley is hidden from themselves until the end. They are both blind to their own feelings to some degree, and must remove the veil and declare their feelings, as it were, with each hoping it is not too late to secure the affections of the other. As Regis says that it is the barrier that drives the novel, Emma must discover who she is and acknowledge her flaws and her errors in order to gain her hero. Mr. Knightley, to a lesser extent, must do the same. Emma’s interior barrier is overcome, when in a moment of clarity, “It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (Austen 320). Mr. Knightley, to a lesser extent, must do the same, and overcome his barrier by realizing his unfairness toward Frank Churchill is rooted solely in his undeclared love for Emma.

I see *Emma* as a modern romance, modern in the sense that Emma is not a curious heroine with a tendency to faint as were the Gothic heroines of Austen’s day, but a clever, rational one who only needs to be a little less sure of herself and a lot more honest with herself to gain her freedom. Emma and George Knightley are headed toward a companionate marriage, with each partner overcoming their interior barriers, each partner making their declaration of love, first admitting it to themselves, and then to each other.

Emma and Mr. Knightley have a long-standing friendship and intimacy, based partly on their siblings marrying each other and connecting the families, but it was more than that. Mr. Knightley had “a very sincere interest in Emma,” and he wonders “what will become of her”

(Austen 33). The two are used to disagreeing on issues, and the two almost prefigure a sparring Hepburn-Spencer pairing in their lively disagreements, and as Mary Waldon claims in her article, “Men of Sense and Silly Wives: The Confusions of Mr. Knightley,” they “obviously find their conflicts rather stimulating than otherwise” (Waldron 146). Waldron’s article takes a deep dive into the growth arc of Mr. Knightley and his eventual rejection of the ideal woman found in ladies’ conduct books of the period to find his ideal woman in Emma Woodhouse. Although Mr. Knightley is from the first introduced in the novel as sensible and sane, Mr. Knightley, “far from being somehow above it all...is involved in the same social/moral confusion as Emma and all the other characters” (Waldron 142). Their first argument in the novel has to do at first with their disagreement on the suitability of the match between Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, but this transitions into a conversation about the types of wives men prefer, and the irony is that sensible, sane Mr. Knightley is getting angry and flustered, while Emma Woodhouse, our “imaginist,” remains collected as she defends her theories. The key lines in the novel which carry through the article are Emma’s defense of Harriet’s beauty: “till [men] do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces,” and Mr. Knightley’s rebuttal, “Men of sense, whatever you choose to say, do not want silly wives” (Austen 51). Mr. Knightley’s (correct) suspicion that Emma is making Harriet over to Mr. Elton prompted this exchange. Knightley first praises Mr. Martin’s good sense, but if he were a man of sense, how could silly Harriet be a desirable wife for him? As another example in the book, John Knightley, Mr. Knightley’s brother, does indeed have a silly wife in Emma’s sister, Isabella, and though occasionally irritated by her, seems to prefer it to an unmanageable woman like Emma. Emma herself acknowledges this when she reads John Knightley’s underwhelming congratulations to her at the news of their engagement. Throughout the book, Mr. Knightley and Emma each want their own matchmaking plans to

succeed, each only realize their love for the other when it is threatened by a perceived romantic attachment to another, and are each humbled and penitent to the other to show their worthiness in marriage. Mr. Knightley slowly steps away from the conduct manual, and declares that he needs an open temper in a wife, and “experience teaches him that his attitudes are too rigid, that Emma’s intuitions are sometimes better than his ‘reasonable’ assumptions, and that love has little to do with rules of conduct” (Waldron 155). Austen ensures that we will see Emma’s transformation, but we need to dig a little deeper to see Mr. Knightley’s path to realization of his ideal woman, and his place in her life. Mr. Knightley and Emma Woodhouse go on a similar journey of growth, casting off outworn ideals, each learning to embody a humble, honest, and open ideal which will give them a union of mutual love and respect, and have an equal partner always at hand to engage in energetic conversation, that some might call conflict, but we wouldn’t dream of it, since Austen assures us of the “perfect happiness of the union.”

Jane Austen’s novels are known for the accurate descriptions of the minutiae in the everyday lives and conversation of her characters. This extends to the silly speeches of a Mr. Collins or a Miss Bates, which are transcribed word for word. However, the sincere proposal of a worthy character is sparsely described by the narrator. As a reader, I would much rather listen in on Elizabeth and Darcy’s attestations of love than hear another syllable of the pompous Mr. Collins. And yet this is a pattern in all her novels. Janis Trout has a theory about this, and in “Jane Austen’s Proposal Scenes and the Limitations of Language,” she explains the reason behind Austen fully articulating, with well-expressed narration and dialogue, the scenes of romance and courtship, but pulling the reader back from hearing the actual proposal and declaration of love. Janis Stout claims that the bareness of Austen’s proposal scenes is a “result of a deliberate aesthetic choice,” and moderates the language of love in the “belief that language is in itself

inadequate to the expression of strong emotion” (Stout 320). Austen, according to Stout, contrasts the “speechlessness of the lovers at the moment of their revelations” with their “talkativeness on other occasions” to give the moment the emotional weight it deserves (Stout 322). This is supported by many proposal scenes in Austen’s works, including *Emma*, with Mr. Knightley’s “If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more” (Austen 338). Even in this, I believe I can claim that Emma is the exception that proves the rule. We do have a window into their garden proposal scene, not merely described, but with some dialogue. Both lovers have been suitably chastened by their errors, as Austen seems to do to make her lovers worthy of each other, and though there *is* more description and dialogue in this proposal, their words to each other are halting, hesitant, and emotional. I believe through *Emma*, Austen is imagining a modern proposal, not of mere offer and acceptance, but an equality of emotion and a mutual submission between the lovers that will usher in a modern marriage of mutual respect and love.

Many of Austen’s worthy suitors undergo a humbling process to ready them for our sparkling heroines, but Emma Woodhouse is resilient, maintaining some of her shortcomings even after her revelations about her own mistaken views. Mr. Knightley was as unconscious of his love for Emma as she was of hers for him, and it was only after their familiar and familial relationship is threatened that their eyes are opened. That puts them on equal footing in one respect, at least. Humanizing Mr. Knightley and showing a few of his faults, while retaining his resolute judgment in every case except where Emma is concerned is another proof of a marriage of equality; equally blind, equally flawed, equally humbled, wholly and delightfully reconciled to their lot: each other.

James Bennett mentions this in his article, “Doating on You, Faults and All.” In *Emma*, Mr. Knightley is shown to be the reasonable, industrious, well-judging, dignified elder statesman

(my paraphrase) of Highbury. He is almost inhuman as Mr. Knightley, Bennett claims, but when he becomes simply George Knightley, he is at his most human, trying to comfort Emma in the garden, thinking she just had her heart broken by Frank Churchill, speaking in broken sentences and confused expression, and transitions into a heartfelt but ineloquent proposal when he finds her heart is whole. For a companionate marriage, a flawed, confident heroine needs a flawed, vulnerable hero, and by showing errors and growth in both, we can predict they will continue to stumble toward the truth together.

Of note in Austen's descriptions of men is the fact that she does not define their worthiness in relation to their position in society or occupation, but how they manage their relationships in the family circle. In her article "Male Experience and Feminine Truth," Sarah Morrison talks about the inequality of the female position in contrast to the male, but notes Jane Austen barely acknowledges men's social power; she doesn't need to, because it is already a central fact in women's lives. But Austen's gift, she goes on, is to make "woman the normative center," rather than "sentimentalizing the victimization of women," and she succeeds where earlier novelists do not. Based on that premise, Austen's men are judged based on their respect for and integration into domestic life, which is the "centrality of the women's experience" (Morrison 343). As a woman's ties are to home, family, and community, her heroine follows her suitor's behavior and comportment toward others to determine if he belongs in her family circle. Morrison also asserts that Austen could confidently predict a happy life for all because "marriage is only one tie among many" (Morrison 344). Mr. Knightley has a great respect for Emma's family attachments and responsibilities, and Austen has allowed a man's highest character, as told by Morrison, to be measured "according to the impact they have on the lives" of the women in his life, presented not in a patriarchal society, but in a feminine setting (Morrison 346).

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, is the only one of Austen's heroines who speaks of marriage as a choice. Emma is an outlier and not representative of young women of her day, nor was her passive father representative of men in his fatherly role. Because Emma is so different from Austen's other novels, it may be, as Moffat quotes John Halperin, "a conscious rethinking of the uses of marriage which...Austen undertook in her life as in her art" (Moffat 46). Referring back to Gilbert and Gubar's assertion, a "happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when a girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man" (154). True, Mr. Knightley is much older than Emma, and did try to provide guidance, but he was not necessarily wiser in the ways of love and friendship than Emma was, and based on her interactions with both Frank Churchill and Mr. Elton, Emma could not have mutual respect and affection for the "puppies" who were her age-mates. If, indeed, as Trilling claimed, Emma had the self-love and moral life of a man, she would need an older, wiser man to be her equal. Even Mrs. Weston approved the match, and, though surprised at first, reflected that it was "all right, all open, all equal" (Austen 368).

Wendy Moffatt believes feminist readers may see Emma Woodhouse as a "fantasy of autonomy," as she states in her article, "Identifying with Emma: Some Problems for the Feminist Reader." She points out that feminist readers are conflicted, because Emma thinks of herself as man's equal and is intelligent, but she is "often obnoxious...and manipulates her friends" (Moffatt 46). Moffat posits that Emma has only the illusion of power; she is still tethered to her father and her so-called enlightenment leads to her marriage, which may not be a "triumph of her autonomy," but a "frightening regression" (Moffatt 53). But let me ask you this: Could Emma have better owned her power by not marrying? *Emma* is clearly in the female romance genre, but there seems no rational reason a feminist reader should not root for a companionate marriage for

Emma based on mutual love and respect, but rather wish her to remain alone with her principles in order to own her power. Austen may have been promoting a marriage based on equality rather than marriage based on economic necessity. Modern readers may not see the subtle differences of a nineteenth-century marriage through this modern lens, but the difference to both parties is remarkable for the time.

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The Perfection of Emma: Emma as Community Member

There is a scene in *Emma*, where Emma, after an evening walk with friends, brings them all home to Hartfield for tea. “Mr. Knightley must take his seat with the rest round the large modern circular table which Emma had introduced at Hartfield, and which none but Emma could have had power to place there and persuade her father to use, instead of the small-sized Pembroke, on which two of his daily meals had for forty years been crowded” (Austen 272). This is a notable scene, and there is much to unpack in that passage. According to Arthurian legend (and Encyclopedia Britannica), King Arthur’s round table signified equality; it was made so that “none of his barons, when seated at it, could claim precedence over the others” (Britannica online). With her large modern circular table, Emma is introducing modernity to Hartfield. None but she could have had the power to accomplish this. She persuaded her courteous, traditional, change-averse father to change a habit of forty years! A large modern, *circular* table, where all have an equal place and can face each other and converse pleasantly. A *large* modern circular table, where there is room for all, as opposed to her father’s dated and inefficient small Pembroke, where not everyone can fit, or even a long table with a hierarchy of seating which may exclude a guest from conversation with someone on the other end. Highbury residents from many classes were seated at the Hartfield round table that evening, and all were welcome.

Much of the matchmaking that goes on in *Emma* seeks to blur the class distinctions among suitable romantic partners. Emma Woodhouse is so eager to elevate Harriet Smith to a higher station, but scorns to consider Robert Martin as a suitable partner, though Mr. Knightley has a high regard for him. Many of the farmers in England at that time were on their way to becoming gentlemen, and both Emma and Mr. Knightley blur (and maintain) class distinctions as

it suits them. Robert Martin deserved a seat at Emma's round table at least as much as Harriet Smith did.

In his article "Emma: Jane Austen's Errant Heroine," Eugene Goodheart talks about Emma being part of the community while also being apart from it. She is elite in her social status, and unique in her intelligence and confidence, but has no real friend, no true community. Hartfield, Emma Woodhouse's home, is physically separate from the larger village of Highbury, and a metaphor for Emma being a part of Highbury while being apart from Highbury. The author quotes D. H. Lawrence in comparing this truth about Austen, whose position in the world was "a sharp knowing in apartness" (Goodheart 600). Goodheart asserts that Emma's "apartness" is displayed in her judgments on her neighbors, and her fusion of "vanity and seriousness." Mr. Knightley is her only equal in rank and situation and is the only person from whom she is open to hearing correction; Goodheart considers Knightley the embodiment of "social reason and understanding" (Goodheart 592).

Emma was in a unique situation in Highbury. She was first in consequence and first in rank, but she very much wanted a community connection, and much of the novel's plot lies in her pursuing connections in improper ways. Her desire for connection is illustrated in her attitude to the Coles's party, which she was too elite to attend; however, she very much wanted to go. Emma's pull between traditional society and a more equalizing modern ideal of community shows the struggle to a long held standard. It probably also had something to do with Emma's expectation of distinction, because "in every respect, it suited Emma best to lead" (Austen 178).

Emma's horror of Mr. Knightley's marrying lowly Harriet or even Jane Fairfax was not due to a class consciousness and a corruption of family legacy at Donwell Abbey (and by familial extension, Hartfield), but a horror of her one true love marrying anyone but her! This

was a different expectation of distinction entirely: “Emma, never loth to be first,” had always been first with Mr. Knightley, and from the first, so she could not bear to be supplanted there! (Austen 57). She exclaims regarding the imagined union of Mr. Knightley and Harriet, “Such an elevation on her side! Such a debasement on his!” (Austen 325). Here Emma is all too aware of the class distinctions that she was so blithely dismissing earlier on Harriet’s behalf. Why was it so unacceptable now? As Harriet reminded her, Emma herself had said that “matches of greater disparity had taken place” (320). This may be the best example of Paul Pickrel’s claim that Emma not knowing herself was mistaken for snobbery. This snobbery was a blind for her own feelings, and in this case she was at first unaware of her true feelings, and then when she was acquainted with them had a wish to disguise them. Emma had no thought of Knightley maintaining his social status in this moment; she only thought of herself.

R. E. Hughes, in his article “The Education of Emma Woodhouse,” considers *Emma* with a microcosmic view; that what is happening in Highbury is indicative of the larger society outside its borders. He claims that the “underlying theme of this novel is the education of Emma Woodhouse,” with the irony that “Emma, who must become pupil, insists on acting as teacher” (Hughes 70). Emma must recognize love and society as it is defined outside of herself, and the definition and illustration of these lessons come from outside Highbury, in the form of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and Mrs. Elton. From her romantic ideas of love, to the lesson learned that money must be considered as well as, or in place of, love, Emma continues to blunder as she learns to synthesize this information. Highbury is not free from the concerns of money and class, or envy and ambition; indeed, most of the characters (Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley, and Emma herself) do make decisions based on those very concerns. The spectrum of the two, money and love, is illustrated in the marriages that take place in the novel;

Weston/Taylor and Churchill/Fairfax are love matches, the Elton/Hawkins marriage was an economic decision, and Smith/Martin and Woodhouse/Knightley satisfy both affection and economic concerns. Hughes concludes by showing that “the conflicts of the macrocosm are seen to be solvable in terms of the microcosm, but that the microcosm itself must be resilient enough to adopt new attitudes” (Hughes 74).

In the end, in true Austen fashion, all our main characters are paired off and live (reasonably) happily ever after. There is an interesting scene where Knightley and Emma have declared their love for each other, and the only cloud in Emma’s blue sky is Harriet’s impending disappointment (once again!) at her hand, in aspiring to love Mr. Knightley. Emma reflects that to spare Harriet’s feelings, she must now be “excluded from Hartfield,” as a matter of “mere charitable caution” (353-4). While it could be construed as now maintaining class distance in deference to Knightley’s views of Harriet, “charitable caution” seems to point to kindness to her friend. Later, when Mr. Knightley breaks the news that Harriet has accepted Robert Martin, Emma “most sincerely wished them happy,” and went so far as to say “it would be a great pleasure to know Mr. Martin” (373-4). Again, while it is possible that it only means Emma would come into contact with Robert Martin as mistress of Donwell Abbey, it is not hard to imagine a continued friendly acquaintance with the Martins, though it may not be as intimate as it once was. When Emma and Knightley were arguing over Robert Martin’s first proposal and refusal, Emma referred to him simply as a “farmer” while Knightley called him an “intelligent gentleman-farmer” (49,50). As Emma now considers herself “a fool” regarding her former plans for Harriet and is now satisfied that Harriet could not do better, might the Martins actually accede to a gentleman’s rank due to Robert Martin's efforts? The text does not definitely confirm this but leaves open the possibility that the Knightleys and the Martins may one day all gather

around Hartfield's round table. Throughout the novel, Emma has been pushing class boundaries to elevate Harriet, and though she has done it imperfectly, the eventual matches in Highbury are companionate marriages.

The idea of inclusion in community is one that Austen portrays well. Miss Bates is a garrulous bore with a good heart, but she belongs in and is respected by the Highbury circle. She is invited to tea, and to dinner, and to balls, even without anyone expecting to enjoy conversation with her. Her inclusion shows the courtesy and compassion which brings a sense of belonging to a community. Emma's most serious cause for repentance was her ill treatment of Miss Bates, and an indication of their community values. I contend that Austen is promoting a modern view of community, with the Highbury community accommodating different types of matches and integrating ideals (and people) that have come from the larger society. Emma learns to discard her outworn ideas and embody new ideals as she navigates love and society to find her place in the world.

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