

# Jane Austen's Literary World

## —On Emma Woodhouse's Growth of Personality

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The novel *Emma* by Jane Austen was published in 1816. The long work, one of her masterpieces, is an interesting book which is related to the study of self-deception. Emma Woodhouse, the heroine, makes lots of consecutive mistakes, and deceives herself each time. But no sooner has she acknowledged her blunders than she repents herself, trying to improve herself. It seems to us the author designed its plot to show her gross mistakes and arrogant follies, finally leading to her awakening and a happy marriage to the most suitable type of life partner.

When we attempt to speculate on Emma's growth of personality through her self-deception, it might be suitable for us to look into it in three stages.<sup>1)</sup> On each stage, around the heroine are the three chief male characters—Rev. Elton, Mr. Frank Churchill, and Mr. Knightley. At the same time, we can not overlook the presence of Miss Harriet Smith in contact with each male character, since she also plays a major role in relationship to Emma's committing egregious blunders.

Since this novel was published, it has been looked upon as a great comedy. In addition to the discussion of the main problem—Emma's growth of personality—we would like to examine whether the work can truly be called a comical one as it has been generally estimated to be.

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### I

To begin with, we would like to give a brief account of the relationship be-

tween Emma and Miss Harriet Smith. After the Woodhouses' governess, Miss Taylor leaves after her marriage, Emma and her father are left alone in the family. Especially Emma feels lonely of Miss Taylor's departure as she was her intimate friend and a mother-like figure. During this period Emma is introduced to Harriet by Mrs. Goddard, the mistress of a school. Harriet is a beautiful seventeen-year-old girl who attends Mrs. Goddard's boarding-school. She is illegitimate. Emma begins to be interested in the beautiful young girl and look after her as a means to escape from her own loneliness.

Emma protects Harriet under her wings, and soon intends to find a suitable man of nobility for Harriet's life partner. As the suitable life partner for her, her patroness sets her eyes on Mr. Elton, a handsome, unmarried rector in Highbury. The Woodhouses have long been the greatest and richest family in Highbury, therefore Rev. Elton often visits them to show respect.

Emma persuades herself that Rev. Elton is paying addresses to her beloved Harriet. As a good example of her self-deception to his attitude, we can mention the picture-painting scene of the CHAPTER VI, VOLUME I. When Emma paints a picture of Harriet, Rev. Elton extravagantly admires the portrait, daring to offer to take the trouble to go to London to get it finely framed. Emma, however, never notices that his admiration and kindness are for the sake of the painter, not for the sake of the model. In this scene, we readers cannot help laughing at Emma's self-deception, because she is entirely blind to Rev. Elton's real emotions.

Emma imagines that her arrangement of a respectable marriage for Harriet will be a reward for, and an exercise of, her real ability in the world. In fact, Emma even forces Harriet to reject the hand of Robert Martin, the tenant-farmer of Abbey-Mill-Farm owned by Mr. Knightley. To Emma's judgement on the event Mr. Knightley gives his frank objection, for he knows well the true personality and character of Robert Martin. But Emma believes in her own judgement rather than Mr. Knightley's though she recognizes his advice has been proper and valid in usual cases. 'Indeed, Knightley's criticism of Emma's behaviour has a precise moral tenor.'<sup>2)</sup>

In the novel, Emma is such a young girl and tends to be pleased with herself; she makes high pretensions to her own judgement. Her wrong treatment

to the Harriet-Elton relationship comes to a close towards the last stage of VOIUME I of the novel. In this scene, when she drives home with Rev. Elton alone after the social gathering held at the Westons, Emma meets the paradoxical truth; to her great surprise, Rev. Elton makes a passionate proposal to her. She is given a deadly shock, as is shown by the author as follows:

It was foolish, it was wrong, to make so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious, a trick of what ought to be simple. She was quite concerned and ashamed, and resolved to do such things no more.<sup>31</sup>

At this stage, Emma is compelled to face the first awakening in her self-deception. It is natural that she should be 'quite concerned and ashamed,' as a result of her own self-conceited behaviour, but her awakening here does not attain such a decisive level, compared with the other awakenings to be mentioned later. Her self-reproach is less intense than in those extravagant cases. But the event certainly shocks her, because she does not feel cheerful at all on the following day, despite it being Christmas.

Indeed, the scene of Rev. Elton's proposal to Emma gives a great comical element to the novel, but some of readers may not necessarily be able to laugh at him loudly because they can easily understand Elton's shock caused by her honest story; his startle may seem to them to be even much greater in its degree than hers.

## II

Emma forms a good impression for Mr. Frank Churchill, who is Mr. Weston's son but was brought up under the patronage of the Churchills, his late wife's family, even before he really appears in Highbury society. In the course of his company in social gatherings or his visits to the Woodhouses, she begins to guess that he has a special interest in her. One day, during their gay talk they decide to hold a ball, and make plans for it. But the idea does not come true because of the information of his aunt's sudden illness. Before leaving Highbury he promises her to come back and prepare a ball again with her. At that moment she is sure that he loves her, and vice versa.

After his return, their careful ball-planning is put into practice at last. The day after the enjoyable event, a curious accident occurs; he happens to save Harriet from a threat by a group of gypsies. Soon after this incident, Emma makes a wild guess that Harriet and Frank may be beginning to be attached to each other. Indeed, Emma possesses an unbounded and vigorous imagination in a sense of opprobrium. Subsequently her suspicions are not realized at all in the story. Rather, before reaching the expected result there appear an established fact that Frank has already been engaged to Jane Fairfax, Miss Bate's niece and an elegant beautiful girl.

At first Emma dislikes the elegant girl, for she has heard that she has known Frank to some extent before the two people join the society of Highbury: Emma may nurse some jealousy against her in longer-time contact with him.

In the case of the Frank-Jane episode, the author shows us her dexterous technique, that is, her deliberately-devised deception to the readers. According to the comment of Laurence Lerner, a scholar of Jane Austen's works, 'in this story Jane Austen has buried the truth very carefully and very skillfully.'<sup>4</sup> It is designed by the author in such a mechanical system that Frank and Jane Fairfax can see each other every day during their stay in Highbury. The picnic scene on Box Hill, too, can be regarded as such a case; the scene is finely set up as a means for concealment of the engagement between the two people. In this scene W. J. Harvey, a critic on Jane Austen, makes an illuminating comment: 'the tensions that build and break in the expedition to Box Hill are felt by all, but understood only by Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill.'<sup>5</sup>

When she knows the decisive truth from Frank's letter, sent to Mrs. Weston, Emma is not upset enough to feel sad and bitter, for at this stage she has already accepted Mr. Knightley's hand. For her, Frank is a person of no consequence. She is now inclined to forgive his misleading words and behaviour, and even willing to give congratulations on the birth of the Frank-Jane couple.

As far as the picnic scene on Box Hill is concerned, we can not overlook Emma's wrong way of treatment to Miss Bates, a talkative but innocent old lady. While she talks with Frank as if they were mutual lovers, Emma unconsciously makes fun of the poor old lady because of her thoughtless

way of talking. We cannot pass over the scene without any emotional feeling towards the heroine. Most of the readers will surely feel angry at Emma's snobbery and arrogance caused by her high consciousness of social standing. Soon after that fuss Mr. Knightley blames her in secret for the insult to the good-natured person from the viewpoint of human morality. Then she bitterly levels criticisms at herself with sincere repentance, leading to her most violent emotion. This is a great tragic scene; it may be the greatest crisis that she has so far experienced, for the content of his blame for her is related to the opinion of her humanity. Reflecting on her disgraceful words and crazy gaiety, lacking in humanity, she is seated in the carriage, and—

Emma felt the tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home, without being at any trouble to check them, extraordinary as they were.<sup>61</sup>

The author depicts vividly and with unusual energy the scene in which Emma is bitterly sorry for what she has done. We can realize at this stage that the event proves to be a great eye-opener for her, to a more considerable extent than in the Harriet-Elton affair mentioned before. After this incident, she tries to be more deliberate in her words and deeds; she recognizes the high sin she has committed.

### III

When Emma acknowledges the fact that Harriet sets her affections on Mr. Knightley, she is given the greatest startle that she has ever experienced in her life of twenty-one years. Further, when it is disclosed by Harriet that she has had some idea of Mr. Knightley's returning her affections, 'she touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth.'<sup>71</sup> But at the very moment, a mental conflict arises in her mind:

It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!<sup>81</sup>

Like a lightning flash, this idea runs into her mind and sticks into her soul. She is then certain of her real affections for Mr. Knightley.

She has so far acknowledged him as a man of good sense and really respected his personality and wisdom; he has been the best adviser for her. In spite of this opinion of him, she has never been conscious of her affections for him.

But, as a matter of fact, she can not easily accept the fact of the possibility that another woman might marry him.

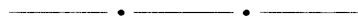
In listening to Harriet's words, Emma tries to pretend to be calm, but in reality the stormy wind of desperate agony continues to blow heavily in her inner mind. At the same time, she can not shake off the fact that it is she that has led Harriet for hopes of marriage above her own social status. She encourages her to speak her heart out as she 'sits and endures farther with calmness, with even apparent kindness.'<sup>9)</sup>

Emma manages to get through the hardest time with Harriet, but soon after she bursts out her feelings: "Oh God! that I had never seen her!"<sup>10)</sup> The author expresses Emma's reflection as follows:

With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. She was proved to have been universally mistaken.<sup>11)</sup>

Thus in this stage Emma's deception of herself is completely broken into pieces, and after that she makes every effort to better her own character.

Here, in addition we would like to pay attention to the presence of Harriet in the novel. Rather stupid girl as she looks, her presence is of no little significance; she plays a remarkable role in her protectress's growth of personality. Moreover, she plays another important part; it is she who reveals Emma's affections towards Mr. Knightley. It might be said that Harriet is a victim of Emma's self-deception. This work could not be looked upon as a total comedy if she were not rewarded a happy marriage to Robert Martin at the final stage in the novel. In this respect, Jane Austen's finesse gives us full satisfaction.



We have so far looked into Emma's process of improvement through her self-deception in the three stages, paying close attention to the problem of her growth of personality. In this last section, we would like to summarize some views as to the problem, including examination of the comical elements of the novel.

The first thing we might say is about the degree or grade of Emma's awakening from her self-deception. In the Harriet-Elton event, she knows

that she has been too selfish and arrogant to Harriet in seeking her life partner, but she recognizes, to a rather slight extent, her ignorant and thoughtless deeds. And, moreover, she cannot but admit that she was ignorant of Rev. Elton's real emotions on account of her dull sense. The scene in which he confesses his affections to her and makes her startled is indeed a comical one, but we cannot necessarily laugh at this circumstance without any hesitation; for we easily acknowledge his bitterly tragic situation. In Elton's case, the situation is very different from Rev. Collinse's, who unilaterally courts Elizabeth in *Pride And Prejudice*.

As to Emma's misunderstanding of Frank's misleading attitude, it does not leave her with any sense of grudge as a result. She has had Mr. Knightley's hand when she knows the truth that Frank was engaged to marry Jane Fairfax. In relationship to Frank, the Box Hill incident of Emma's insult towards Miss Bates gives her a greater crisis; after understanding of Mr. Knightley's advice, she, no doubt, tries to cultivate herself in morality. At this stage she comes to improve her own character to a considerable degree.

Emma's self-deception towards Frank seems to be tragic, but the author intends not to give her a tragic outcome by means of her receiving Mr. Knightley's addresses. On the contrary, in the scene of Emma's awakening in her wrong treatment of Miss Bates, the author means to show us a tragic element in the novel.

With respect to Mr. Knightley, Emma meets with the greatest crisis when Harriet speaks out her affections towards him. At this moment, Emma comes to be conscious of her attachment; she awakes completely at last. But, then, she is compelled to stand on a tragic position, or in the most miserable situation.

Judging from the result that all will come right in the end, this novel can naturally be called a total comedy, but it contains a touch of tragic elements; it sometimes shows us tragic intensity in the process leading to its happy ending. So in this sense we could call *Emma* a kind of tragicomedy.

In the novel Emma often makes mistakes, deceiving herself, but the moment she acknowledges her faults, she is always ready to improve herself and cultivate her own human character; she has a remarkable ability to improve her

attitude, and possesses the ability to adapt herself and to be flexible. This changeability could be regarded as an expression of her intelligent aspect in her character, for we could generally think that the best test of human intelligence is whether we can change or improve our attitude when we are confronted with our daily problems, especially with perplexing ones.

Jane Austen is said to have mentioned to her intimate people 'I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.'<sup>12)</sup> Considering Emma's many blunders, full of snobbery, arrogance, whimsy, and ignorance of the world, most of us readers may not tend to like her as her creator gave an honest comment on her. But when we set a high value on Emma's sincere attitude towards cultivation of her personality, we could associate her hard efforts with a well-known proverb: To err is human, to forgive, divine.<sup>13)</sup> Then we readers cannot help doing honour to the great heroine, Emma Woodhouse, in spite of her unpardonable faults.

#### Notes

- 1) Laurence Lerner gives the same explanation to this item in his paper *Emma*. (Notes on Literature 'Jane Austen', pp. 40-41; ed. H. Hirukawa; Eichosha Publishing Co., Ltd., 1977, from The British Council, 1977.)

We can divide the action into three stages, each showing her relationship with one of the three chief male characters, Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley.

- 2) Malcolm Bradbury, *Jane Austen's Emma. Critics on Jane Austen*, p. 85; ed. Judith O'Neill; Univ. of Miami Press, 1977.
- 3) E. I, XVI, 136-137  
The above abbreviation stands for VOLUME I, CHAPTER XVI, page 136-137 in *Emma* by Jane Austen. The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen, ed. R.W. Chapman, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974. Hereafter to be abbreviated in the same way.
- 4) Laurence Lerner, *Emma*. The same as 1)., p. 44.
- 5) W.J. Harvey, The Plot of *Emma*. Norton Critical Edition '*Emma*', p. 455; ed. S.M. Parrish; W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972.
- 6) E. III, VII, 376
- 7) *ibid.* III, XI, 407-408
- 8) *ibid.* III, XI, 408
- 9) *ibid.*
- 10) *ibid.* III, XI, 411



- 11) *ibid.* III, XI, 412-413
- 12) J.E. Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, p. 157; ed. R.W. Chapman; Oxford Univ. Press, repr. 1951 (first edition, 1926); from the second edition (1871) of the original book (1817).
- 13) Alexander Pope (1688-1744), *An Essay on Criticism*, 2525.