

Adam Mackay

English 716

Professor Sirabian

Final Essay

5/15/13

Forgiving Emma Woodhouse

Emma Woodhouse is easy to dislike and hard to forgive. Whether it's her manipulation of Harriet Smith, her false accusations of Jane Fairfax, or her aggressive attack of Miss Bates, Emma appears to be less a heroine than a villain. But Austen makes it clear that Emma is a character worth rooting for despite all of her mistakes and missteps. Tony Tanner, author of "The Match-Maker," writes of Emma, "Her occupation is principally concerned with tending a father who is the negative of a proper father, and tending her fantasies, which, because she is so curiously lonely (Highbury and Hartfield 'afforded her no equals'), encounter more collusions than obstacles" (Tanner 414). As Tanner displays in this passage, Austen excuses Emma from her mischief. First, Emma was raised with less than adequate guidance, and frankly her high status did little in the way of teaching her discipline. Second, discipline does find Emma, although a bit later in life, in the form of Mr. Knightly, who's wise and honest critiques of Emma speak for the audience. Finally, combined with her poor upbringing and the voice of Mr. Knightly, Austen shows Emma's acknowledgment of and remorse for her mistakes. In short, Jane Austen's Emma provides a heroine full of ignorance, arrogance, and jealousy, but when push comes to shove Emma Woodhouse deserves forgiveness and a chance for redemption.

The duplicitous side of Emma Woodhouse is on full display from the very beginning of Jane Austen's novel. After claiming success in the completion of her scheme to unite Miss

Taylor with Mr. Weston, Emma is in search of a new project, and she finds the perfect specimen in the young, naïve, and lower class Harriet Smith. Emma judges Harriet, deeming her life unsuitable, and takes it upon herself to make a change, “*She* would notice [Harriet]; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners” (Austen 24). Pompous and perhaps ignorant, Emma seeks to control the life of Harriet Smith, and this control displays Emma’s duplicity. On the one hand, Emma is seeking to improve Harriet’s life by raising her social status to a higher, more luxurious station. This is very insulting to Harriet, but the intentions, although ignorant, are not malicious. On the other hand however, Emma is clearly taking control of Harriet’s life without regard for Harriet’s wellbeing. Emma has determined that her elite lifestyle is ideal, and all those who fall beneath her must aspire to reach her level. This control continues, as the “superior” Emma Woodhouse determines that Mr. Martin is not the right man for Harriet.

Gullible and sweet, young Harriet Smith is easily snared in Emma’s web. However, her new project encounters an obstacle in the form of the low class farmer Mr. Martin. Harriet’s love for Mr. Martin is evident, but Emma cannot allow her new found friend to marry such a low class man. Displaying both her wit and malevolence, Emma carefully manipulates Harriet, easing her out of the plan to woo Mr. Martin, and filling Harriet with her own sense of superiority. Emma states, “The misfortune of your birth ought to make you particularly careful as to your associates” (Austen 30). By knocking Harriet down with this sharp comment, Emma can now rebuild Harriet to her satisfaction. Emma continues, “There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman’s daughter, and you must support your claim to that station by everything within your own power” (Austen 30). Emma, beginning to rebuild, instills in Harriet a false

sense of superiority, raising Harriet to a higher class than she belongs. Emma concludes, “Or there will be plenty of people who would take pleasure in degrading you” (Austen 30). Emma’s manipulation fills this sentence as she tries to place herself in the role of protector, but as we can see Emma is the only one dishing out degradation. A bit later Harriet’s attention is captured by a letter of proposal from Mr. Martin. Emma, in belief that she had rid of Mr. Martin for good, quickly decides to put a stop to this flirtatious affair. In a heinous act, Emma degrades Mr. Martin’s letter claiming, “I think one of his sisters must have helped him,” because the letter itself is too well written (Austen 50). Emma speaks insults towards Mr. Martin so confidently that when Harriet asks if indeed she should refuse him Emma responds with shock, she replies, “Ought to refuse him! My dear Harriet, what do you mean? Are you in any doubt as to that?” (Austen 51). This manipulation gives Harriet no way out, and she now must refuse Mr. Martin or suffer the ire of her “superior” friend and supposed mentor Emma Woodhouse.

Eugene Goodheart, author of “Emma: Jane Austen’s Errant Heroine,” agrees that Emma is too egotistical to realize why she is degrading Robert Martin. He states, “Emma’s snobbery prevents her from appreciating [Robert Martin’s] virtues. Her intervention delays what turns out to be the right outcome, a marriage between Robert Martin and Harriet” (Goodheart 590). Indeed Emma does nothing but delay the inevitable, Mr. Martin and Harriet wed, and in no way does Emma benefit their relationship. Unlike Emma’s decision to raise Harriet’s social class, her denouncement of Mr. Martin is malicious. She knows that Harriet will be hurt by her words, yet she chooses them carefully then attacks. With Harriet in a vulnerable position, Emma is not yet finished. She has not only relieved young Harriet of her previous crush, but she now has a replacement suitor lying in wait.

Austen writes of Emma's plan to delete Mr. Martin from the mind of Harriet Smith, "Mr. Elton was the very person fixed on by Emma for driving the young farmer out of Harriet's head. She thought it would be an excellent match; and only too palpably desirable, natural, and probable, for her to have much merit in planning it" (Austen 34). Without consulting the feelings of Harriet, Emma is looking for her own satisfaction as she tries to force a union between two people unfit for one another. This leads to chaos, as Emma is not in full control of the situation. The malleable Harriet falls for Mr. Elton, but it becomes clear that Harriet's heart will be broken when Mr. Elton advances not towards her but Emma instead. Emma states to Harriet, "You are his object-and you will soon receive the completest proof of it...I congratulate you, my dear Harriet, with all my heart. This is an attachment which a woman may well feel pride in creating. This is a connection which offers nothing but good" (Austen 72). Again, Emma's two sides are on display. She is naively under the impression that Mr. Elton is in love with Harriet, and in fact her congratulation is sincere. Shinobu Minma, author of "Self-Deception and Superiority Complex: Derangement of Hierarchy in Jane Austen's *Emma*," agrees with this defense as he writes, "In her officious efforts to make a match between Harriet and Elton, Emma persuades herself into believing that she is acting for Harriet's sake" (Minma 50). Emma truly believes that she is assisting Harriet, but she does not fully understand the extent of her actions. That being said, Emma is very proud of herself and, basking in the glow of her own success, she fails to recognize the reality of the situation she has created. This allows critics to focus more on her arrogance than her good intentions, but those intentions should not be overlooked.

Emma makes mistakes, some more grievous than others, but these mistakes do not come from inconsideration. Goodheart writes, "Emma is willful, manipulative, an arranger or rather a

misarranger of other people's lives" (Goodheart 589). The key word is "willful," and the term certainly applies to Emma Woodhouse. Emma has stunted the growth of Harriet Smith, but it is important to recognize the motives behind these actions. Growing up without a mother, Emma was left in the care of her "indulgent father" and her governess, Miss Taylor. Austen writes, "Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than a indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection" (Austen 7). While not left wanting for affection, Emma certainly lacked accountability and discipline, Austen writes, "Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse's family, less a governess than a friend" (Austen 7). Acting as a friend as opposed to a mother, Miss Taylor does not offer the stability needed for young Emma to flourish. Tony Tanner writes of Emma Woodhouse, "Emma is a clever but 'spoiled' girl and, having lacked external authority (both from her father and from her governess) when she was young, she has not internalized any authority which can direct and control her as she grows into a young woman" (Tanner 412). Coddled as a child, Emma is unable to mature, and therefore unable to recognize the consequences of her actions. In fact nobody seems to fault Emma for any of her wrong doings, with the exception of one Mr. Knightly, Emma's "Knight" in shining armor, who rescues Emma from herself, offering the rare discipline she lacked as a child.

Mr. Knightly acts as Emma's redemptive voice. By this I mean Emma sees the error of her ways through the words of Mr. Knightly. Having witnessed firsthand the manipulative way in which Emma controls Harriet, Knightly voices the truth that Emma has failed to recognize as he boldly states, "You have been no friend to Harriet Smith" (Austen 61). Upon watching Emma convince Harriet to respond in the negative to Mr. Martin's proposal, Knightly asserts, "You saw her answer! you wrote her answer too. Emma, this is your doing. You persuaded her to refuse

him” (Austen 59). Knightly, unlike the others in her life, does not allow Emma to escape without explaining her actions. Now transparent, Emma is forced to admit the full extent of her manipulation, clarifying the real motive behind persuading Harriet to move away from Mr. Martin, “Mr. Martin is a very respectable young man, but I cannot admit him to be Harriet’s equal” (Austen 59). No longer can Emma separate herself from the truth, she did in fact control the actions of Harriet. Again choosing his words carefully, Knightly punctures yet another hole in the bubble of comfort surrounding Emma’s life, “You will puff [Harriet] up with such ideas of her own beauty, and of what she has a claim to, that, in a little while, nobody within her reach will be good enough for her” (Austen 62). While previously Emma may have been able to remain naïve to the chaos she is creating, Knightly does not hold back his reprobation. Emma at once is demeaning, ignorant, and calculating in her manipulation of Harriet, but with Knightly’s bold assertions she is able to acknowledge her own mistakes. This acknowledgment is on display as we return to Emma’s discovery of Mr. Elton’s true intentions.

Describing Mr. Elton as, “The lover of Harriet,” Emma is truly shocked to discover Mr. Elton’s affections are directed elsewhere (Austen 123). Mr. Elton cries, “Miss Smith! – I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence – never paid her any attentions, but as your friend” (Austen 124). Emma’s world, the world she created in her own mind, has collapsed into reality. At once Emma is both calculating and manipulative, while maintaining an air of naivety and ignorance. It is harmful to both Harriet and Mr. Elton to create this union entirely in her own head, but Emma is not without remorse. Austen writes of Emma’s recognition of her grievous mistake, “Every part of it brought pain and humiliation, of some sort or other; but, compared with the evil to Harriet, all was light” (Austen 127). Above all other concerns, Emma shows remorse for her treatment of Harriet. While this behavior is deplorable,

Emma, in part, is excused from her behavior thanks both to Mr. Knightly and an understanding of her troubled childhood. Goodheart writes, “Emma takes her cues for her behavior from observing external circumstances that she invariably misinterprets” (Goodheart 590).

Misinterpretation of her surroundings does not make Emma an evil person, and while her manipulation of Harriet is intentional, the motives behind her actions can ultimately be forgiven. However, Emma, after the incident with Harriet, has not yet learned the error of her ways, and yet again she shows herself to be somewhat of a bully.

Emma’s relationship with Jane Fairfax is nothing short of tumultuous. Edgar F. Shannon Jr. author of, “Emma: Character and Construction,” writes, “[Emma] has taken a dislike to Jane Fairfax, who should have been her natural friend and companion and, believing Jane to be the object of a married man’s attentions, has repeated to Frank the slander she has concocted” (Shannon Jr. 638). Emma, once again, reverts back to her old ways by slandering Jane Fairfax, citing claims that are unsubstantiated to say the least. This natural dislike, in Emma’s mind, stems from Jane’s supposed inappropriate relationship with a married man. However, this relationship is created in Emma’s imagination, leaving us yet another hint to just how clueless the immature Emma can be.

Emma’s dislike of Jane Fairfax is less about Jane’s imaginary relationship, and more about Emma’s immaturity and jealousy. Goodheart writes, “In knowing herself, Emma would have to admit that she is a creature of fancy with an irrepressible need to rule her little world” (Goodheart 595-596). This is aptly stated, as Jane Fairfax presents a threat to the world in which Emma lives. Jane Fairfax is elegant, kind, and capable of wooing Frank Churchill, Emma’s brief crush. As Knightly points out, her dislike of Jane Fairfax came “because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself” (Austen 156). This

lack of maturity breeds jealousy and it doesn't take long for Emma to retaliate in ways both passive aggressive and mean.

Austen writes of Emma harboring a natural dislike of Jane's character, "Emma was very willing now to acquit her of having seduced Mr. Dixon's affections from his wife, or of any thing mischievous which her imagination had suggested at first" (Austen 157). This statement proves untrue, as it becomes clear that Emma has not acquitted Jane of her imaginary crime. During a lighthearted word game, Frank Churchill and Emma gang up on Jane to humiliate her by placing the word "Dixon" in full view, referring to her imaginary affair. Frank Churchill, the future husband of Jane, proves to concoct this plan out of jealousy himself, but Emma is all too eager to join in the humiliation, as Emma, with "eager laughing warmth," encourages Frank to embarrass Jane (Austen 327). This passive aggression is unwarranted, and clearly comes out of jealousy and a lack of control. Minma writes, "Emma's sophistry, like that of her predecessors, is a means of justifying her own conduct to herself; like them, she glosses over her unwarranted control of others by subtle manipulation of motives" (Minma 51). Embarrassing Jane is Emma's pathetic attempt to lower Jane's social status, and here we see how Emma reacts to a woman who may slightly challenge her role in society. Minma confirms this by stating, "Rank and position are a sort of obsession with Emma, and because of this preoccupation, as well as for the haughty and supercilious attitude she frequently shows, she has been often called a snob" (Minma 54). Emma's obsession with class explains her humiliation of Jane Fairfax, as no one has ever posed a threat to her elite social level.

However mean Emma's treatment of Jane Fairfax, she does feel bad for what she has done, as Austen writes, "She could not endure to give [Knightly] the true explanation; for though her suspicions were by no means removed, she was really ashamed of having ever imparted

them” (Austen 328). Feeling more shame than true remorse, the audience struggles to forgive Emma.

Immediately after Emma’s humiliation of Jane Fairfax, Austen reminds us of the immaturity Emma still holds, as she argues against Knightly’s assertion that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are secretly in love with one another. Knightly asks Emma, “Have you never at any time had reason to think that she admired him?” to which Emma replies, “Never, never!” (Austen 328). Emma continues to display her lack of insight as she states to Knightly, “Oh! You amuse me excessively. I am delighted to find that you can vouchsafe to let your imagination wander – but it will not do” (Austen 329). Ironically chastising Knightly for having an overactive imagination, Emma is completely wrong in her argument. Knightly once again proves the voice of reason and redemption, as he is able to recognize the relationship between Frank and Jane, a relationship we in the audience know to be very much alive.

Austen gives Emma a childish air, allowing us to see her as more girl than woman. We know Emma can behave poorly, but we also justify her actions because she falls in the favor of Knightly. Knightly is clearly a man, no longer a boy, and is capable of correctly identifying the thoughts and feelings of the people around him. Emma however, struggles to put herself in the shoes of those below her. Although she is manipulative and mean, Emma shows enough of her childish naivety to elicit sympathy. She has not yet been redeemed; she is still very much a girl, but her maturation comes after an incident with Miss Bates. After this incident Emma is no longer able to offer an explanation for her behavior, and is forced to fully recognize the error of her ways.

Emma is able to excuse her manipulation of Harriet by citing her good intentions, and she is able to hide behind Frank Churchill as she attacks Jane, but Emma can offer no excuse for her

deliberate and personal attack of Miss Bates. While setting off on a picnic, Emma and Miss Bates, among others, are in the midst of a light-hearted and joyful discussion. Jokingly encouraging all in the party to entertain Emma, Frank Churchill suggests that each of the seven members must say to Emma “two things moderately clever-or three things very dull indeed,” to which Miss Bates replies in a self-deprecating way, “I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth” (Austen 347). Austen writes of Emma’s response, “Emma could not resist. ‘Ah! Ma’am but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me – but you will be limited as to number – only three at once.’” (Austen 347). With these words, Emma has reaffirmed her bully status. Not only is her attack unnecessary, but the victim is not deserving of scorn. Miss Bates, although annoying, is never malicious, her intentions are always kind and her demeanor is always positive. Yet, as Austen writes, Emma “could not resist” her attack. Unlike the manipulation of Harriet, this attack does not involve good intentions. The attack was mean, hurtful, and affected Miss Bates greatly, “[Miss Bates] did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, through a slight blush showed that it could pain her” (Austen 347). As Goodheart states, “Tact is a mark of social intelligence, and again Emma fails the test” (Goodheart 590). The attack of Miss Bates is wonderfully depicted in Director Douglas McGrath’s 1996 film *Emma*. As Miss Bates makes her self-deprecating remark she laughs heartily with Mr. Knightly. Emma however, having just been insulted by Mrs. Elton, attempts to raise her own spirits by stepping on someone below her. Emma’s comment is very painful, as we see the embarrassment written on the face of Miss Bates. McGrath captures Emma perfectly, as she realizes almost immediately that she has misspoken. Like Austen’s novel, McGrath keeps the door open for forgiveness as Emma’s remorse is clearly visible, and properly represents the wise Mr. Knightly as he takes Miss Bates away to pick strawberries avoiding the awkward

silence. This scene once again shows Emma's lack of maturity, and it is getting hard to speak in her defense. But just as before, when Emma is in need of social discipline, Knightly is more than willing to step up to the plate.

Goodheart states, "Emma may know Miss Bates, but she seems too often not to know herself" (Goodheart 592). Emma indeed does not fully understand herself or her actions, and like a large schoolyard bully picking on the kid who can't defend himself, Emma insults Miss Bates. It takes Knightly to recognize this disparity before Emma is capable of feeling remorse. Knightly states of Miss Bates, "She is poor; she has sunk from comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion" (Austen 351). Emma grows immediately concerned, Austen writes, "[Knightly] had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted, and her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern" (Austen 352). Unlike Knightly's lecture about Emma's manipulation of Harriet, Emma does not try to defend herself. The moment has passed, and Emma knows she cannot take back her words. This throws Emma into despair, and provides a "regeneration" of sorts according to Shannon Jr., he writes, "In the beginning, as every reader knows, she is spoiled and conceited...Until the end of the morning at Box Hill, which is the emotional climax of the book and the beginning of her regeneration" (Shannon Jr. 638). Following her incidents with Harriet and Jane Fairfax, Emma is no longer able to defend her old habits. She recognizes the mistake she has made, and most importantly she quickly feels remorse. As Shannon Jr. writes, "The novelist has endowed Emma with good qualities and has provided firm basis in her character for eventual redemption" (Shannon Jr. 639). Austen always leaves the door open for the audience to respond to Emma with favor. Who among us has not said something we regret immediately? Emma's recognition

of what she has done, combined with our approval of Mr. Knightly allows, yet again, for Emma to be forgiven. This, in essence, displays true growth through maturation. As the novel closes, we care for Emma's well-being, and we are comforted in the fact that if Emma should slip up again Mr. Knightly will be there to set her straight.

Emma is able to consistently make mistakes without eliciting permanent scorn. The door to forgiveness is always left open. Emma displays ignorance and manipulation as she forces herself between Harriet Smith and Mr. Martin, but Austen makes clear her good intentions. Emma displays arrogance and jealousy as she slanders Jane Fairfax, but Austen allows Emma to ride on the coattails of Frank Churchill subverting some of the blame. Emma displays malice and aggression as she needlessly ridicules Miss Bates, but Austen shows Emma's remorse and acceptance of her mistake. Austen makes it clear that forgiveness is always possible, and with the guidance of Mr. Knightly Emma can finally follow the path of true redemption.

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Emma*. London: Penguin Books, 1815. Print.
- Emma*. Dir. Douglas McGrath. Perf. Gwyneth Paltrow, Jeremy Northam, Sophie Thompson. Miramax, 1996. Film.
- Goodheart, Eugene. "Emma: Jane Austen's Errant Heroine." *Sewanee Review* 116.4 (2008): 589-604. Print.
- Minna, Shinobu. "Self-Deception and Superiority Complex: Derangement of Hierarchy in Jane Austen's Emma." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 14.1 (2001): 49-65. Print.
- Shannon Jr., Edgar F. "Emma: Character and Construction." *PMLA* 71.4 (1956): 637-650. Print.
- Tanner, Tony. "The Match Maker." *Jane Austen*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. 186-189. Print.