

## EMMA

That *Emma* is a major work of Austen's fictional <sup>excellence,</sup> both positively and otherwise, can <sup>hardly</sup> be denied.<sup>^</sup> So far as texture is concerned, it is hardly less light and sparkling than *Pride and Prejudice*. Its craftsmanship is excellent, but it is partly manifest, partly well- below the surface. It is free from such faults as are found in other novels of Jane Austen. It was perhaps due to the fact that Jane Austen had taken "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like."<sup>1</sup> Until the end of the incident at Box Hill, which is the emotional climax of the book and the beginning of Emma's regeneration, she has been guilty of much that is reprehensible in both thought and deed. *Pride and Prejudice* is, no doubt, a complex and subtle work of art, but *Emma* is much more complex and subtler than even *Pride and Prejudice*.

Emma is unquestionably a charming character, but not without some faults in her. It is due to these faults that the author gets full scope for exercising her free-ranging irony. The earlier section of the

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1. *Memoir*; Ch-10; P-157

novel is charged with this characteristic irony. Through direct narration Austen introduces us to the heroine:

*"Emma woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, who seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her."*<sup>2</sup>

Use of irony is all-pervasive in *Emma*. We have the first suggestion of it in the opening chapter. It is much in evidence when it is found that Emma is often distressed and vexed – particularly when she is engaged in match-making schemes and these schemes always misfire. The irony gains in force when Emma is emotionally entangled with hard-headed Kinightley. An ironical twist is also there in the way she sizes up Mr. Elton. Emma thinks Mrs. Elton to be "self important, presuming, familiar, ignorant and ill-bred". Now some of these faults are there among Emma's own characteristics also. We have found her to be self-important and presuming though not familiar or ignorant or ill-bred. In the structure of the novel, Jane Austen

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2. *Emma*; Ch-1; P-763

*devises* a series of scenes of ironic parallel and contrast where, without any direct comment from herself, she illustrates her theme. The danger of Emma's total ignorance of her own nature is emphasized by showing us how much Emma has in common with Mrs. Elton. Emma dislikes Mrs. Elton so much that she can hardly be polite to her, while at the same time Emma is shown to be infected with many of the same traits though not in so crude a form. What Mrs. Elton does in a vulgar, loud way, Emma does in a more refined and ladylike manner. Emma too is snobbish, self-complacent, presuming and malicious. And perhaps a further ironic hint is that Mrs. Elton, however unpleasant, has not been harmful to anybody, whereas Emma causes active harm to some of the persons around her.

The novel is almost replete with irony. In it, there is irony in the situation, there is irony in the dialogue and there is a deliberate conscious irony in Jane Austen's technique of characterization which reveals not just social flaws but moral flaws too. The three major narrative movements in the novel are built on irony. It is the irony of situation.

Examples of irony in dialogue are found plentifully in *Emma*. Emma in answer to knightley's protest at her meddling in forcing a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton remarks:

*"Were you, yourself ever to marry, she is the very woman for you."*<sup>3</sup>

A statement extremely ironic in view of Emma's later fears. There is lively irony, when Emma exclaims at Mrs. Weston's suggestion of possible intimacy between Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax:

*"My dear Mrs. Weston, do not take to match-making, you do it every ill. Jane Fairfax, mistress of the Abbey? Oh no, no- every feeling revolts. For his own sake, I would not have had him do so mad a thing."*<sup>4</sup>

To accuse Mrs. Weston of the crime of which she (Emma) herself is guilty is transparently ironic. Ironically it is she (Emma) who has partial knowledge, it is she (Emma) who commits all the blunders, even the indiscreet one of confiding her conjectures about Jane and Dixon to Frank Churchill. We have this comic irony in Knightley when he says:

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3. Ibid; Ch -8; P-800

4. Ibid; Ch -26; P-899

"I should like to see Emma in love and in some doubt of a return, it would do her good."<sup>5</sup>

Emma is in doubt but knightley too is in doubt whether his love is returned by Emma. Thus the dialogues in the novel are permeated with irony.

The ironical design that we find in the novels of Austen has been formulated by other critics. Marvin Mudrick in his *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* finds out the source of the irony in a contrast between the values the author intends to uphold and those prevailing in the actual world. Mudrick's theory of irony comes close to Douglas Bush's moralistic approach in so far as it focuses on the author's personal value judgements. John Odmark in his *An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels* analyses the structure of the novel and considers the ironic vision to be the principle which determines the structure. He says that as a rule irony in Jane Austen's fiction has been defined primarily in terms of content. What Odmark wants to draw attention to is the fact that irony is above all a

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5. Ibid; Ch -5; P-785

structuring principle that determines the shape of all the novels. In the specific context of *Emma*, Odmark notes the principle of irony as the definitive force that shapes both the plot and the characters.

Though the satire and irony of Swift remind one of Jane Austen, his indignation, hatred and violence were too direct and exploit the same technique of deflation of character and motive. It involves sometimes a partial deception of the reader who is lured and persuaded to approve of the seemingly good.

The most moral of English novelists, Samuel Richardson, is also the least ironical and witty. It was his detailed study of states of mind and feeling rather than his comparatively crude treatment of morals, that provided Austen with a model. Pamela, accepted without irony by Richardson as an embodiment of virtue, supplied hints for the satirical portrayal of Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*.

*Emma* offers a clear example of the plot pattern which repeats itself several times as Emma's growth to self Knowledge progresses. We have chosen two groups of passages from this chapter for analysis which illustrate two movements of this kind. The first group, from

near the beginning of the novel, concerns Emma's relationship with Harriet; the second, from later in the book, illustrates her growing recognition of her feelings for Mr. Knightley. As we have said, we are interested in exploring techniques—especially irony—which persuade us into making particular judgements.

We are going to start by looking at two views of the friendship between Emma and Harriet, beginning with that of Emma herself when she first meets Harriet:

*"She was not struck by anything remarkably clever in Miss Smith's conversation, but she found her altogether very engaging – not inconveniently shy, nor unwilling to talk and yet so far from pushing, showing so proper and becoming a deference, seeming so pleasantly grateful for being admitted to Hartfield, and so artlessly impressed by the appearance of everything in so superior a style to what she had been used to, that she must have good sense, and deserve encouragement. Encouragement should be given. Those soft blue eyes, and all those natural graces, should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintances she had already formed were unworthy of her. The friends from whom she had just parted, though very good sort of people, must be doing her harm. They were a family of the name of Martin, whom Emma well knew by character, as renting a large farm of Mr. Knightley, and residing in the parish of Donwell – very creditably, she believed; she knows Mr. Knightley thought highly of them; but they must be*

*coarse and unpolished, and very unfit to be the intimates of a girl who wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect. She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintances, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers.*"<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Knightley, however, thinks that the friendship can only damage Harriet, as he tells Mrs. Weston:

*"She will grow just refined enough to be uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her home. I am much mistaken if Emma's doctrines give any strength of mind, or tend at all to make a girl adapt herself rationally to the varieties of her situation in life. They only give a little polish."*

*"I either depend more upon Emma's good sense than you do, or am more anxious for her present comfort; for I cannot lament the acquaintance. How well she looked last night!"*

*"Oh, you would rather talk of her person than her mind, would you? Very well; I shall not attempt to deny Emma's being pretty."*

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6. Ibid; Ch -3; P-774-75



*"Pretty! Say beautiful rather. Can you imagine anything nearer perfect beauty than Emma altogether – face and figure?"*

*"I do not know what I could imagine, but I confess that I have seldom seen a face or figure more pleasing to me than hers. But I am a partial old friend."*<sup>7</sup>

The first passage is here elaborately discussed very much from Emma's point of view, following the progress of her thoughts very closely. At various points, for example, we see her drawing conclusion 'she must have good sense; they must be a coarse and unpolished'. Actually, we know nothing about Harriet, but by this stage in the novel we have formed some opinion of Emma, so as we read this passage we are both using this new evidence to confirm or change our views on Emma herself, and using our initial impressions to assess Emma's view of Harriet. Emma is pleased with Harriet for showing 'proper' and 'becoming deference', for being grateful that Emma has noticed her, and towards the end of the passage, the repetition of 'she' draws attention to Emma's concern with herself. Emma thinks she is encouraging Harriet for Harriet's good. We begin to suspect that in fact Emma is using Harriet for her own ends. She thinks first,

7. Ibid; Ch -5; P-784

for example, that taking Harriet up will be 'interesting' but only second 'a very kind undertaking' and she sees the relationship as a kind of ornament, highly becoming her own situation. We begin to suspect, then, that Emma's thoughts are being presented ironically. We are aware of a gap between what we see as her real motives and her own view of what she is doing.

Here the second passage offers a different point of view on Emma and Harriet. We can see the same oppositions at work in this second passage, perhaps they will take on thematic importance in the novel as a whole. Rather than confusion, however, Mr. Knightley's judgement of Emma and Harriet is based on careful choice between the various criteria and this contrast between his method of judgment and that of Emma herself clearly affects our view of the heroine.

*So the doubts regarding Emma's attitude to Harriet are echoed* by Mr. Knightley whose views seem to be based on a firm grasp of distinctions Emma herself does not see, and whose criticism carries even more weight since he is, by his own admission, fond of Emma. Even we go through the novel earlier, we know, of course that Mr. Knightley is proved right, that Harriet does suffer because Emma

gives her expectations above her social position, so that Emma's dismissal of his high opinion of the Martins here carries even greater ironic weight. Our sense that Emma is presented ironically is thus confirmed by comparing one point of view with another within the novel, and Mr. Knightley's moral case is established by the plot.

The next passage and the event that we have chosen for analysis is from the scene in which Emma draws Harriet's portrait in an effort to secure Mr. Elton's interest in her. Emma is pleased with the portrait after the first sitting:

*"..... and as she meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance. She had great confidence in its being in every way a pretty drawing at last, and of its filling its destined place with credit to them both"...*<sup>8</sup>

Here the scene, as a whole, again allows the reader to stand back slightly and judge her. It is made quite clear that Emma's portrait is not in fact an accurate likeness of Harriet, that she has intentionally given 'a little improvement to the figure' in the interests of furthering

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8. Ibid; Ch -6; P-789

her match with Mr. Elton. Emma sees this as perfectly justified, thought the reader might want to disagree. And then Emma's friend comment on the portrait in various ways, again offering the reader the chance to compare different views:

*"Miss Woodhouse has given her friend the only beauty she wanted", observed Mrs. Weston to him, not in the least suspecting that she was addressing a lover. "The expression of the eye is most correct, but Miss Smith has not those eyebrows and eyelashes. It is the fault of her face that she has them not."*

*"Do you think so?" replied he. "I can not agree with you. It appears to me a most perfect resemblance in every feature. I never saw such a likeness in my life. We must allow for the effect of shade, you know"*

*"you have made her too tall, Emma", said Mr. Knightley.*

*Emma knew that she had, but would not own it; and Mr. Elton Warmly added:*

*"Oh, no – certainly not too tall – no in the least too tall. Consider, she is sitting down, which naturally presents a different – which in short gives exactly the idea – and the proportions must be preserved, you know. Proportions, for shortening – oh, no! it gives one exactly the idea of such a height as Miss Smith's – exactly so, indeed."*

*"It is very pretty", said Mr. Woodhouse. "So prettily done! Just as your drawings always are, my dear. I do not know anybody who draws so well as you*

*do. The early thing I so not thoroughly like is, that she seems to be sitting out of doors, with only a little shawl over her shoulders; and it makes one think she must catch cold.*"<sup>99</sup>

We are again involved in judging between different opinions -- here of Emma's portrait and therefore, implicitly, of her treatment of Harriet. This kind of scene, in which we see different characters' reactions side by side, is quite common in Jane Austen's fiction. It is sometimes called a touchstone situation, because by showing characters responding to the same thing it offers a kind of comparative test of their reactions. In other words, it tells us as much about the characters themselves as about the object of their attention. Here, for example, Mr. Knightley is most critical; offering simply the curt comment, "you have made her too tall"- he is right but seems perhaps over-severe. Mrs. Weston recognizes that the portrait has improved Harriet's eyes but blames Harriet's face rather than Emma for the change--"it is the fault of her face that she has them not", turning her accurate vision of the portrait, a measure of her good sense into much more indulgent and short sighted praise of Emma.

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9. Ibid; Ch -6; P-789-90

As readers we are concerned with both to decide whether to accept any of these positions and to supply motives for what the various characters say. This makes the comedy of Mr. Elton's reactions more complicated. On a second reading irony again comes into play since we know that it is Emma and not Harriet whom he is trying to flatter through his uncritical admiration of the portrait.

Thus we find that Jane Austen's comic spirit is clearly revealed in the personal relationship in ordinary life. The ironic contrast is between what Emma believes herself to be, what others believe her to be and what she really is. The story is rounded off with the reconciliation of Harriet and Mr. Martin. This provides an ironically comic contrast with that of Emma and Mr. Knightley. The revelation of the full details about Harriet's illegitimate birth completely deflates all the illusions of Emma. The way Mr. Woodhouse is made to agree to the marriage of Emma with Mr. Knightley also adds to the comedy at the close. He is prompted by fear and not love. He gives his consent because the robbing of poultry houses makes him feel the need of having somebody at Hartfield. When Mr. Elton gives his blessings to the marriage we find the last ironic touch which is a little modified by the envious and ill-tempered comments of his wife.

At last, we find in the novel that Mr. Elton's real feelings are revealed, and Emma's treatment of Harriet reaches its crisis, when he proposes to Emma herself. She is forced to recognize that her plans for Harriet have been misguided and Emma reflects on what she has done:

*"The first error and the worst lay at her door. It was foolish, it was wrong, to take 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>10</sup>*

How are we to judge Emma's self-criticism here? Her ability to see that she has been wrong is clearly in her favour, but how serious is she? How long will her resolution 'to do things no more' actually last?

If we have read the novel before, judgement is easier. We know that Emma still has a long way to go before she understands the full

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10. Ibid; Ch -16; P-846

implications of her self-centredness; so we are quicker to respond here to any clues that her remorse is as yet limited. The first word she uses to describe her 'error' is 'foolish', a fairly mild term of moral disapproval. She sees what she has done as a 'trick' and at the end of the paragraph, she is described as being 'quite concerned and ashamed'. These terms of mild criticism tend to suggest that when Emma does use a stronger word, describing what she has done as 'wrong'. She is not fully aware of what that term really implies.

Emma's view of her fault is very specific; she focuses on her role as match-maker rather than seeing this as part of her general influence over Harriet, and the opposition which she uses to describe her mistake – 'making light of what ought to be simple' – do not really coincide with the more serious kinds of moral confusion illustrated by Mr. Knightley's judgements which we looked at earlier.

We are going next to a passage under chapter 38, which suggests Emma's feelings for Mr. Knightley even more clearly. It occurs during the ball. Emma dances with Frank Charchill for most of the evening, though she is by now sure, she is not in love with him, but she is worried by the fact that Mr. Knightley is not dancing:



*"There he was, among the standers-by, where he ought not to be; he ought to be dancing, not classing himself with the husbands, and fathers, and whist-players, who were pretending to feel an interest in the dance till their rubbers were made up, so young as he looked! He could not have appeared to greater advantage perhaps anywhere, than where he had placed himself. His tall, firm, upright figure, among the bulky forms and stooping shoulders of the elderly men, was such as Emma felt must draw everybody's eyes; and, excepting her own partner, there was not one among the whole row of young men who could be compared with him. He moved a few steps neared, and those few steps were enough to prove in how gentleman like a manner, with what natural grace, he must have danced, would he but take the trouble. Whenever she caught his eye, she forced him to smile, but in general he was looking grave. She wished he could love a ball-room better and could like Frank Churchill better. He seemed often observing her. She must not flatter herself that he thought of her dancing; but if he were criticizing her behaviour, she did not feel afraid. There was nothing like flirtation between her and her partner."<sup>11</sup>*

On a first reading of this passage, we are concerned here, like Emma, to work out characters' feelings and motives from limited evidence. Along with Emma we are trying to account for the feelings responsible for Mr. Knightley's grave looks; but we are interested primarily in the feelings of Emma herself.

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11. Ibid; Ch -38; P-961

What impression do we form from her observation of Mr. Knightley here? What the above-quoted passage seems to emphasize is Mr. Knightley's powerful physical presence, his 'tall, firm, upright figure,' his 'natural grace'; and, as used here, 'gentlemanlike' seems to refer primarily to physical characteristics. Like Colonel Brandon and ~~Maria~~<sup>Mariane</sup> in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Knightley is considerably older than Emma and one might find it difficult to come to terms with their marriage at the end of the novel because of this. Unlike ~~Maria~~<sup>Mariane</sup>'s view of Colonel Brandon, however, Emma's view of Mr. Knightley here, her inability to take her eyes off him, provides ample evidence of her strong sexual attraction. It is anything but right to think that Jane Austen's novels are without any reference to sexuality just because they do not deal with it in an overt manner. Like the interconnection between Darcy and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, this passage seems to have strong sexual associations, both on Emma's part as this analysis suggests and on Mr. Knightley's – as the end of the novel makes it clear. His 'grave' looks here may be attributed to this jealousy of Frank Churchill.

The irony of the passage lies in Emma's unawareness of the real state of her feelings, <sup>feelings</sup> we strongly suspect on a first reading and

which are confirmed at the end of the novel. She shows no sign of understanding why it is that she is so worried by Mr. Knightley's not dancing. There is thus an ironic opposition between her ignorance of her own emotional state and the self-awareness on which she prides herself. Her use of 'gentlemanlike' to describe his appearance, particularly after her criticism of Mrs. Elton for misusing the term, is an indication that she is attracted by moral qualities as well and at the end of the passage, she implicitly recognizes him as a moral authority in her suspicion that he is actually criticising her behaviour. It is this moral authority which is stressed later in the novel when, on an outing to Box Hill which is an important crisis in the novel, Emma is rude to Miss Bates and Mr. Knightley points out to her how wrong that was:

*"While they talked they were advancing towards the carriage; it was ready; and before she could speak again, he had handed her in. He 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. She had not been able to speak; and, on entering the carriage, suck back for a moment overcome; then reproaching herself for having taken no leave, making no acknowledgement, parting in apparent sullenness, she looked out with voice an hand eager to show a difference; but it was just too late. He had turned away, and the horses were in*

*motion. She continued to look back, but in vain; and soon, with what appeared unusual speed, they were half-way down the hill, and everything left for behind. She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed – almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates? How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness!*<sup>12</sup>

The above extract presented entirely from Emma's point of view, has the same function as the one we examined earlier in which Emma reflected on her vain attempt to create a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton; in the same way, a crisis has forced Emma to judge her behaviour.

In contrast to her earlier self-criticism, the terms used here to describe Emma's state of mind suggest powerful feelings; 'anger', 'mortification', 'grieved' and 'most forcibly struck'. In the earlier passage Emma's moral language was strikingly mild, such that when she did describe herself as 'wrong' it was doubtful that she fully

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12. Ibid; Ch -43; P-992-93

understood the implications of the word. Here, she immediately recognises her behaviour as 'brutal' and 'cruel'— terms which show her awareness of her own selfishness, her cruel blindness, to others' feelings, and so suggest that she is now much closer to understanding Mr. Knightley's moral criteria. Again unlike the earlier incident, where Emma was soon able to console herself, here she is really suffering as a result of her error. But we still feel that her self-knowledge is limited and that we understand her more fully than she understands herself. So the irony is still operating in this presentation of Emma's remorse.

The whole novel, Emma is steeped in deep irony which is Jane Austen's forte. It is irony of situation that more than anything else pervades this novel. We may refer to an incident that occurs at the Crown Inn in Chapter 38. Dancing is in full swing. While all are enjoying themselves, Emma notices that Harriet is sitting all by herself because she did not find any partner. Observing this, Mrs. Weston asks Mr. Elton senses that Mrs. Weston requests him thus because she is eager to find partner for Harriet. He makes a feeble excuse which clearly indicates that he is not in the least interested in dancing with Harriet. Being much surprised and mortified, Emma considers

an unchivalrous evasion on Mr. Elton's part. This situation is, however, saved when Mr. Knightley volunteers to partner Harriet. This act of Mr. Knightley reveals his genuinely kind-hearted but unobtrusive nature.

The dialogue between Mr. Weston and Mr. Elton shows how he is not in the least interested in Harriet:

*"The Kind hearted, gentle Mrs. Weston had left her seat to join him and say, 'Do not you dance, Mr. Elton?' to which his prompt reply was, 'Most readily, Mrs. Weston, if you will dance with me.'"*

*"Me! Oh! no — I would get you a better partner than myself. I am no dancer."*

*"If Mrs. Gilbert wishes to dance," said he, "I shall have great pleasure. I am sure; for, though beginning to feel myself rather an old married man, and that my dancing days are over, it would give me very great pleasure at any time to stand up with an old friend like Mrs. Gilbert."*

*"Mrs. Smith — oh! I had not observed. You are extremely obliging — and if I were not an old married — but my dancing days are over, Mrs. Weston you will*

*ex. Anything else I should be most happy to do, at your command — but my dancing days are over.*"<sup>13</sup>

The entire episode of the Elton – Harriet debacle is rich in comic irony. Having decided to make a match between Harriet and Elton, Emma used every opportunity to bring them together. She firmly believed that Harriet and Elton were becoming interested in each other. Emma was much pleased that her scheme to turn Harriet's attention to Mr. Elton was bearing fruit. This belief was strengthened because Elton was very conscious of Harriet's attractions and was warm in her praise of what Emma had done to improve her. But all Emma's ~~all~~ beliefs and efforts proved futile when Harriet was snubbed and slighted by Mr. Elton. <sup>The</sup> ~~He~~ irony here lays in the amusing discrepancy between what Emma believed she could do and what really happened.

In her fictional art, Jane Austen is much inspired by her predecessors — particularly by Richardson and Fielding. The subtle use of irony mastered by Fielding has not been without its influence

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13. Ibid; Ch -38; P-962

on Austen's novels. But while Fielding has a tremendous zest for life and unbridled vigour of mind. Jane Austen is starkly deficient in these particular qualities. As the story progresses, they emerge in all their depth and complexities. Fielding, however, has not been able to achieve this artistic trick.

The final extract describes the point at which, a few chapters later, Emma does finally realise what she feels for Mr. Knightley. Harriet has told Emma that she is herself in love with him and that she has hopes that he loves her:

*"Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress; she touched, she admitted, she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!*

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*Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling, had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness had led her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world.<sup>14</sup>*

Here, there is a very striking example of irony when Emma discovers that Harriet is in love with Mr. Knightley. The irony here arises from the contrast between what Emma has been thinking and planning and what actually turns out to be the case. Once again, Emma has proved to be absolutely wrong in her assessment of persons and situations and once again we laugh at the absurdity she has committed. In this case, Emma further discovers that she herself has been, or is in love with Knightley. This is a crucial stage in the novel, and the irony behind the events which have led to it, therefore, assumes greater importance.

14. Ibid; Ch -47; P-1012-13

Emma's first moral crisis was the result of discovering that the man she had planned Harriet should marry was in fact in love with Mr. Knightley, <sup>n</sup> how the man she loves appears to be in love with Harriet. The plot neatly reverses the situation and Emma has a taste of her own medicine. The strength of her own feelings shows her how wrong she has been to play with the feelings of others. Mr. Knightley is proved right in the most painful way possible.

The terms in which Emma expresses her faults to herself are again important. She has been 'inconsiderate', 'irrational' led on by 'blindness' and 'madness'. As so often in Jane Austen's fiction, attention to details of vocabulary, to the key words in a passage, is a means of defining the novel's major pre-occupations, and here these terms take us back to the thematic oppositions set up earlier through our discussions. There, Mr. Knightley's views on Emma's relationship with Harriet helped to establish moral oppositions between 'self-interest' and 'disinterestedness' and between judgements based on 'reason' and those based on 'speculation' or 'imagination', and Mr. Knightley's 'clarity' of Judgement was contrasted with the blindness of various other characters. Emma, at last, echoes Mr. Knightley's terms and sees everything 'with a clearness which had never blessed

her before. In the end, Emma runs out of definite terms to describe her fault. She was ready to give it every bad name under the sun, and this provides an interesting contrast with the earlier crisis when she was happy to label her conduct as 'wrong' without really understanding what that meant. Now she fully understands her position and no term of moral disapproval is too strong to describe it.

So, Emma's use of such a strong moral tone is a measure of the strength of her feelings rather than an accurate judgement. Her misuse of the word alerts us to what is perhaps the final irony in her situation. Emma is now aware of her fault and her feelings, but she is only aware of her fault because of her feelings. Her moral and emotional awareness are inseparable, as the beginning of the second paragraph makes it clear: 'Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes'. The question thus arises as to whether Emma would have seen her own selfishness if she had not been in love with Mr. Knightley. In other words, is a kind of selfishness still one of her prime motives? How much has she really changed at the end of the novel?

Apart from moral purpose, the way the novelist has rounded off the story with the excellent touches of irony will always fascinate the readers. An illuminating passage from Frank W. Bradbrook's book *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors* (Cambridge 1966) describes the significance of such mode of ironical implication.

The story ends happily with the reconciliation of Harriet and Mr. Martin, that provides an ironic comic contrast with that of Emma and Knightley. Emma's illusions are completely deflated when the full details about Harriet's illegitimacy are revealed. The incident that persuades Emma's father to agree to her marriage to Mr. Knightley also adds to the comedy of the close of the novel. Emma persuades her father that by having Mr. Knightley in the house as her husband he (her father) will have protection from the chicken-thieves who have been bothering the neighbourhood and it is for this fatuous reason, not for love to his daughter, that Mr. Woodhouse at last gives his blessing to the union of his greatest friend and his dearest daughter. The final irony is, of course, provided by Mr. Elton blessing the marriage of Emma and Knightley.

Jane Austen is gifted with the power of an acute observation together with quiet and incisive irony that helps her portray her characters. She shows an acute grasp of the human mind and human motives and reveals these with great skill. She is not only concerned with the externals of characters, but also with a psychological portrayal of it. She has a keen insight into human psychology, especially into female psychology. As a result, she gives us an abundance of character-portraits.

In *Emma* she presents people from different levels of society. Naturally class-distinction is all the more <sup>conspicuous</sup> in this novel than in her other works. There are The Woodhouses, The westons, The Knightleys and the Eltons. On the other hand, there are The Coles, The Coxes, The Martins, The Batses and The Perries. They represent the middle-class society of Highbury. And there is the farmer Robert Martin. These are the people in *Emma*. They gossip. They attend social calls and hearty dinners. They take part in merry balls, shopping expeditions and weddings. And these things make an occasional ripple on the placid surface of the country life of Highbury. But what sometimes strikes a jarring note in this even tenor of life is Emma's taste for snobbery and her sudden whims. Her mind is obsessed with

degrees of rank and importance in society. It is on account of her snobbery that she rejects Mr. Martin as a possible husband for Harriet. She thinks Mr. Martin to be beneath the dignity of a girl like Harriet to marry, only because he is a farmer, but thinks it quite suitable for Harriet to aspire to the vicar Mr. Elton. But when Mr. Elton presumes to propose to Emma herself, she is horrified that he should think himself her equal and look down upon Harriet. Emma dismisses the news Mrs. Elton's arriving from Bath because Mrs. Elton has brought 'no name, no blood, no alliance' and has a father in trade. That is the trouble with the Coles too. Emma's snobbery puts her in an embarrassing position with regard to the Coles. She thinks it beneath her dignity to mix with them because they have risen to wealth from a much lower position. However, she does respond to their invitation when they give a dinner party, and she does so because everybody else has accepted the invitation. She is, however, happy in the company of the Westons and Mr. Knightley who happen to be present there. She pays handsome compliments to Mr. Knightley for his coming like a gentleman in a carriage. Emma is quite a snob. But Emma's snobbery creates a really bad situation for her when she says something insulting to Miss Bates at Box Hill. She considers it beneath her dignity to visit the Bateses for their lowly position in society.

Later, however, she realizes after a rebuke from Mr. Knightly, that she has been brutal in her treatment to Miss Bates.

By the above discussions, we may conclude that *Emma* is undoubtedly a comedy, and it is at the same time largely a study of complex personality, namely the personality of the heroine. In other words, it combines the interest of a character study. The novel *Emma* as a whole is conceived in a spirit of irony, and the comic interest proceeds chiefly from the use of irony – irony in the situations or incidents and irony in the characterization.