



## Moral Values & Ideals in the Novel *Emma*

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**Abstract:** It would be wrong to say that Jane Austen is merely a skillful portrayer of the social scene without any serious moral interests. She is certainly very skillful in giving us minute and detailed pictures of the social scene with which she is concerned. Still, she is also a writer with serious moral interests and she never fails to give a moral slant to her stories. There is always a sound morality at work in her mind as she narrates her stories, though she does not allow moral considerations to obtrude themselves upon her attention, and she never thrusts her moral principles or preferences upon us in an aggressive spirit. Always, when she tells her story, she seems to be applying her moral ideas to the particular class of society with which she deals. Indeed, we cannot escape the fact that she is very keen to take the moral measurement of the society, with which she is concerned, through the range of her characters. This article investigates the moral ideals presented in the novel *Emma* through various characters.

**Index Terms - Austen, Moral Values, Class Division, Misplaced confidence, Social Comedy, Marriage**

### I. Introduction

Jane Austen was a brilliant writer who explored the themes of morality, ethics, and society in her works. She was influenced by the traditional Christian worldview and the conservative old-world society of her time. Still, she challenged some of the common attitudes and conventions of her age with her wit and irony. She portrayed her characters with realistic flaws and virtues and showed how their moral choices affected their lives and relationships.

The novelist, Jane Austen, observes to the common agreement of a moral in her novels. There are several occasions in which Austen exhibitions the moral lessons that are the undesirable effects of trusting in our mind and interest rather than observing at the truth or the evidence of the condition. The major characters like Emma, Mr. Knightly base their opinions on what other people in the town say or think which prevents them from looking at the situation with an objective point of view. For instance, Emma misapprehends Mr. Elton's actions, Mr. Knightley's unable to consider Frank Churchill objectively, and Frank Churchill flirting with Emma. One of the important events that show this moral lesson can be perceived when Emma misinterprets Mr. Elton's actions in the carriage when he proposes to Emma, even though Austen makes it clear that Mr. Elton is not in love with Harriet.

## II. The Moral Significance of the Novel *Emma*

The Novel *Emma* begins by outlining different contrasting moral lookouts. It ends with clarification, by offering to the readers their way through the variety of interpretations. The reader gains insight into Emma's flaws, realizing their profound impact. Emma's apathy toward others, her tendency to manipulate them like mere objects, and her pragmatic approach to virtue—seeing it solely as a means to secure a suitable marriage—reveal fundamental betrayals of human potential. Her insufferable vanity leads her to believe she understands everyone's emotions, while her unforgivable arrogance drives her to meddle in everyone's fate. Her actions had led to much mischief. She had brought evil on Harriet, on herself, and Mr. Knightley. The social and moral universe of the novel takes on all the weight of its significance here because it provides a context in which Emma's faults are not minor ones to be treated lightly but total violations of a whole worthwhile universe. Mr. Knightley and Jane Austen serve as the agents of retribution in this context. The reprisal, once comprehension dawns, is benevolent: Emma learns the essential lesson of wholeheartedly embracing the moral and social institution of marriage—an institution she initially rejected but now embarks upon as she enters maturity. The novel exposes the moral horror associated with certain values, including snobbery, excessive admiration for elegance and intelligence, and a pragmatic view of goodness solely for its marriageability. These values are purged. The narrative emphasizes the significance of genuine regard for oneself and others, portraying the complete human being as morally serious, fully responsible, and deeply engaged. Every human action becomes a pivotal, defining act of self-expression. And what is extracted for us is the moral mistakes of certain values. The novel persuades us of the importance of true regard for self and others. It persuades us to see the human being as morally serious, full, fine, totally responsible, and entirely involved. It persuades us to consider every human action as an important, committing act of self-definition.

## III. The Values of *Emma* Novel for the Modern Reader

*Emma* is certainly the novel of character, of character alone, and of one dominating character in particular. It is therefore very necessary that we should understand Emma's character correctly. *Emma* is Jane Austen's masterpiece because she has accomplished the difficult task of portraying and resolving disharmony deriving entirely from within the heroine herself. The author has done so with such economy and with such perfect artistry that the surface brilliance has obscured for many readers the emotional depth and moral significance of the novel. We find ourselves in a real-world of intricate human relationships. The irony is the bright instrument with which the author delights, stimulates, and enlightens the reader, but with which she has practiced no ultimate deception. It is wrong to say that this novel has nothing worthwhile to say to modern men and women. Through the discrepancy between appearance and reality, this novel reminds us of human fallibility and the need for modesty, unselfishness, and compassion. The novel urges charity and forbearance toward the less gifted and fortunate than ourselves. It shows the advisability of openness and sincerity, the evil of slander and of jumping to derogatory conclusions, the cruelty of inflicting mental pain, and the falseness of snobbery. It demonstrates that we cannot escape the consequences of our actions, that love is not

an emotion to be played with, and that marriage is not a game. Such truths *Emma* novel inculcates objectively through Emma's progress from self-deception and vanity to perception and humility.

#### IV. The Moral Interest of the Book

Because critical intelligence is everywhere involved, because we are asked continuously to judge what we are seeing, the prevailing interest in *Emma* is not one of mere aesthetic delight but a moral interest. Because Jane Austen is the least theoretical of novelists, the least interested in life as opposed to living, her ability to involve us intensely in her scenes and people is inseparable from her moral concern. The moral is never exhibited on a superficial level. It is wrapped up always in the value of feeling encouraged.

The moral implication is itemized visibly, as Mr Knightley states it after the Box Hill incident or while he reads Frank Churchill's letter of explanation, its force will depend not on its abstract "correctness" but on the emotional conviction it carries, involving, of course, our already acquired confidence in Mr Knightley's judgment and character though. Some of Mr. Knightley's comments, out of their situation, might seem quite moralizing:

"My Emma, does not everything serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with one another?" (Page 430)

The sentiment in the above lines, abstracted, might serve as the conclusion of a moral tale. In fact, in the novel, it is a moment of great beauty, backed as it is by a depth of feeling convincing.

#### V. The Value of *Emma* Novel in Present Time

The question arises as to what relevance and helpfulness exactly the novel *Emma* has for us today. In what sense does a novel deal with realism and dexterity in a society? If *Emma* today captures our imagination and engages our sympathies, then it has some genuine value for us way we give our compassion, and our values are quite useless.

An extension of human sympathy and understanding is never irrelevant, and the world of *Emma* novel is not presented to the readers with complacency. Emma faced with what she has done to Harriet, the whole humiliating horror of it, or Emma finding that, except for her feeling for Mr. Knightley, "every other part of her mind was disgusting": These are not insights calculated to decrease our moral awareness; and in none of the issues of conduct arising in the novel is Jane Austen morally neutral. The intensity with which everything matters to us in this novel is the product of this absence of complacency, this passionate concern of Jane Austen for human values. Emma is the lead character of the novel and it is through her consciousness that the situations are revealed. Although she is considered to be the heroine of the novel not in the conventional sense. She is not merely spoilt and selfish, but she is snobbish and proud, and her snobbery leads her to inflict suffering that might ruin her happiness. She has until her experience and her feelings for Mr. Knightley bring her to a fuller, more humane understanding, an attitude to marriage typical of the ruling class. She sees human relationships in terms of class snobbery and property qualifications. Harriet, for the sake of social position, she would cheerfully hand over to the wretched Elton; she does in fact, reduce Harriet to a humiliating misery; and her chief concern about Mr. Knightley is that his estate should be well-preserved for little Henry, the

eldest son of John and Isabella Knightley and the elder brother to John, Bella, George, and Emma. It is only through her own intimate experiences that she comes to a more critical and more fully human view.

## **VI. Concerned with the Actual Problems of Life**

What gives Emma its power to move the readers is the realism and depth of feeling behind Jane Austen's attitudes. She observes with a dependable yet passionate and critical precision the actual problems of her world. That this world is narrow cannot be denied. The smallness of her world does not, in fact, matter at all. What is valuable in a work of art is the depth and truth of the experience which it communicates, and such qualities cannot be identified with the breadth of the panorama. We may find out more about life in a railway carriage in the course of a short journey than in making a tour around the world. And when Emma says to Mr. Knightley "Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be"; she is giving us a valuable hint about Jane Austen's method. The silliest of all criticisms of Jane Austen is to say that she did not write about the History of England. She wrote about what she saw and perceived.

## **VII. The Problem of Class Divisions**

Jane Austen's novel "Emma" delves into the complexities of social class and its impact on characters and relationships. The novel is set in 18th-century English society, where the rich and "well-bred" hold sway over social situations. They issue invitations, initiate friendships, and dictate norms. Those of lower standing depend on the charity and initiative of those in higher classes. Their actions are often constrained by societal expectations. Emma, the protagonist, is charitable toward the poor but lacks initiative in befriending the orphaned and talented Jane.

Characters' use or abuse of their social status reveals their kindness or cruelty. For instance, Emma's wit at the expense of Miss Bates, a lower-standing woman, is condemned as cruel by Mr. Knightley. Mr. Knightley's act of asking Harriet to dance after she's snubbed by Mr. Elton demonstrates charity and graciousness.

Social class significantly influences marriage prospects. Frank conceals his engagement with Jane because she's an orphan, deemed an unsuitable match by his family. Emma advises Harriet to reject Robert Martin due to his lower social status, leading to a missed connection. Mr. Elton also rejects Harriet based on class calculations

## **VIII. A Narrow and Sensible Morality**

Jane Austen is the mistress of a quaintly confined world, inviolate to ideas and admitting only the most distant reverberations of the passions. She brings it a transforming vis-comica (comic force) which can create Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Collins and Mrs. Norris and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. But this is not the whole story. The heroines take us further. It is along with these young women that we can best explore Jane Austen's claim to trespass beyond the bounds of light literature. According to Dr. Leavis, Jane Austen would not have been a great novelist without her intense moral preoccupation. The moral climate within which she grew up, and which she appears in large part to have accepted without much questioning, was not in itself much to the

advantage of her development as an artist. It is a narrow and prudential morality, much tainted by material interest. And it infiltrates into the novels in ways apt to elicit a willful kind of enjoyment. There is an occasion in *Emma* when Frank Churchill who has his reasons judges the Crown Inn, a capital place for a dance, and makes light of Emma's objection that a socially homogeneous gathering could not be contrived. He cannot see that "there would be the smallest difficulty in everybody's returning into their proper place the next morning". Emma, deprecating his lack of "pride", reflects that "his indifference to a confusion of rank bordered too much on inelegance of mind". Again, we are either amused or disapproving. And it will not quite do to tell us that the passage is dramatic and merely a reflection of the injudicious sense of consequence indulged by Miss Emma Woodhouse of Hartfield.

## IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, the actions that took place in *Emma*, Jane Austen wants us to be reminded of an important moral lesson which is that all humans need to be cautious of claiming to be completely truthful and acting on it because there are so many instances where we tend to be wrong about that "truth." Emma's character development throughout the novel is a testament to this moral lesson. She learns to be more objective and less self-centered and ultimately becomes a better person for it. The novel *Emma* is a timeless classic that continues to resonate with readers today, and its moral values are as relevant now as they were when it was first published.

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