

## “EMMA” AS AN IRONIC COMEDY

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Jane Austen occupies a high rank among English novelists though she is not one of the greatest. Her works have an exquisite perfection that is lacking in most of the writers of fiction. Faithful observation, personal detachment and a fine sense of ironic comedy are among her chief characteristics as a writer. *Emma* is Jane Austen's greatest novel because in it her powers are at their fullest. It is a comic novel in which irony dominates. Irony arises from a contrast between appearance and reality, between what a character thinks himself to be and what in reality he is, and what a character says and what he really means to convey and so on. Irony may produce comic and tragic effect depending upon the circumstances. In the plays of Shakespeare, both these elements are found in abundance. The use of irony may entertain or sadden the readers. In the novels of Jane Austen use of irony is all pervasive. There are many examples of irony in the very opening chapter. Emma claims that she has made the match between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. It is this match that serves as Emma's premiere into the world of matchmaking. Mr. Knightly softly rebukes Emma's explanation of her "success" by matching Miss Taylor with Mr. Weston, insisting that to succeed requires some amount of effort. He assures Emma that she has played no part in the match between the lovers. However, Emma insists that if she "had not promoted Mr. Weston's visits here, and given many little encouragements, and smoothed many little matters, it might not have come to anything at all" (10). There is irony and contrast between what Emma says and what the matter in reality is. The contrast becomes the source of amusement.

The second example of comic irony is the account of Emma's efforts and plans in bringing about a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton. Irony arises from the folly of Emma who confidently says that she can bring a happy matrimonial alliance between Harriet and Mr. Elton, but in actuality it does not happen. When Harriet is first introduced to Emma, it is made clear that Harriet's lineage is unknown. However, Emma is quick to determine that

Harriet must be born of a family of high societal status simply because that is what she would like to believe. As she further develops Harriet's character in her mind, she begins to manipulate the actual Harriet to act accordingly. Emma's painting of Harriet brings to light the physical illusion Emma possesses of Harriet. Mr. Knightley points out, "you have made her too tall, Emma" (47). Although Emma realizes this, she consciously decides to retain a more beautiful form of Harriet. The painted image clearly adheres more closely to the version of Harriet that Emma has created. Mr. Knightley acknowledges this difference in appearance by commenting, "I cannot rate her beauty as you do" (58). He clearly does not see the form of Harriet that Emma has created in her mind. Unwilling to recognize and repair her own flaws, Emma focuses on repairing Harriet's imperfections.

Although Mr. Martin is clearly in love with Harriet, Emma discourages the marriage, certain that Harriet must marry a gentleman of higher social status. She succeeds in persuading Harriet to reject the marriage proposal of Robert Martin. Mr. Knightley becomes angered at the news that Harriet has rejected Mr. Martin and immediately accuses Emma of intervening, saying, "you have been no friend to Harriet Smith, Emma" (63). Mr. Knightley recognizes the opportunity for Harriet's life that Mr. Martin's proposal provides, claiming that Mr. Martin is Harriet's superior. She considers Elton a pleasing young man, a suitable husband for her. Emma truly believes that Mr. Elton is in love with Harriet, despite Mr. Knightley's warning that Mr. Elton's affections are instead directed toward Emma. Emma continually insists that "Mr. Elton and I are very good friends and nothing more" (115). Inside Emma's mind, Mr. Elton is, in fact, in love with Harriet so his every act of kindness is misconstrued to correspond with Emma's illusion. Emma's inability to read characters such as Mr. Martin and Mr. Elton is closely related to her inability to recognize and understand her own flaws. Ironically, by creating alternate forms of others to deal with their flaws, she is also avoiding acknowledgment of her own faults.

Emma herself paints a portrait of Harriet which Elton takes to London to have it framed. Emma makes her every effort to promote a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton and is deeply shocked when Mr. Elton proposes not to Harriet but to Emma herself. She was quite concerned and ashamed and resolved to do such things no more. Then we find comic irony in Emma's statement that Harriet's father must be a gentleman of fortune, and so Mr. Martin must be regarded as being inferior to Harriet in social status. Indeed irony comes to light when it is discovered that Harriet's father was only a tradesman. The irony becomes more marked when Emma asks Elton to share some time along with Harriet for a private conversation of an amorous kind. The most amusing situation arises when Emma's all efforts have been dashed to the ground because Elton expresses his love not with Harriet but with Emma herself. Indeed Emma becomes the victim for her illusions and misjudgments.

Emma's assessment of Frank's character is ironical too. First of all Emma considers Frank as a suitable husband for herself and she has been holding a high opinion of the attainments of Frank. She also finds his talk to be highly pleasing, who can talk on a variety of subjects. She has a regular discussion about him with Mr. Knightley, disagreeing completely with Mr. Knightley's evaluation of Frank. Later on she drops the idea of marrying him, but plans a match between Harriet and Frank as he has rescued her from the gypsies. The irony comes to light when the fact of Frank's engagement to Jane is revealed. We laugh heartily at the illusions and absurdities of Emma, who is ignorant of cunningness of Frank. Frank is a hypocrite, who does not disclose the fact of his secret engagement to anybody in Highbury, not even to his

Step-mother and father. When staying at Randalls, he never fails to meet Jane, but outwardly he always meets her as if they were mere acquaintances. Emma has to change her opinion about the character of Frank because there is an interesting contrast between what she had thought him to be and what he proves to be.

Emma's choice to refrain from marriage is questionable to readers since she is so involved in creating matches for her peers. Critic Smith claims "she resists the prospect of domestic confinement" (131). She perceives marriage as a restriction to her freedom. Paris agrees with Smith, stating "marriage presents itself to Emma less as an opportunity for fulfillment than as a threat" (78). Due to her independent, self-superior nature, Emma refuses to be at the mercy of a male other than her father. Additionally, unlike many women of her time, Emma does not need the financial support that marriage brings. Emma explains to Harriet, "were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing; but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature" (87). Emma's comfort with her current situation leads to her insatiable longing to improve the less-than-desirable conditions of the other young singles. The very institution that she finds threatening to her own happiness is that which she uses to improve the lives of others. In her mind, Emma ironically "fixes" situations and people instead of identifying and repairing her own flaws.

The most striking example of irony is noticed in Emma's discovery of Harriet's love for Mr. Knightley, with whom Emma is already in love. She is deeply shocked to learn from Harriet that she was never in love with Frank but had been in love with Mr. Knightley since he had asked her to dance with him. Again the irony arises from the contrast between what Emma has been thinking and planning and what the reality comes out. Thus Emma is a complete failure in her evaluation of persons and situations and that is why she becomes a target of laughter and ridicule. Irony can be seen in the case of minor characters too. For example, Mrs. Weston endeavors her best to bring about a match between Emma and Frank, but her plans bear no fruit because Frank gets engaged to Jane. Indeed, Jane Austen treats life as a comedy and what makes her primarily a comic writer is the characteristic of seeing the inconsistencies and incongruity between a person's pretensions and his abilities, between his words and actions. Jane Austen's ultimate vision of life is ironic. She is a comic writer and her use of irony in her novels adds to the comic effect.

## References

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