

15. Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax

Emma is a mystery story; and it is of the essence of a good mystery story that everything mysterious should be exposed to the light in the end. In the meantime there should be a clear distinction between those who are making the mystery, and those who have to find it out. This requirement applies to Emma herself psychologically. She has to find *herself* out; and this means that the self she already knows has no mystery in it. She appears to be a very transparent character.

Jane Austen depended on this when she said “I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.”¹ But if she herself could like a character who was transparently *not* very likeable, then there must be an implicit aspect in Emma’s character and situation that we should be able to discover. Let us ask ourselves why Jane Austen herself liked Emma Woodhouse, and see what the novel can tell us.

The first sentence tells us implicitly both why we shall not like Emma much, and why we ought to sympathize with her more seriously than we instinctively do. This girl, says the first clause, was extremely *lucky*. She was beautiful, she was intelligent, and she was rich. She “*seemed* to unite some of the best blessings of existence”; but by implication she did not really unite them. She was not “blessed,” and in some ways she was not very nice; in fact, she was rather *spoiled*. The second clause tells us how old she is: She “had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.” But by implication that is about to change. Emma Woodhouse is now going to be somewhat distressed and vexed.

In the story she will be vexed explicitly. First she will be vexed by the courtship of Mr. Elton, as a direct result of her own arrogant conviction that she knows what is best for others. We shall be very amused, but not at all sympathetic; and we shall have grounds for wholehearted disapproval, when we consider the effect of Emma's influence on Robert Martin's courtship of Harriet Smith. Then she will be deceived, and put in danger of quite severe distress, by the false courtship of Frank Churchill. We cannot help sympathizing with her here; but her own behavior towards Jane Fairfax, and to Jane's aunt, Miss Bates, keeps the faulty aspect of her character firmly before our eyes. Frank Churchill is much worse than she is — just as the Rev. Philip Elton is more contemptible than she. But she is not a very good character; and we are bound to feel a certain contempt for her.

She deserves our more wholehearted sympathy nevertheless. The "blessings" of her existence — and especially her "happy disposition" — combine to conceal the "distress and vexation" of her situation at the age of twenty, and the really virtuous goodness of her response to it. She is the younger of two daughters, and she has been motherless since she was four or five. Her sister Isabella is some seven years older than she; and Emma has been mistress of her father's house since her sister got married, when she was thirteen.ⁱⁱ

The place of her mother has been taken by the governess, Miss Anna Taylor, who arrived sixteen years ago. Miss Taylor (newly become Mrs. Weston) speaks to the girls as their "mother" (I, xiv, 121; cf. I, v, 40) but she has been more like a sister to Emma since Isabella got married. Emma has been very happy all these years. But now Miss Taylor has married a near neighbor, Mr. Weston. Emma foresaw this event, and did all she could to make it happen; but now that it has happened, she is rather mournful because she is lonely, and she foresees much future loneliness.

Her father did not marry early (I, i, 7); and with an elder daughter of twenty-seven or eight, he must now be in his sixties. Like Isabella he is not very clever — Emma's brains came from her mother. But his real problem is that, being independently wealthy, he has never had anything to do. All of his attention has become focused on his own health — which is rather delicate. He is like an

anxious child with the authority of a grown-up. This enables him to project his anxieties upon all those others who must treat him with respect.

This is the crux of Emma's situation. She has now reached the age at which her sister got married; and the marriage of Miss Taylor has uncovered the fact that Emma herself cannot reasonably expect to get married. She is already a "mother" with a very difficult "child." Her father's dependence upon her is absolute; he cannot be left. Her mind runs obsessively upon marriage; but it is marriage for others that she must contrive; marriage for herself is out of the question.ⁱⁱⁱ Her father's death, when it comes, will leave her as the maiden aunt of her sister Isabella's large family (cf. I, x, 86); and the courtesy-aunt of Anna Weston's smaller one. This is the future that she is rather mournfully contemplating when the story starts; and it is the resolute good will with which she determines to be happy in it, that makes Jane Austen like her. Miss Austen was certainly hoping for a happy marriage when she was twenty; but it is a resolutely contented maiden aunt who invents Emma.

"The real evils . . . of Emma's situation," says Miss Austen, "were the power of having rather too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (I, i, 5). She leaves it to us to notice that the only thing that Emma wants to have her own way about, is the marriage of Harriet Smith. Her disposition to think too well of herself shows even in this, because she believes that the patronage and friendship of Emma Woodhouse can outweigh the stain of illegitimacy. Even if Harriet really were a gentleman's daughter (as Emma chooses to believe) it was not at all likely that a gentleman of independent means would marry her.^{iv} The very idea that Harriet is the daughter of a gentleman illustrates Emma's false concept of her own status. Harriet *has* to be a gentleman's daughter, because Emma Woodhouse cannot make friends with the daughter of a tradesman, any more than she could continue to be friends with a farmer's wife. Mr. Knightley, the squire who owns not only the Donwell Abbey estate, but almost all of Highbury (I,), exposes the pretentious folly of this, as soon as he hears how Emma has prevented Harriet from accepting the proposal of Robert Martin (I, viii, 60-5).

Emma's "happy disposition" is beautifully illustrated by the pleasure that she can derive even from the daily street-spectacle of Highbury (II, ix, 233). This is another way in which Jane Austen sees herself in Emma. But it is not good for a thirteen year old girl to become the effective mistress of a rich man's house and estate. Emma knows that she has a position to keep up; but she does not know what that really involves. The fact that she could answer questions at ten, that puzzled her seventeen year old sister (I, v, 37) only makes matters worse, because it helps to convince her that she needs no model, but can safely rely on her own judgment. She understands the social system, and her own place in it, very well. But the real responsibilities of her position she has still to learn. So far, she only knows how to manage her own father (within the narrowly constraining limits that that is possible).

Emma's matrimonial urge has fastened upon Mr. Elton, the relatively new vicar of Highbury parish, even before she meets Harriet; and when we consider how unthinkable Harriet Smith is as a wife for him, it is not surprising that Emma's interest in him, leads to Mr. Elton's thinking of Emma as a possible wife. He is a cold-hearted, socially ambitious man who has already attracted the notice of a minor heiress rather like himself, but with no profession to occupy her mind. Emma Woodhouse would be a much better catch than that. For Emma herself, such a connection is unthinkable (though it probably ought not to be).

The Westons have, for some time, been thinking of Emma as a wife for Mr. Weston's son Frank Churchill (perhaps Miss Taylor already thought of returning the favor when Emma was trying to help on *her* engagement). Mr. Knightley, who may have begun to think of marrying young Emma when his brother wedded her sister, is already jealous of Frank, before anyone at Highbury has met him.^v Mr. Weston is now in his forties. But when he was a dashing young Captain of Militia not much past twenty, young Miss Churchill of Enscombe in Yorkshire eloped with him. She died about three years later, leaving him with a baby boy. Her brother and his wife took over this child, who became Frank Weston Churchill when he was twenty-one (I, ii, 15-6).^{vi}

Harriet Smith, who has received a proposal of marriage at seventeen, finds it almost incredible that Emma should have decided never to marry. As Mr. Knightley says, she would finally “catch at the old writing-master’s son” rather than be an old maid like Miss Bates. Poor Miss Bates never was pretty; but otherwise she is exactly what Harriet might become. Emma knows that she herself is in no danger of that. She will always have enough to do; and she will have her nephews and nieces (I, x, 84-6). Also she will be a dispenser of charity rather than a recipient.^{vii}

Mr. Knightley is sixteen years older than Emma (I, xii, 99); and she knows very well that experience has made him much wiser than she. Her own criterion for friendship is education rather than social position; and she has already been obliged to admit to herself grudgingly that Robert Martin is more cultured than she expected. But when Mr. Knightley exclaims that Harriet is very lucky to have attached him, Emma suspects that he is applying a *masculine* standard of shared interest in his evaluation of a fellow farmer (I, viii, 65); and even after she discovers how right he was about Mr. Elton, she does not budge an inch about Robert Martin.

The story of Mr. Elton, which fills volume one, is only important for the establishment of Emma’s character. The focus of the central “mystery” is Frank Churchill. Both Emma and Mr. Knightley are prejudiced by their own wishes in their interpretation of his continuing non-appearance; but the facts and the conventions of gentility are all on Mr. Knightley’s side.^{viii}

At the beginning of volume two the arrival of Jane Fairfax is heralded. Jane and Emma are the same age (I, xii, 104); and they are both beautiful and very clever. Emma has always been jealous of Jane’s accomplishments, and of the general recognition that they have received. Jane, on her side, envies Emma’s many social advantages. They ought to have been firm friends for years; but instead they dislike one another.^{ix} Emma feels, quite correctly, that Jane is unduly reserved and secretive — and that is one fault which she certainly does not have herself. She is *suspicious* of Jane’s hidden feelings; and whereas she usually ascribes *better* motives and feelings to the people in her circle than they actually have, her fertile imagination spontaneously produces guilty secrets for Jane. Jane does indeed have a guilty secret; but it is not the one that Emma ascribes to her.

Jane Fairfax met Frank Churchill at Weymouth about four months earlier — in October, when he could quite easily have been visiting the Westons who were married in September. Everyone in Highbury is naturally very interested to know what Jane thinks about Frank. But she will not talk about Weymouth at all; and about Frank Churchill she is extremely circumspect. They are bound to have compared notes about their Highbury connection — and especially about the *contrast* in their experience, because Frank has never been allowed to go there, and still has prudential grounds for avoiding it. Yet now Jane will only say what other people think of him. She has no opinion about his cultural interests — which is quite astonishing, unless he has none. But she is just as secretive about Mr. Dixon, whom she *must* know better; so Emma's suspicions remain where they have spontaneously settled.

Once Jane Fairfax is in Highbury, Frank Churchill appears very promptly. (No doubt, her decision to pay an extended visit to grandmother and aunt, was based on that expectation.) But their engagement must remain secret; and the readiest cover for it, from Frank's point of view, is to fall in with the hopes of the Westons, by paying attentions to Emma. This is not exactly *necessary*; but without it, his frequent visits to the Bates' would be noticed, and he does not want to restrict those. He is thoughtless and irresponsible in his attentions to Jane; but his attentions to Emma are a much worse torture for Jane, whichever way she looks at them. It is only certain that he is deceiving *somebody*; and if Emma really is the victim, then she, Jane, must share in Frank's guilt. When he tells her — as he certainly does — of Emma's suspicion that she is in love with Mr. Dixon, the whole situation is made worse. The piano was a very valuable contribution to her happiness. But Frank ought to have managed that gift with more discretion; and for the rest, his behavior is simply disgraceful all round.^x

Emma does fall somewhat in love with Frank Churchill (II, xiii, 264). Everything conspires to make this happen; and although she steadfastly says to herself that she means to refuse him, she does expect him to ask her, and her refusal would have cost her some pain.^{xi} The connection would certainly be acceptable to the Churchills, since Emma's fortune is thirty thousand pounds (I, xvi, 135); but one cannot imagine Frank Churchill voluntarily settling down with someone who has

never seen the sea, and does not expect to see it for years (I, xii, 101). The attraction of Emma is only responsive. She is convinced that Frank is in love with her; and she is soon taken with the idea that his affections can be transferred to Harriet (II, xiii, 266-7). This alone shows that she has very little idea what being properly in love is like. She *likes* Frank Churchill (and we need not doubt that he likes her; but he mainly enjoys leading her on).

Mrs. Weston thinks Mr. Knightley is in love with Jane Fairfax; but when Emma suggests that to him, he denies it quite decisively (II, xv, 287). He remarks that Jane is too secretive; and he is the only one who eventually begins to have a sound idea of what her secret is. His appreciation and admiration of her is steady and well-founded. When the secret comes out he makes a very fair and generous estimate of her conduct. (He is less generous towards Frank Churchill, but on that side *Emma's* judgment is surprisingly mature — III, xv, 444, 448.)

At the end of the second volume Frank Churchill has been summoned back to Enscombe, and Emma is feeling quite depressed. The Churchills are to come to London, and Frank will soon return; but his disappearance drives home the fact that he is not a possible mate for Emma (who must stay with her father). It is her temporary interest in Frank that prevents her from recognizing *why* Mr. Knightley must not marry Jane Fairfax. At the beginning of the third volume she has overcome her very mild obsession about Frank. She *projects* her personal feelings into anxiety for him. He has been away for two months, and he must *not* be still in love with her when he returns (III, i, 315).^{xii}

Until this time Frank has generally supported his father's view that Mrs. Churchill's illness is imaginary. But now, when he definitely *wants* to be free to come away from her, he gives his firm opinion that she really *is* ill — and in a slow decline (III, i, 316-7). He thinks she will live for years — and that is important to him, because he must eventually confess his engagement. (His ill-concealed fury when he hears Mrs. Elton calling Miss Fairfax "Jane" only leaves Emma puzzled — Mr. Knightley might have found the solution more quickly — III, ii, 324-5.)

The ball has Mr. Knightley and Emma thinking of one another. Mr. Knightley is consciously in love, and jealous; Emma, safely out of love. But it is the rescue of Harriet from the slight put upon her by Mr. Elton, that is crucial. This brings Mr. Knightley into full contact with Harriet for the first time; and he begins to take a serious interest in her, as a possible wife for Robert Martin. He is sufficiently impressed to tell Emma that she chose better for Mr. Elton than he has chosen for himself (III, ii, 327-8, 331).

The episode of Harriet being rescued from the gipsies by Frank Churchill sets up Emma's final misreading of her little world. Harriet has found her fairy prince in Mr. Knightley; but Emma thinks she means Frank Churchill. (The gipsies take themselves off, before Mr. Knightley comes down upon them as Justice of the Peace. No doubt they were used to moving on voluntarily, before the local authority obliged them to go. Frank, of course, has just been contriving another rendezvous with Jane Fairfax; but we must leave Emma to her own imaginings.)

Mr. Knightley begins to suspect that there is a secret understanding between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. But when he mentions this to Emma, she is so certain he is mistaken, that he shifts to the much more plausible assumption that Emma already has an understanding with Frank. What Mr. Knightley thinks will happen to Mr. Woodhouse, as he leaves him with his hot fire in June, to return to Donwell Abbey, I cannot guess (III, v, 343-51). But Emma's obstinate conviction that everyone must feel what she wishes them to feel, has misled him completely.

The strawberry party at Donwell Abbey sees Jane Fairfax tormented almost out of patience by Mrs. Elton's officious determination to arrange her future. Emma begins for the first time to sympathize with Jane properly. But the solitude that Jane so desperately needs, she does not properly get; for as she is walking home she meets Frank Churchill. Frank writes to Mrs. Weston later that he wanted to walk back with her, and she — very sensibly — would not let him (III, xiv, 441). This quarrel put him into a foul temper. Actually we can reconstruct their conversation in a little more detail. They had been invited, just a few days earlier, to take tea with Mr. Woodhouse. Playing with home-made "alphabets," Frank teased Jane (and Emma too) about Mr. Dixon. Then,

seeing that Jane was upset, he tried to apologize by the same route; but she would not look at his last word.^{xiii} No doubt he now told her how sorry he was; and he wanted to share her walk in token of their reconciliation. He was quite oblivious to the folly of any such behavior in a small community in which gossip was a major source of entertainment. Jane refused very emphatically,^{xiv} and Frank was bitterly hurt. He talks wildly of going abroad.

Instead, he joins the expedition to Box Hill. The day is hot, and he (like several others) is still out of temper. He “flirts” with Emma — that is Emma’s own word, but the sight must have had the direst implications for poor Jane Fairfax. Emma is led into being thoughtlessly witty at the expense of Miss Bates (who takes the shamefully cutting joke in very good part).^{xv} Frank makes matters worse by seeming to refer (under cover) to his own case in a sarcastic comment about the courtship of the Eltons “in a public place” (III, vii, 370-2). Jane Fairfax responds “that it can be only weak, irresolute characters . . . who will suffer an unfortunate acquaintance to be an inconvenience, an oppression forever” (373). That is the moment when her own resolution is made. She goes off with Miss Bates to find Mrs. Elton; and that evening she writes to Frank to break off the engagement.

After his carefully measured rebuke to Emma, Mr. Knightley goes to London, because he cannot bear to watch the expected triumph of Frank Churchill. Emma, on the other hand, has become conscious that Mr. Knightley’s good opinion is what matters most to her. She finds that Jane has agreed to let Mrs. Elton arrange her future; and Frank Churchill has actually gone back to Richmond. So Mr. Knightley would have done better to trust to his own suspicions.

This is the situation when news comes of Mrs. Churchill’s sudden death. Frank has been falling in with his father’s prejudiced belief that she was a selfishly tyrannical hypochondriac. More recently, because her health was important to himself, he has been observing and reporting it accurately; but her death is a surprise to him, and a still greater surprise to all for whom Mr. Weston has been the oracle about her.

Jane Fairfax must now be in a terrible state of misery. As we learn later from Frank's confession-letter, a paradigm case of "Freudian slip" caused Jane not to receive any answer to the note in which she broke off the engagement (III, xiv, 442). When she sends back his letters, Frank realizes that he must get Mr. Churchill's approval for a formally acknowledged engagement. This turns out to be quite easy; but for some days Jane is in Purgatory — and in this state she has to deal with Emma's earnest endeavors to aid and comfort her. Of all the people in the world, it is Emma whom she most desires to avoid; and she cannot tell anyone why. The strain on her good manners — and on Miss Bates' grateful politeness — is terrible.

The news of Frank's engagement must now be "broken" to Emma. Emma confesses that she was quite briefly attached to him, but is so no longer. When she realizes that she is in love with Mr. Knightley, she will say that she never was in love with Frank at all (III, x, 396; xi, 412; xiii, 426-7). Both declarations should be accepted as sincere. To Mrs. Weston she confesses the self-hypnotic working of her own imagination; and in speaking to Mr. Knightley, she uses the standard of felt experience. The real force of her attraction to Frank Churchill is shown by the difference between her reaction to Mrs. Weston's suggestion that Mr. Knightley is in love with Jane Fairfax (II, viii, 224-5) and to Harriet's humble belief that he may indeed be in love with her. She is not troubled about Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax, because her mind is full of Frank; but she accepts the far less likely daydream of Harriet, because she now knows exactly why she is frightened (cf. III, xv, 449-50).

Emma now understands completely, why Jane Fairfax has been so reserved, and has rejected her recent overtures quite violently. She can hardly comprehend how Jane could tolerate Frank's attentions to herself. But it is the thought of her own Dixon-fantasy that gives real force to her disapproval of his behavior. The way that Frank played with her fantasy already made Emma conscious that she was wrong to reveal it to him. But now she must live with the knowledge that Jane herself knew all about it. (The things that she cannot acknowledge are far more important than the behavior that she can openly deprecate — cf. III, x, 399.)

Emma is the same wilful “imaginist” as ever. Even in her own shame and confusion over the deceit — and in spite of her awareness that Jane Fairfax is a daughter-in-law to be proud of (III, x, 400) — she can reflect that Mr. Churchill would have accepted Harriet just as readily (398). But it is at this point that she discovers that Mr. Knightley is Harriet’s Prince Charming; and this finally brings her to an understanding of her own feelings. She knows that Mr. Knightley’s interest in Harriet is all for the sake of Robert Martin; but she is such a sentimental romantic that she cannot trust her own good sense; and all of a sudden she can see Harriet from Mr. Elton’s point of view. But she quite forgets that it was Mr. Knightley himself who stated *that* sensibly when *she* suggested playfully that *he* should himself marry Harriet (I, viii, 64-5).

In all this confusion of mind, Emma has to come to terms with the offences, witting and unwitting, that she has committed against Jane Fairfax. Of all her imaginative fantasies, the dream that she might have been in Jane’s confidence is the most astonishing (III, xii, 421). She *was* almost admitted into Frank Churchill’s confidence — because he had the grace to be ashamed of using her as a “screen-lady” (II, xii, 260-1); but Jane’s tormented conscience could hardly have been shared even with the childhood friend that Emma now wishes to have been. At this point, she faces an evening of reflection far more mournful than on the day Miss Taylor was married; and this is where we learn that Mrs. Weston is pregnant. Soon Emma will have no intelligent company at all!

The comedy of imaginative misunderstanding continues to the last. It seems hardly believable that Emma should stop Mr. Knightley on the verge of his declaration. But she has simply gone from believing what she chooses, to believing what she fears, with the same obstinate wilfulness. She is as much her father’s daughter as Isabella, even if she has inherited an optimistic intelligence from her mother; and now, when her happy confidence is restored, she has to conceal what she was afraid of. “Seldom, very seldom,” says Jane Austen, “does complete truth belong to any human disclosure” (III, xiii, 431). The delightful sense of “complete truth” in her novels, depends very much on this insight. Some day soon George and Emma will laugh together about Harriet Smith. But for the moment, Mr. Knightley can certainly not be told why Emma wanted to avoid listening to him.

Mr. Knightley has a far better understanding of Harriet than Emma. If Robert Martin had *asked* her to marry him in the first place, instead of writing to her, she would almost certainly have accepted him. Once she is away in London, Mr. Knightley can send Robert Martin to his brother's with some papers (having, no doubt, asked John to take notice of him); and face to face, the trick is soon done. That Emma is so glad of it, must surprise her lover; and she has no disposition to explain yet. It begins to look as if she hopes to keep some of her follies secret from the man who is so little prone to folly. But, in fact, she loves complete openness best of all (III, xvi, 460; xviii, 475).

Emma's resolve to remain with her father as long as he lives holds firm; and Mr. Knightley shows how well he understands her problem by solving it before she can even tell him her resolution (III, xv, 448-9). They will all dwell together at Hartfield, for as long as Mr. Woodhouse lives.^{xvi} It requires a certain finesse, even to reconcile Mr. Woodhouse to this. The novel that begins with him lamenting the marriage of "poor Miss Taylor" ends with his welcoming Mr. Knightley as a protector against poultry-thieves. Just what Mr. Knightley could do about the intruders, that Mr. Weston was unable to do for his wife, we must be careful not to ask.

When Emma goes for her final reconciliation with Jane Fairfax, their encounter is seriously impeded by the presence of Mrs. Elton. Even Mr. Knightley, that paradigm of squires, has forgotten his parish duties, in the personal excitements of the moment. So Emma, who wants to get back to Hartfield, where he will be waiting, can only talk to Jane for a few minutes on the stairs. But their mutual understanding is now perfect. Jane even ventures a confidence about the future; and Emma's enthusiastic reception of it, promises a different style of communication between them henceforth.

In the last scenes of the story, the principals are at Randall's. Mrs. Weston now has her baby; Mr. Knightley makes jokes about Miss Taylor and himself as educators; Emma wonders whether she will be able to call him "George," now that it will no longer be a piece of tomboy cheek. Then, a few days later — after the revelation about Harriet Smith — the Woodhouses are there again with "Frank and Miss Fairfax" (III, xviii, 476).^{xvii} So we end with Frank and Emma

comparing notes about the moral superiority of their respective partners; and Jane Fairfax expressing her amazement that they can remember with a laugh, the things that still torture her conscience. But she herself does “smile completely”; and she will soon learn to laugh at herself with the best.^{xviii}

It is a happy company of which we take leave. *Emma* is a supremely happy book. Even the Eltons, the most consciously hypocritical of Jane Austen’s clerical couples, will never visibly disgrace the microcosm of mutual social support and moral respect of which Mr. Knightley is the center; and even the elder Mr. Churchill will be drawn into it, before Frank and Jane Churchill return with him to Enscombe. Death has removed Mrs. Churchill, the only independent social power who cannot distinguish between wealth and educated moral character as the real foundation of aristocratic responsibility and privilege. But Jane Austen never forgets the divine authority of nature. It has served her need mysteriously in the case of Mrs. Churchill; and in her vision it will fall upon Jane Fairfax, in the more easily recognizable guise of “consumption” somewhere around her thirtieth birthday. By then, Frank Churchill will be morally safe. He is a natural charmer; but he has a conscience that will not allow him to flirt as freely as Henry Crawford. He is more like Harriet Smith than he is like Crawford. He will marry again when Jane dies, because, like Harriet, “he must marry somebody.” But Jane Fairfax finally brought him to Highbury, to his new “mother”; and there he will be securely rooted. We can overlook Jane’s sad destiny — which is not allowed to intrude on the novel — as we compare her, finally, with Anne Elliot. Anne avoided the moral error into which Jane Fairfax fell. But she paid a terrible price; and the social responsibility that led her into an opposite, but equally erroneous decision, was completely hollow. There does not seem to be a simple rational solution to this problem in the stable social world of Jane Austen’s vision. It is a matter of intuitive judgment; and the two parties must agree in their intuitions about it. On the whole, we must say that Jane Fairfax was wiser. Anne, herself, might even say so; and her verdict would satisfy Jane Austen. We have seen why *Emma* is morally admirable; but her moral problem was a simple one. It is the more complex conflicts that are morally interesting. That is why the reader of *Emma* should pay close attention to Jane Fairfax.

Notes

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- i. *Memoir*, 1926, 157.
 - ii. Miss Taylor joined the household when Emma was four (I, i, 5). It seems that Isabella, who was then about eleven, did not have a governess before that. Their mother — who was clever and sensibly firm (I, v, 37) — apparently instructed the girls while she lived. That Isabella is seven years older than Emma is strongly indicated at I, v, 37; and further confirmed by the fact that she has been married seven years, and she has five children, the youngest being eight months old (I, i, 6; xii, 98). Emma has been “mistress of the house and of you all ever since she was twelve” (I, v, 37). If this is not a slight exaggeration, it may perhaps refer to Isabella’s becoming engaged at nineteen.
 - iii. “She *always* declares she will never marry, which, of course, means just nothing at all,” says Mr. Knightley (I, v, 41). When Emma *started* saying this (at fourteen or fifteen?) it did not mean much. But now she has begun to grasp what it means — and she is quite in earnest about it. (Mr. Knightley probably understands that; but he does not *want* it to be true.)
 - iv. Jane Austen is careful to show us how doubtful Harriet’s claim to gentility is. She is the “natural daughter of somebody” who has left her in Mrs. Goddard’s school as a “parlour-boarder,” after the school has done all it can for her education (I, iii, 22-3; cf. viii, 61-3). She is as beautiful as she is generally amiable; but she is not very clever. If Robert Martin had not fallen in love with her (and if he were not quite determined, and intelligent enough to understand Emma’s influence) the only future we can foresee for Harriet is that of her friend, Miss Nash. She might teach the little ones at Mrs. Goddard’s. She could hardly qualify as a governess. She is now seventeen (I, viii, 64) and Robert Martin twenty-four (I, iv, 30). Mr. Knightley thinks she will be a parlor-boarder till she “is glad to catch the old writing

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- master's son" (I, viii, 65). But when he actually talks to her, his opinion improves somewhat (III, ii, 331).
- v. Mr. Knightley confesses this later, when he becomes engaged to Emma (III, xiii, 432). Perhaps the joking suggestion that Mr. Weston's "son may plague him" (I, v, 38) marks the very moment when his jealousy was born. It is born at the same time as his realization that he is in love with Emma; and we may notice that at this point he says that "I love to look at her" and that he feels more for Emma than for Isabella (I, v, 39-40).
- vi. As a boy he was Frank Churchill Weston. There is something rather mysterious about his father's relations with the Churchills. The family were reconciled with his wife in her last illness, but not with him. Mr. Weston has never been to Enscombe (I, xiv, 120) and Mrs. Churchill does not want Frank to become intimate with his father. They meet now "every year in London"; but they may not have been allowed to meet while Frank was a minor — he is now twenty-three. Captain Weston was rather worse off when his wife died than when they were married; yet he was able to leave the militia, and go into business in London. The natural inference is that the Churchills paid him off, in return for his relinquishing the little boy.
- vii. Emma and Harriet are on a charitable errand when this conversation occurs. Emma does full justice to Miss Bates when she says that "Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind"; and she ought not to be "the proper sport of boys and girls" (I, x, 85). We can tell from Emma's judgment here just how ashamed she will feel when her wit runs away with her at Miss Bates' expense.
- viii. We should notice that Mr. Knightley is wrong in supposing that Frank Churchill has "learnt

to be above his connections” (I, xvii, 145). Frank has none of his aunt’s attitude about that. He simply prefers to please himself — and not to upset his aunt “unnecessarily.” He does not recognize the obligations that are so evident to Mr. Knightley at all. On the other hand, Emma is quite right in holding that Frank must pay some attention to his aunt’s feelings; and she is also right in saying that Mr. Knightley is “determined to think ill of him” (I, xviii, 149).

- ix. Shared interests and intelligence, working on Emma’s happy disposition, ought to have made Jane Fairfax her friend. But Jane Fairfax has no doubt been held up to her for years as a model by Mr. Knightley (cf. II, ii, 166); and Jane herself, though fortunate in her situation with the Campbells, is not a consistently *happy* person. *Patience* is her virtue; and underneath it there is a bitter sense of the injustice of life. Anyone *could* make friends with her. But she will not make the first move. Emma is a spontaneously happy person, who wants to be recognized as the leader. Only someone who can enjoy the spectacle of Highbury high street could find pleasure in Harriet’s conversation.
- x. It is difficult to see how the piano-gift could have been managed discreetly, since any explicit reference to the Campbells would have been exposed as a falsehood when they returned from Ireland; and the lovers must have anticipated that Jane would return to live with the Campbells, for the duration of an engagement which they surely expected would be lengthy. (The fact is that if Frank was determined to make Jane this present, he ought to have been prepared to acknowledge the engagement fairly soon.)
- xi. She pretends to be uncertain of what she feels. But later she confesses that she “was attached” (III, x, 396). That *might* be an exaggeration, but it has the look of truth (cf. III, xi, 412). She had better reason for pretending to herself earlier, than she has for pretending to Mrs. Weston at that stage. But finally when she realizes that she loves Mr. Knightley she

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- says — first to herself and then to him — that “she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all” (III, xi, 412; xiii, 426-7).
- xii. This “two months” is literally March and April (cf. III, i, 318). Frank’s first visit was in February (II, xviii, 309); and Mrs. Churchill will spend May in London (xviii, 308), moving very soon to Richmond (III, i, 317). The interval may be a little more than two months actually — or Frank’s return to Enscombe may have been in the first week of March.
- xiii. Jane Austen told her family that the word swept away unexamined was “pardon” (*Life*, p. 307). But we do not need to know that. We can guess readily enough that Frank wants Jane Fairfax to forgive him.
- xiv. The words “Oh! Miss Woodhouse, the comfort of being sometimes alone” addressed to someone she had no reason to like, burst out of this normally reserved and self-contained girl. She will have said something much more violent to Frank a few moments later.
- xv. We should not ignore the contribution of Mr. Knightley to Emma’s loss of control. His clear threat to say something unkind if pressed to reveal his thoughts (III, vii, 369) was all too likely to drive Emma into saying something outrageous. Just for a moment she lost sight of the objective reasons why Miss Bates must not be made fun of. (Her *defiant* attitude to Mr. Knightley, is an aspect of the deep-rooted attraction between them. See in this connection, the note of R.W. Chapman on II, xii, 262; but he is wrong in thinking that Emma does not realize who she is talking about at III, x, 397.)
- xvi. Jane Austen told her family that Mr. Woodhouse survived Emma’s marriage by only two

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- years. (This drives home how guilty Emma would have felt, if they had persuaded him to move to Donwell.)
- xvii. No doubt Mrs. Weston is very punctilious, in order to distinguish herself from Mrs. Elton. Frank's avoidance of any familiarity in speaking of Jane (III, xiv, 440-1) is one of the most convincing signs of a real sense of moral respect on his part. He is *not* like Henry Crawford.
- xviii. We must always remember that the girl we have seen until this moment was under severe moral and prudential stress. Frank complains that she was "unnecessarily scrupulous and cautious . . . even cold" (III, xiv, 440). Jane Fairfax herself says that she became "*unreasonable . . . captious and irritable*" (III, xii, 419). The girl who lived with the Campbells, found Frank's "delightful spirits . . . constantly bewitching"; and she bewitched him in her turn. No one in Highbury has seen that openly responsive girl since she was nine. She has been oppressed by envy, and by shame over the excessive responses of her "talking aunt." But both Mr. Knightley and Emma feel that the Jane Fairfax of the latest time is more unresponsive than she used to be (cf. II, ii, 169; vi, 202-3; xv, 288-9). That will all be changed now.