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CIEE: 19th Century British Literature

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May 31, 2024

Parallels in Jane Austen’s Emma

Jane Austen’s Emma is a brilliant case study of the titular character. Austen's use of parallelism in Emma serves to highlight Emma's hidden insecurities shown through the parallels drawn between Jane and Emma, the potential for moral decay shown through the parallels between Emma and Mrs. Elton, and ultimate growth into a more self-aware and mature individual shown through the parallels between the matchmaking schemes. By drawing these comparisons, Austen is able to highlight Emma’s evolution from a naive and self-satisfied young woman to one who gains greater self-awareness and humility.

Austen employs parallelism to uncover Emma's hidden insecurities and personal growth. The parallel between Emma and Jane Fairfax is particularly telling: both characters experience the early loss of parents, which profoundly shapes their childhoods. Emma, described as “handsome, clever, and rich” (Austen, 1815, p. 1), enjoys the privileges of wealth and social status. In contrast, Jane relies on her talents and hard work to navigate her social world. The narrator’s tone when it shifts into either of the characters, through the free indirect style Austen employs, is filled with assertion, though Jane’s is more cautionary and Emma’s is openly assertive, even brash at times (Reichmann Lemous, 1979, p. 7). This juxtaposition underscores Emma’s underlying fear of inadequacy, as she perceives Jane’s accomplishments as a threat to her sense of self-worth. Every praise Jane receives Emma takes as a personal attack against herself. Emma’s initial disdain for Jane is rooted in this fear. Janaki notes that “Emma does not tolerate anyone whose accomplishments are superior to her own” (Janaki, 2004, p. 3), highlighting how Emma’s arrogance masks deeper insecurities. It is not until after Emma’s moral awakening at Box Hill that Emma tries to reconcile with Jane, an act that earlier in the novel she would never have considered. This reconciliation shows Emma beginning to acknowledge and respect the merits of others, even people she considers ‘superior’ to herself. Austen uses this evolving relationship to illustrate Emma’s journey away from her initial arrogance and towards humility.

Austen also uses parallels to caution Emma, most clearly through the parallels drawn between Mrs. Elton and Emma. Both characters are described as vain and self-satisfied, with Emma having "a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (Austen, 1815, p. 1) and Mrs. Elton introduced as “a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her importance” (Austen, 1815, p. 236). Both women enjoy financial independence, allowing them a degree of autonomy unusual for most women of their time. This financial freedom contributes to their sense of superiority and their inclination to meddle in the lives of others. They develop mentor-mentee relationships with lower-ranking women, Mrs. Elton with Jane and Emma with Harriet. Their interactions with these women highlight their similar tendencies towards condescension and manipulation. They both attract the same man, Mr. Elton, suggesting their similarities are perceptible to other characters as well. They can both be cruel to people they consider ‘beneath’ them, with Mrs. Elton embarrassing Harriet at the dance and Emma embarrassing Miss Bates in Box Hill. Despite these similarities, Emma and Mrs. Elton are seperated by their capacity for growth and self-reflection. As Bitchall observes, “Emma is as snobbish and arrogant as Mrs. Elton…Yet Emma is shown, quite simply, as having a heart, while Mrs. Elton is not credited with such an organ” (Bitchall, 2010). Emma’s ability to recognize her faults and seek forgiveness, such as her apologies to Miss Bates and Jane, marks her as capable of personal growth. In contrast, Mrs. Elton remains largely unchanged throughout the novel, embodying the consequences of unchecked vanity and arrogance. Through these parallels, Austen offers a cautionary tale, showing the reader what Emma could have become had she not been capable of introspection and change.

Furthermore, Austen’s use of parallelism in Emma’s matchmaking schemes highlights Emma’s growth from misguided confidence to genuine self-awareness. During both schemes, Emma tries to couple Harriet with a gentleman of a higher rank, first with Mr. Elton and then with Frank Churchill. Both times, Emma misinterpreted signals from the men that would indicate their interest in Harriet. Both times, Emma convinces Harriet that she should marry a man of higher rank than herself, even though Emma knows a gentleman is unlikely to marry below his station. The failure of the match between Harriet and Mr. Elton is a pivotal moment for Emma. When Mr. Elton reveals his true feelings for her, Emma is forced to confront her misjudgments. Although she initially resolves not to meddle again, stating that “it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together” (Austen, 1815, p. 135), her superficial refutation is evident as she continues to deny any foresight of Mr. Elton’s intentions. She continues to meddle in other people’s love lives, as seen through Harriet and Frank’s matchmaking scheme. It is not until Frank and Jane’s secret engagement is revealed, revealing Emma as just a pawn in their scheme, that Emma truly realizes the harm caused by such a scheme. Her tirade about the scheme, calling it a “system of hypocrisy and deceit, - espionage, and treachery” (Austen, 1815, p. 393) where she demands they must “hear for the consequences” (Austen, 1815, p. 393) for enacting such a deceitful scheme is reminiscent of the scoldings Mr. Knightley directed towards her. This moment signifies Emma’s genuine realization of the harm caused by her manipulative schemes and her resolve to change. The gradual distancing between Emma and Harriet towards the novel’s end further illustrates Emma’s maturation. Their relationship, which once enabled Emma’s manipulations, becomes less central as Emma grows. This separation symbolizes Emma’s move away from childish schemes and towards more responsible and respectful interactions. While the novel ends shortly afterward, we can assume that Emma will at least think twice before devising another scheme.

Austen uses to illuminate Emma’s character development and personal growth. The parallels between Emma and Jane show that, while arrogant, Emma is not completely secure in herself. Emma’s and Mrs. Elton's parallels serve to show just how easily someone in Emma’s position could become a Mrs. Elton. The repeated matchmaking failures underscore Emma’s journey from an overconfident young girl to a self-aware woman. Through these comparisons, Austen crafts a rich and nuanced portrayal of Emma’s evolution into a mature and self-reflective young woman, underscoring the novel’s enduring relevance and insight into human character.

**References**

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