On Emma’s Growth from Callowness to Maturity

Li-Jun Li\textsuperscript{a}, Yi CHEN\textsuperscript{b,\ast}, Yu-Shan ZHAO\textsuperscript{c}

School of Foreign Language, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China
\textsuperscript{a}llj0426@163.com, \textsuperscript{b}1434574788@qq.com, \textsuperscript{c}15901356067@163.com

*Correspondent author

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Abstract. Jane Austen was a gifted and realistic English author. She paid intense heed to trivial domestic things, but didn’t care about political affairs and big events in the world. Her work, \textit{Emma}, which dominates the literary circle, is unique and highly acclaimed. This thesis proves that \textit{Emma} is a bildungsroman by introducing the background of \textit{Emma}. It also analyzes the process of Emma’s psychological and social growth in great details and explains its significance. Psychologically, she knows her own shortcomings and does self-examination at last. In a social level, Emma gradually gets to know herself in the later part of the novel and is able to carry herself and conduct matters in a sensible way. Emma’s improvement also gives lots of lessons to the contemporary youth.

Introduction

Jane Austen has been regarded as one of the greatest British novelists all the way. Jane Austen had published six novels. \textit{Emma} is widely acclaimed as her most skillful and maturest work. Emma, as a bildungsroman, indeed gives expression to its meaning. Following the characteristics of a bildungsroman, \textit{Emma} gives a full account of the growth of a young woman, Emma, who was wealthy and kind, yet snobbish, self-righteous. She eventually succeeded in achieving her moral growth. Emma represented the female middle class of the day.

A great number of thinkers hold the view that \textit{Emma} is simply a biography based upon her life. By virtue of \textit{Emma}, Jane Austen shows her own disposition. \textit{Emma} is a novel of growth. As was suggested by Huang Mei, \textit{Emma} is totally distinguishable from other novels, because the protagonist is imperfect. Jane Austen once said that Emma was one whom no one but herself would much like.

Highbury was a picturesque and populous village. The Woodhouses were the first to settle on there. People all showed respects to them. Emma Woodhouse, the heroine, was the second daughter of Mr. Woodhouse who was wealthy and enjoyed a high social status. In consequence of her mother’s death and her sister’s marriage, Emma had been the mistress of her family from long time before. Mr. Woodhouse was an indulgent father and Miss. Taylor, a governess, gave Emma affection and kind words rather than strict supervision, which heavily spoiled Emma. Encouraged by Miss Taylor’s union with Mr. Weston, Emma found a great amusement in the world; that is, doing matchmaking. It was owing to her lack of social morality that she suffered a lot both mentally and physically during the process of making matches for her friend, Harriet. Emma began to do in-depth self-reflection and reconsider her own affection. Fortunately, Mr. Knightly whom Emma loved declared his love for Emma at long last. Harriet happily accepted the result, and married Martin. Emma finally realized she was wrong. In the end, the novel presented a happy ending. Emma and Harriet all gained their own happiness and growth.

Since \textit{Emma} is a bildungsroman, which is a novel about the progress of an individual. “In a bildungsroman, the goal is maturity which the protagonist achieves little by little and with difficulty. The genre often emphasizes a main conflict between the heroine and the society.” (Abrams, H. A, 2004:8) On the basis of Wikipedia, a bildungsroman, in literary criticism, is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood, in which character change is extremely important.
Emma eventually could learn from her own bitter experience and cast off original immaturity and impulsion, all reflecting Emma’s improvement in the road of growth. Heading towards maturity, Emma failed once and again as a result of her ignorance, and suffered a lot due to her own mistakes. As she recognized how painful others were due to her errors, she knew she was only too wrong and self-centered. From that time, she was gradually becoming mature. After reflecting and correcting her own vanity and arrogance, Emma’s minds and soul had been sublimated. In the following part, Emma’s developments will be analyzed from two perspectives.

**Emma’s Psychological and Social Developments**

**Three Stages of Emma’s Growth.**

Emma is an imperfect heroine who has many setbacks in character. Emma’s growth process is divided into three stages. Firstly, Emma lived a carefree life. After her governess, Miss Taylor, got married, who had lived with her for years and had given her affection and love all the time, Emma felt rather lonely and deserted. At that time, Harriet Smith came to her life and kept her from loneliness. Emma then picked up a new “career”—doing matchmaking. As time passes by, readers gradually come to know the fact that Emma’s weakness in her personality always do harm to her friends and family members around her. All began when Emma made up her mind in doing matchmaking. She encouraged Harriet to say no to Robert Martin’s proposal and talked Harriet into pursuing Mr. Elton. Nevertheless, this was all her wishful thinking and things went another way. When Mr. Elton declared his love for Emma instead of Harriet, Emma was shocked and couldn’t believe what she had heard.

Thus, this unexpected result let Emma notice and reflect her mistakes for the first time. Emma should take responsibility for troubles and sufferings she had made to Harriet. She was too arbitrary, adventurous, and smug. However, though she suffered a lot at this time, yet Emma didn’t take a lesson from it and continued to focus her eyes on every man coming to Highbury in order to search out a wonderful husband for Harriet. Emma was deeply convinced that she had talents in being a match maker. So we can see that Emma, in fact, didn’t completely overcome shortcomings and she was still self-righteous and arrogant.

At second stage, the plot goes on. Some major events came into play. At this time, Frank Churchill, Mr. Weston’s son, came to visit his father. “He was a very good-looking young man; height, air, address, all were unexceptionable; looked quick and sensible.”(Austen, 1994:23) Emma thought he was an ideal man and a good choice for Harriet. So she made many chances for them to date. To be frank, Harriet actually had her own choice at this time. She had developed a particular liking for Mr. Knightly who had given her a hand on many occasions. What we need to pay attention to is that Emma didn’t overtly give hints this time. She just put her plan in her mind. From this point, we can get that Emma became maturer. Moreover, in an outing to Box Hill, Emma was rude to Miss Bates. Mr. Knightly blamed her. Later, Emma quickly realized her mistakes. Emma discovered her mistakes and felt rather humiliated and sorry for Miss Bates. At this stage, Emma got improved and became more rational, and she could understand others’ feelings. This was a critical turning point for her growth.

At third stage, unexpected things happened. When the attachment of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax was exposed, Emma was astonished. She felt humiliated towards Harriet who she thought was in love with Frank Churchill. But what made Emma more astounded was Harriet’s affection towards Mr. Knightly. Not until then did Emma realize how deeply she loved Mr. Knightly.

Therefore, Emma started to reflect what she had done in the past. She felt extremely sorry to everyone she hurt for her arrogance. She knew she was totally mistaken and had made her friends suffer a lot and she herself was too arrogant and even dared to arrange others’ marriage and destiny. Until now, Emma had a full understanding of herself. She made up her mind in getting rid of her shortcomings and lived a brand-new life. This is a process of growth.
Two Aspects of Emma’s Growth.

The thesis discusses the process of Emma’s psychological and social growth. The analyses of the growth will do good to the exploration of female improvement process, which is significantly important to further study social values. Psychological improvement aims at Emma’s own true understandings of herself and the society where she lived. At last, she finally saw through the surroundings and herself. She got the idea of how to adapt to the world and how to live and what she should do to reach her goals. “And social improvement shows step by step Emma’s gradual acceptance towards social morals.” (Odmark, John, 1981:339) She knew how to keep a balance between her own interests and social morality.

Emma’s Psychological Development. From a psychological perspective, Emma’s development correlates with three stages of Emma’s growth. Meanwhile, her progress is closely related with Harriet. In other words, Harriet is the witness of Emma’s growth process. At first stage, Emma was sure that she was gifted in matchmaking. Due to being extremely spoiled by her father, she always did whatever she wanted. After encountering the disagreement from his father and Mr. Knightly, she was also determined to make more matches. Thenceforth, Mr. Elton became her ideal choice. However, Emma misunderstood Mr. Elton’s feelings and ignored others’ advice. Finally, Mr. Elton proposed his love to Emma rather than Harriet. Although this failure made Emma recognized her own shortcomings and felt sorry for Harriet, she was far from correcting her mistakes:

She stopped to blush and laugh at her own relapse, and then resumed a more serious, more dispiriting cognition upon what had been, and might be, and must be. (Austen, 1994: 103)

As mentioned above, the psychology of Emma shows her improvement; she knew she had done something wrong and had hurt Harriet. However, when she recovered from this failure, she continued her career. At second stage, Emma had chosen another man for Harriet, that is, Frank Churchill, Mr. Weston’s son. Yet Emma didn’t directly do some arrangements. She just buried this scheme in her mind and helped them in a secret way. Austen described Emma in a vivid manner:

She would not stir a step, nor drop a hint. No, had had enough of interference. There would be no harm in a scheme, a more passive scheme. (Austen, 1994: 221)

Emma knew she should calm down and think carefully for she might harm Harriet and even ruin her life. She couldn’t let the tragedy happen again. In all, Emma turned gradually mature and rational.

At third stage, Emma suffered a lot. The two things that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax had engaged and Harriet had been in love with Mr. Knightly had great influence on her. She truly thoroughly understood her own heart for the first time and bravely recognized her own mistakes for the first time. Until now, she really could be called a real grown-up. She learned to forgive others and understand others’ feelings and became more sociable. While carrying on a conversation with Mrs. Weston, Emma shew her sympathy and affection towards Jane Fairfax whom Emma disliked before after hearing about her unsatisfied conditions. There is a paragraph on her psychology:

Mrs. Weston’s communications furnished Emma with more food for unpleasant reflection, by increasing her esteem and compassion, and her sense of past injustice towards Miss Fairfax. She bitterly regretted not having sought a closer acquaintance with her, and blushed for the envious feelings which had certainly been, in some measure, the cause. (Austen, 1994: 315)

As it is shown above, Emma indeed grew up with the help of friends around her. She regretted arranging others’ destiny and ordering others to live their lives under her rules in the past. Till now, what she really wanted was to be more rational physically and psychologically in order to leave her less to regret in the future. In fact, Harriet was a mirror of Emma herself and acted as an important role. However, Harriet was virtuous and sincere. Harriet’s good characters were just what Emma lacked. Through three stages, Emma became maturer from a psychological perspective. What’s more, her development process is meaningful to all of us. Only when we overcome difficulties can we get progress.
**Emma’s Social Development.** After a series of attacks, Emma was developing step by step from a social view, that is, she gained her own identity. Emma gradually knew who she was, what she wanted, and which way she should take in the future.

At the beginning, Emma was preoccupied with making matches. She took up searching a husband for Harriet regardless of people’s warnings. She became a social manipulator who arranged people’s destiny freely. She encouraged Harriet to love Mr. Elton, who was a selfish and cunning man and wanted to take advantage of his marriage to gain property and great fame. At last, this plan failed. A short time later, Emma didn’t give up and selected another man, Frank Churchill, for Harriet. Unfortunately, it didn’t work once again. Moreover, Harriet even loved Mr. Knightly with whom Emma truly was in love in the deep heart.

Since then, Emma began to think about the questions--what did she want and which way should she take? Tears tricked down her cheeks. She knew she had done nothing but greatly impair all that she loved due to her arrogance and vanity. She knew she couldn’t be self-righteous again. Thus, she wasn’t a manipulator any more. For another thing, Emma began to believe in marriage. What impresses people most is Emma’s negative attitude towards marriage in the beginning of the novel. She overtly professed that she wouldn’t marry with anyone but would live with her father forever as a maid. “I promise you to make none for myself, papa; but I must, indeed, for other people.” (Austen, 1994:11)

Emma was sure that she wouldn’t marry, but she was interested in matchmaking. She had done two match makings for Harriet. Yet she failed again and again. “During that process, she slowly reconsidered herself including her attitude to marriage. To some degree, Emma was stubborn.” (Christopher Jillie, 2005:21) Maybe it was because that she didn’t realize her feelings towards Mr. Knightly. To be honest, Harriet was an extremely vital role for Emma’s growth. Without Harriet’s confession, Emma wouldn’t have seen through her own heart and made a right judgment of herself. At last, Emma was clear about what she wanted and who she should treasure. Her attitude towards marriage had changed greatly thanks to her growth. Furthermore, when Emma heard about Harriet’s connection with Martin, she was surprised and felt happy for them.

Emma’s attitude to Robert Martin had changed greatly. Firstly, Emma persuaded Harriet to decline Martin’s proposal because she looked down upon Martin. Martin was just a common people. Emma deeply knew the difference of the common people and the middle class. So she refused to let Harriet be with Martin. With time going by, Emma became maturer and less selfish. She understood Martin was reliable and kind. Martin was better than Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill in honesty, integrity and responsibility. After a series of attacks and failures, Emma had achieved her social development.

**Summary**

In the course of these development process, Emma received support and help from Mr. Knightly. “Besides him, Jane Austen also arranged such characters as Harriet and Frank Churchill to make Emma totally understood.” (Heqian Dai, 2013:10) The heroin seemed to be comic and stupid and the whole novel seemed to be involved with females’ marriages. Actually, the heroine was to find a way to adapt to the society and achieve her moral growth. “There were conflicts between her personal desires and the social values.” (Shao Jindi, Bai Jinpeng, 1993:8) When turning mature, Emma fully got the fact that she must make a concession to be in harmony with the society. Fortunately, Emma learned to keep a balance between her power, wealth and social needs, values in the end.

The novel fully illustrated the social values and morality in England between the 18th and the 19th century. “Emma had to learn to live harmoniously with the middle class in that society.” (Yangqing Shi, 2014:8) However, there were many conflicts in the society. Thus, Emma, pompous and selfish, certainly would encounter massive obstacles.

As for the social morality expressed in the novel, they were all moral norms in Jane Austen’s heart. The middle class espoused this kind of morality at that time. Frankly speaking, its life
philosophy discloses the major conflicts in the society. Everyone living in the world should learn to conform with social morality and at the same time achieve their life goals to make their lives meaningful and worthwhile. Learning how to obey moral norms and not hurt personal interests and feelings is a question worthy of being discussed at any time.

In the novel, social morality hadn’t been spoken out directly, it was gradually coming to readers’ minds during the process of Emma’s growth. Emma’s experience let readers fully understand the standards of social morality and learn it together with Emma. This kind way of expression is special and attracting. Readers can unwittingly get improved when reading novels.

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