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Emma as a Comic Novel about the Regency-Era Way of
Life

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I. Introduction

In my essay, I aim to prove how the novel *Emma* by Jane Austen possesses the main characteristics of the genre *novel of manners*, since it describes the daily life and activities of the country community, their marriages, the different social classes which appear in the novel, and how they are perceived through the eyes of the main character. In the novel of manners, social boundaries and expectations are described, and the unspoken rules everyone is aware of. I also intend to prove that humour and comedy play a significant role in the novel.

According to Paula Byrne, “manners” used to have a wide range of meaning in the nineteenth century, from “character of mind” to the “general way of life; morals, habits to ceremonious behaviour, studied civility” (297). Polite behaviour was essential in the rural community. Byrne also mentions that morning calls were a routine part of everyday life which occurred by getting an introduction card and compliments were compulsory in everyday talk; for instance, both Emma and Mr. Woodhouse feel obliged to visit the new Mrs. Elton even if both are innately opposed to the idea. In the novel, we get to know the most important types which are present in the rural English middle class and receive a glimpse of their estimated wealth, the education they received, the balls and dinners they hold, and their social relations within the different classes.

I am going to discuss the daily activities of the country gentry and the social classes that appear in the novel. I will divide the main social classes into four groups: the country gentry (Mr. Knightley and the Woodhouses), the “rising middle class” (the Eltons, the Coles, and the Westons), the lower class such as the yeomanry (Robert Martin) and Harriet Smith as a natural daughter (she belongs to the lowest segment of the middle class), and a unique social group including those gentlewomen who were either forced to become governesses or suffered from the lack of money and from the humiliation of dependence (Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates, and Miss Taylor). I aim to investigate how the gentry is perceived as the social and moral leaders of the community, their habits, their way of thinking, and their feeling of responsibility and their options regarding marriage and maintaining friendships. I will also examine how the “rising middle class” is perceived in society and how each character attempts to be accepted into the gentry class either through marriage or friendship. It will be explained how a farmer like Robert Martin is treated and viewed in society and how Jane Austen uses a sentimental, although almost unrealistic, approach towards the yeomanry and their values, which cannot be measured by money. Furthermore, I will provide a description of the landscape and a book extract about the infamous Box Hill scene from the novel which I find crucial regarding both the plot development, character development, and Regency-era English identity.

In the third chapter, I will explain the kind of humour utilized in the novel based on scholarly papers and own observations. I am going to divide it according to its main sources: the utilized, subtle irony in the novel, the open and almost mocking violation of classic romance stories, Emma's lack of self-knowledge, and the source of comedy derived from exaggeration. Irony can be analyzed from different aspects and how it shapes the structure which will occur in the paper. Many occasions happened due to misunderstandings and misfortunes created by Emma's lack of self-knowledge and it is presented in the the plot and the relationships through the narrative technique of free indirect discourse. The source of comedy, mentioned above, is derived from exaggeration (how small events are overdetailed and how trivial pieces of information serve as important topics in the life of the community). Finally, I try to show how the novel possesses influential comedic features and how the subtle sources provide a strong comic side to a classic example of the genre of the novel of manners.

II. *Emma* as a Novel of Manners: social life in Highbury

Emma is one of the best known novels of the genre known as the novel of manners, whose purpose is to show the reader the way of life of the country gentry, the yeomen and the traders. It also shows the daily activities of different classes, together with their values, their unspoken rules, and their opportunities and responsibilities in society.

2.1 Understanding the Essence of the Novel of Manners

According to Jonathan Sachs, *Emma* does not only focus on the courtship plot, but it studies ordinary life, day-to-day encounters, and manners (44). Jane Austen, through this novel, not only wishes to show the ordinary life of the villagers of Highbury (a small village of 325 inhabitants), but she purports to offer an example of how people lived their everyday life in the Georgian era presented through the daily routine of a small village. Tom Keymer explains that Highbury “is 16 miles from London, 9 from Richmond, 7 from Box Hill—though the coordinates can’t be triangulated on the ground” (Keymer), therefore the exact location cannot be maintained. Keymer also concludes that the citizens “have social and familial networks across the country—Bath, Oxford, Yorkshire; the fictional Maple Grove near Bristol—and take seaside vacations in Southend or upscale Weymouth. They’re surrounded by regional products that demonstrate the national circulation of consumer goods: Stilton cheeses, Tunbridge-ware boxes, York tan gloves; a fancy Broadwood piano from Soho in London (Keymer). According to Michael Kramp, “Austen often depicts Highbury as a microcosm of England, highlighting the disruption of its present, the nostalgia for its past, and the anxiety over its impending industrial future” (148). David Greenham also mentions A. C. Bradley and his statement about Jane Austen’s age, “the age of romantic revival” (Greenham 163) and the connection between nature and romanticism and thinks of Austen’s works as some “new modes of feeling towards nature” (163) and “the idea that civilization is the fall of man from some paradisaic state of nature (362)” (Greenham 163). Douglas Murray also shares a similar point of view and adds that the novel creates and romanticizes a never-existing, post-Napoleonic version (956).

Although none of the cited authors points out, *Emma* differs from Jane Austen’s other novels, since it provides very few glimpses into the harsh realities compared to how her other heroines were forced to experience them first-hand. One might get the impression that both Emma and the readers observed Harriet being a daughter out of wedlock, Jane Fairfax’s vulnerability, and the poverty of the Bateses through a safety net or pink lenses, whereas Elizabeth Bennett and the Dashwood-sisters’ lives are exposed to the misfortunes of an unmarried woman.

Janine Barchas sums up the different claims of Austen scholars about the main location of Highbury: “John Wiltshire observes how Emma ‘embeds its action convincingly in the small,

circumscribed, but nevertheless detailed Highbury world' [...] Park Honan warms to this small-town setting as 'snug and consoling,' while Fiona Stafford detects an acute 'claustrophobia', a constant dread of feeling trapped or 'boxed in'" (Barchas 120). She also maintains that the main character of the novel and the leader of the community is a lady who has never seen the sea and her very first trip to a popular tourist spot is to Box Hill seven miles away from Highbury (Barchas 120). These pieces of information are important to remember; this is one of the main sources of the comic side of the novel, since small-town gossip and boredom develop the plot and create misunderstandings. Also, it will be mentioned later that Emma and Mr. Woodhouse also created a bubble for themselves. They are very protective of their environment and attempt to shut down the displeasures of life, still they are causing their own claustrophobia and prevent themselves to explore the outside life they (especially Emma) sometimes long for. One can draw an allusion between the boxed life of Highbury and the boxed life of the Woodhouses.

Marriage is viewed differently in contrast to the other novels, where it was a necessity of survival. Galvan describes the nineteenth century as "revolutionary" as this is a period of "revolutionary democratic energy, wide-scale industrial change, imperial expansion and rebellion, religious self-questioning and alternative spiritual movements, and the institutionalization and dispersion of scientific thought" (see Galvan). He also writes that fiction embodied the hidden desire for blithe marriage (see Galvan). In this period the idea of marrying for love also started to rise in contrast to the marriage for economic sake. As the social differences have loosened up and the middle class started to meddle with the gentry, at the same time, people started to consider different factors for love. Hughes argues that Austen played with the love-economics marriage scale: the Weston-Taylor and the Churchill-Fairfax marriages are located in the love factor, the Elton-Hawkins marriage is based on economics, and the Knightley-Woodhouse and Smith-Martin marriages share both factors (Hughes 74). The Regency-era was an age when social boundaries started to fade and it opened new ways for forming friendships and finding love and companionship with people with slightly different backgrounds. One might find it struggling to give a concrete description of each class and group, however, though a close-reading of the text, it is manageable.

2.2 The Country Gentry

The richest characters in Highbury, according to Robert D. Hume, "are not titled and

do not seem terribly grand, but they are unquestionably part of an economic elite” (Hume 40). The estimated annual income of those families in general would be between 3,000,000 and 4,500,000 pounds in today’s money (Hume 53). The following description from the novel perfectly explains the place of the different classes in the community:

The Woodhouses had been settled for several generations at Hartfield, the younger branch of a very ancient family—and that the Eltons were nobody. [...] The landed property of Hartfield certainly was inconsiderable, being but a sort of notch in the Donwell Abbey estate, to which all the rest of Highbury belonged; but their fortune, from other sources, was such as to make them scarcely secondary to Donwell Abbey itself, in every other kind of consequence; and the Woodhouses had long held a high place in the consideration of the neighbourhood. (*Emma* 90)

It is clear that the family of the Knightleys holds a higher prestige, since Mr. Knightley has tenant farmers, yeomen, and his land is entailed, which means that the eldest son would be the successor of the property. Murray argues that Mr. Knightley’s home, Donwell Abbey, is the “seat of power” (956) that also represents an even older gentry family than the Woodhouses. The name “Abbey” might refer to a former abbey Henry VIII had presumably given away during the Act of Suppression in 1536 or during the Second Suppression Act of 1539, thus the Knightley family might date back to the sixteenth century (see Johnson).

Hume points out that Mr. Knightley does not work in the traditional sense of having a job, but often supervises the work of his steward, William Larkins, and keeps in touch with his tenant farmers (Hume 55). We also learn that he has a housekeeper and servants in his house. However, he lives more modestly than the Woodhouse family, since he does not use his carriage unless it is necessary. It is important to note that carriages used to mean a status quo among the wealthy members of society. Mr. Woodhouse owns a carriage himself as a gentleman.

The Woodhouse family has no farmers and is only second-in-command regarding class and position in Highbury. Presumably, the land and Hartfield are not entailed, thanks to the family only being a younger branch of an ancient family, unlike the Knightleys. As a result, Emma and her sister, Isabella, could be their father’s successor, otherwise, she would have a lower, similar, albeit financially better position than Elizabeth Bennett. Her dowry is much higher, still she would not have a home after her father’s death, since the land would go

to the eldest male member of the family. Mr. Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice* only has 2,000 pounds per year to keep a wife and five daughters, whereas Emma is the heiress of 30,000 pounds and Hartfield (see, Hume 53).

We cannot tell for sure where Mr. Woodhouse's money comes from (Hume 53); they are a younger family, they have no tenants, no business we know about, and he is too much of a gentleman to work in trade. Emma, as the daughter of a rich gentleman, is not required to work; she has time to visit the new Mrs. Weston every day, to attend balls and dinner parties, do charity work for the poor, paint, read, gossip, play on musical instruments, and do needlework. In her position as a rich heiress, she can spend her days with the usual activities of a gentlewoman; her only duty is her charity visits which she does with Harriet. At the beginning of the novel, she explains to Harriet that she does not need to get married, so she can focus on different activities. However, the narrator mockingly points out that, despite the fact that Emma constantly proves that she is educated and she has great plans for the books she wishes to read, she is not hard-working enough to read all the books:

Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I [Mr. Knightley] have seen a great many lists of her drawing-up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—very well chosen, and very neatly arranged—sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. (*Emma* 22)

There is one significant feature the reader learns about the gentry: they have great responsibility as the highest social group in the village. Shinobu Minma explains that the gentry possessed their privileged status of leisure, education, wealth and a feeling of responsibility towards the underprivileged, a *noblesse oblige* mentality as she puts it (Minma 58). Byrne also notes that politeness was essential in the Georgian era and the highest class of the rural community (the gentry) was supposed to lead by example. (Byrne 299).

Mr. Weston encourages Frank Churchill not to defer his visit to Jane Fairfax: “any want of attention to her here should be carefully avoided. You saw her with the Campbells when she was the equal of everybody she mixed with, but here she is with a poor old grandmother, who has barely enough to live on. If you do not call early it will be a slight” (*Emma* 194). Mr. Knightley also has a low opinion of Frank Churchill for not attending the wedding of his father. Mr. Woodhouse, although he is against moving out of his comfort

zone, also feels obligated to visit the new Mrs. Elton, despite his opposing views about marriage. Even Emma feels obliged to visit the new wife, although she has convinced herself not to stay longer than the compulsory fifteen minutes required for one visit. The gentlemen think that the lower position one has, the more attention they deserve. Minma also argues that although, seemingly, Emma visits the poorest people of Highbury, those visits “are distorted by the pursuit of her own pleasure” (Minma 59)

She wishes to maintain her feeling of superiority. Moreover, her pursuit of matchmaking and taking an interest in Harriet’s situation also count as Emma’s view of “charitable actions.” Mr. Knightley, who understands the gentry’s social obligations, advises her to befriend Jane Fairfax, in the same way Mr. Weston encourages Frank to visit Jane in order to fulfil their role of *noblesse oblige* (Minma 59). In a way, it can be said, Emma attempts to keep the expected social responsibilities. However, she interprets those rules wrongly; what one might call interfering, she sees as charity and she ignores Mr. Knightley’s pieces of advice.

2.3 Box Hill as the Root for Englishness; *Noblesse Oblige*

The Box Hill episode has a surprisingly crucial role in the plot. Murray notes that Box Hill is famous for its landscapes, which look uncultivated, as they avoided farming (966). He also analyses a landscape painting where the dogs ran away from their owners, claiming that it serves as a proof that Box Hill cannot be tamed by man (Murray 967). He also claims that “the rustic lovers in the canvas’s lower right claim Box Hill as a place of sensual pleasure, as the ‘English Daphne’ described by Aubrey, Macky, Defoe, Bevan and Gilpin” (Murray 966). According to Murray’s theory, such “a place [is] shamelessly disreputable” (968) and it is “a place known for sin” (968) that causes social manners to be loosened up and love triangles to be highlighted. Murray also reckons that the usually slow Miss Bates is the only one whose personality has not been adjusted, while the other characters engage in petty power struggles, flirtations, and jealousy; thus Box Hill brings out the worst personality traits and hidden insecurities in everyone (968).

This understanding of the role of Box Hill explains why Emma violates her responsibility as a social leader by mocking Miss Bates publicly, Mr. Knightley openly rebukes her for it (partly because of his own feelings of jealousy):

Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal

in situation—but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her and before her niece, too and before others, many of whom (certainly some,) would be entirely guided by your treatment of her. (*Emma* 250)

On the other hand, Murray also mentions that, despite their charitable actions, Emma and Mr. Woodhouse tend to distract themselves from the harsh realities of the world, mentioned in a few paragraphs earlier (957). The father and the daughter share the unlikely trait of maintaining order and purity, both in the literal and metaphorical sense (957). While Emma is clinging to being in charge by refusing to acknowledge anything that is outside of Highbury or her social class, Mr. Woodhouse seeks control by repelling against dirt¹; bad air, and maintaining an unreasonable diet (Murray 959), although he tries his best to fulfil his social duty. One might come to the conclusion that it highly contradicts Stafford's observation that Highbury has a "claustrophobic" atmosphere, whereas Murray thinks that Emma and Mr. Woodhouse create the claustrophobia for themselves (959).

Mr. Knightley, is on the top of the social hierarchy in Highbury. As opposed to Emma who gives these duties a somewhat narcissistic aspect and Mrs. Woodhouse who is inhibited by his own whims, Mr. Knightley takes his role as leader of the community seriously. David Selwyn notes that he lives very modestly for a landowner: instead, he spends the profit of his land to support the less fortunate people of the village (Selwyn 60). He is always polite with Miss Bates and he sends his own seldom-used carriage for Jane Fairfax and sends apples to Mrs. Bates because he knows that Jane is very fond of them. He is on friendly terms with Robert Martin and thinks highly of Larkins. We hardly know anything about his wealth, only that the Woodhouse family is the wealthiest, then the Coles come second, therefore Mr. Knightley is supposedly the third richest gentleman in Highbury.

Emma's biased views on people and their social position are not always reliable. Technically, both the Coles and the Westons have gained money by trading, still, Emma is more than ready to refuse their invitation to their party, and, despite the fact that the wealth of

¹ Murray notes that "Mr Woodhouse adopts the miasmatic theory of disease, one of the primary explanations of sickness before the establishment of germ theory" (959).

the Cole family is “second only to the family at Hartfield” (*Emma* 207), they are still considered to be of “low origin” and “only moderately genteel” (*Emma* 207). Minma points out that Emma’s distance from the Coles is derived from jealousy and her feeling threatened by their wealth, whereas she could feel superior to the Westons, and similarly, to Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith (54-55). On the other hand, Keymer notes that the Westons needed two or three generations to pass before they could rise to gentility (Keymer).

2.4 The Rising Middle Class

Mr. and Mrs. Elton belong to the rising middle class, both are social climbers and they do not seem to know their place in society. Mr. Elton, with his profession as a vicar, belongs to the middle class; vicars were traditionally educated men. According to Maggie Lane, similarly to surgeons and attorneys, vicars used to belong to the intellectual elite, but without “breeding” or good “connections” (347). Emma also has a subjective opinion regarding Mrs. Elton. She used to consider him handsome and very pleasant and thought of him as an equal to Harriet, the supposed natural daughter of a gentleman.

However, after his proposal, she thinks Mr. Elton is a “nobody” compared to herself and she also feels hurt when Mr. Elton offends her best friend. Mrs. Augusta Elton comes from a family in trading from Bristol, and possesses a dowry of 10,000 pounds (Hume 53).

Birchall thinks that Augusta Hawkins suffers from an inferiority complex because of her social background, when compared to Emma Woodhouse (see Birchall). This claim might be supported by Keymer who notes that Mrs Elton’s family probably made money by slave-trade (see Keymer). Because she feels inferior regarding her background, she attempts to compensate for her fear by bragging about his sister, who married into the gentry, and taking fashionable habits like calling her husband Mr. E., referring to him as “caro sposo” and trying to take up social activities the gentry has, such as music, arts, and literature. Although she is accepted into the community as Mr. Elton’s wife and gets all the attention a newly married woman is supposed to receive out of courtesy, she does not find her place in the community and violates several unspoken rules at her first appearance: she is boasting about the position of her brother-in-law, she is boasting about her intellectual resources and her love of music, and attempts to become the artistic leader of the local society. She also treats Emma as if they were intimate friends. Carrie Wright’s view is that, as a daughter of a merchant and with a pretty dowry, Mrs. Elton belongs to the *nouveau riche* (Wright).

Wright also notes that Mrs. Elton wearing pearls shows her desire of feeling accepted and upper-class, but her excessive dresses are highly in contrast to the humble behaviour she preaches about as a clergyman's wife (Wright). While the naive and silly Miss Bates is impressed with her wearing lace and pearls, Emma considers her a "little upstart, vulgar being" (*Emma* 181). Emma, without even meeting her, does not see her as someone superior to Harriet, since she has "no name, no blood, no alliance" (*Emma* 120). Thus, the reader can conclude that Emma believes that an illegitimate daughter of a gentleman is superior to a daughter of a rich merchant.

Marriage also means achieving higher social status: Mrs. Elton also feels entitled to look down on unmarried women like Jane and educates them about humility in a woman. She also violates the role of a middle-class person by openly patronizing Jane who has a less fortunate background and also violates the role of a guest in Mr. Knightley's house, when she becomes the self-proclaimed organizer of the strawberry picnic and shows no signs of politeness or manners expected from her age and status Mrs. Elton's assertive and familiar manners, and the fact that she could enjoy the privileges of a newly-wed woman threatens Emma's position and feeling of superiority.

However, it is interesting that she becomes patronizing in the same way Emma patronizes Harriet. I should conclude that one of the reasons why Emma dislikes Mrs. Elton, apart from her too familiar way of talking, is that she has personality traits which Emma dislikes in herself, similarly to the reason why Emma dislikes Jane, but likes Harriet. As Mr. Knightley notes it, he had once told her, "it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself" (*Emma* 108-109).

2.5 The Yeomanry and the Love Child

Although there are lower figures among the minor characters, Robert Martin is an important character who belongs to the yeomanry. He is Mr. Knightley's tenant who refers to him as a "gentleman farmer." His family has "two parlours, two very good parlours, indeed; one of them quite as large as Mrs. Goddard's drawing-room; and of her having an upper maid who had lived five-and-twenty years with her; and of their having eight cows" (*Emma* 18).

Based on this description, Robert Martin is also well-off by the standards of yeomen: however, Emma believes that he is unsuitable for Harriet or for Emma's friendship or attention:

The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is, therefore, in one sense, as much above my notice as in every other he is below it. (*Emma* 17)

Apart from his profession, Emma looks down on Mr. Martin for his looks and his taste in reading. As a farmer, he is more interested in pragmatic texts, like the *Agricultural Reports*, which is strictly connected to his profession, but has no interest in reading novels written for gentlemen and gentlewomen like *The Romance of the Forest*, or *The Children of the Abbey* (*Emma* 17). On the other hand, Emma undermines his writing skills, after she has read his letter of proposal, which is short but intelligent and to the point. Mr. Knightley, a gentleman with eccentric and honest noblesse oblige attitude as the local landowner, however, shows admiration and friendship towards Mr. Martin. Lane points out that social roles were becoming less rigid and began to allow friendship between two people of different backgrounds. Similarly to how Emma appreciates beauty, youth, and good nature in Harriet, Mr. Knightley thinks highly of Mr. Martin because he “speaks to the purpose” and is “open, straight-forward, and very well judging” (*Emma* 37).

Albeit Mr. Knightley would deny it, he also has sentiments towards the classic traits of a gentleman. Robert James Merrett writes that, after the rise of the merchants, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution, people longed for the idealized life of the country and yeomanry belonged to one of the most respected and traditional professions, expressing tradition and British national values (Merret 53).

Harriet might be regarded as one of the characters with the lowest social background. She is born out of wedlock, and her parents had no plans of introducing her to their circle of friends and family. As regards her educational background, she studied at a boarding school (similarly to Robert Martin’s sisters), while real ladies and gentlewomen were educated by governesses their families hired for them. Interestingly, Emma is highly convinced that Harriet’s supposed gentleman father is superior to Mr. Martin’s family and social background. Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes Tobin’s view is that Emma adopts Harriet like a pet, and she has plans for her in her own matchmaking game (419). She uses her like a doll, and feels superior because of her lack of money and lack of intelligence, in contrast to Jane, who intimidates Emma by being the talented and accomplished woman Emma aspires to be. Emma still has a pragmatic side and knows that an illegitimate daughter of a gentleman needs to be patronized and

matched with a good husband. Even for her, a marriage with Frank Churchill would be seen as a “miracle,” as something highly romantic, yet she thinks that Harriet with her family background and money would be an eligible wife for a vicar. On the other hand, Emma finds Harriet unsuitable and highly superior to be married to Robert Martin, even if Mr. Martin is described as a “gentleman-farmer” by Mr. Knightley and, based on the number of his servants, he is a relatively well-off farmer, a yeoman. Emma, however, feels, that yeomen are out of her touch because they are rich enough not to be dependent on Emma’s charity work, but not high enough in rank for her to visit them. Emma claims that “she could not visit Mrs. Robert Martin of Abbey-Mill farm” (*Emma* 33):

I cannot help wondering at your knowing so little of Emma as to say any such thing... a farmer, (and with all his sense and all his merit Mr. Martin is nothing more,) a good match for my intimate friend! Not regret her leaving Highbury for the sake of marrying a man whom I could never admit as an acquaintance of my own! (*Emma* 41)

Wealth and dowry are not the only factors of position in the community. Miss Bates has a comfortable place among Emma’s circle of friends, while the same circle is reluctant to accept the rich Coles as friends. In the novel, traditional female traits like beauty, manners, education, and humility are depicted among those traits that are beneficial for women who wish to be popular or are able to marry.

Emma is convinced that by being “pretty and good-tempered” (*Emma* 40) and also showing humility, a woman can have the “highest claims a woman could possess” (*Emma* 42), which also has a devastating outcome from the most powerful woman in the village. It can be observed that Harriet’s looks and sweet nature are valued highly by Emma, and Robert Martin’s profession as a yeoman shows a longing for the classical country life.

Kramp also maintains that Mr. Knightley thinks similarly; however, he finds Robert Martin, a gentleman-farmer, more suitable for Harriet, instead of a vicar. In this case, Mr. Knightley and Emma have different opinions about where to place a good-natured, young, and classically beautiful woman in the social hierarchy or if the wealthy farmer is superior to a natural daughter of a gentleman (Kramp 150). Nevertheless, both characters agree that wealth is not the only significant factor of position and marriage, but they also think of sentimental traits as valuable features.

2.6 Unmarried Gentlewomen

Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates deserve an independent group and paragraph due to the unique cases of their status quo; they are “the impoverished gentlewomen” as Tobin describes and labels them (414). She argues that middle-class women who remained without a male supporter were forced to enter the worklife as governesses and teachers. They were considered above doing manual work but not received the education or the opportunity to enter business. They were taught to speak conversational French and have some knowledge about music, but these skills were not enough to become professionals in any field. Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax are educated and come from a family of gentry or at least the middle class. Most women in their positions could not marry well (although Jane’s case is exceptional, since she will marry later advantageously), therefore they are dependent on the good-will of relatives and friends (Tobin 415-416). Many novels and short-stories label unmarried gentlewomen as sheltered, comic-relief characters or embittered, dominating, and unpleasant characters. Tobin agrees that these types of women are often viewed as the burden of their families, brothers and relatives, and, as they are aging, they are forced to move from one family to another in order to find a relative who supports them (Tobin 417). The other option for them is the role of the governess. The most obvious novel for the life of a governess is *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë.

Jane Fairfax could not be put simply into any group for another reason: she is an outsider in the Highbury society, visiting her grandmother and aunt once in a while. Similarly to Frank Churchill, she is being slowly introduced and causes excitement among the inhabitants of Highbury. She is an orphan, although she is the daughter of an infantryman, Lieutenant Fairfax, and the granddaughter of a vicar on her mother’s side.

After the death of her parents, she was adopted by Lieutenant Campbell who provided for her enough to be an educated and well-travelled gentlewoman who is suitable for a governess. However, if she accepted such a job, she would have ceased to be even on visiting terms with Emma Woodhouse or even Augusta Elton. Even in her current situation, she could not be recognized as Frank Churchill’s equal, thus their engagement has to be a secret concerning Mrs. Churchill, Frank’s dominating aunt who could have never agreed to Jane Fairfax. Mrs. Elton takes Jane Fairfax under her wing, similarly to how Emma does it to Harriet; however, Mrs. Elton has realistic plans for the future of Jane Fairfax as a governess, instead of finding her a rich husband.

Miss Bates has a similar situation to Jane Fairfax. Tobin describes her as an “impoverished gentlewoman” (418). She and her mother, Mrs. Bates, live “in a very small way,” “rented an apartment that belonged to people in business” and have one servant (*Emma*

12). Austen does not specify Miss Bates's income but, interestingly, she enjoys mentioning values a woman can bring into her marriage other than wealth: family background, looks, intelligence, youth, and education.

However, Miss Bates is neither "young, handsome, rich, nor married" (*Emma* 14), thus she has a very low position in the local society. The only reason she is not excluded from Emma's circle of friends is the fact she is still a vicar's daughter, once living a comfortable life and she has gained an uncommon popularity thanks to her good nature and good-will. Thus, one can assume, the narrator counts popularity as valuable besides one's background, money, and education.

This chapter showed that Highbury is regarded as a micro-world of England where different classes can be found. I have mentioned the different entertainments that people of a smaller community can enjoy such as dinner parties, a small ball, daily visits, picnics, small gossips, and charity for the poor. The novel perfectly describes the values of the gentry and also its responsibilities towards lower-class people. The desired way of life that existed in Austen's age is explained, and the hidden, secret longing for the traditional, pre-industrial English countryside by romanticizing the yeomanry and the landscapes. It also draws a line between the social classes, and explains the boundaries the society drew between people (regarding marriage, friendship, and social contacts within the classes), which features were considered to be important regarding marriage, and how people classified themselves in the social hierarchy of classes.

III. *Emma* and Comedy: the Significance of Comedy in *Emma*

Although *Emma* is a novel of manners, comedy and irony also play a significant role in the novel; comedy shapes the plot, as it appears in misunderstandings. The characters are the archetypal comedic characters which are developed into more three-dimensional characters by Austen. John Wiltshire maintains that *Emma* is a comedy, where cross-purposes lead to serious ends (see Barchas115). Mudrick claims that Austen utilized irony in order to divert herself and her audience with an unengaged laughter and this instrument is used to “sharpen and expose all the incongruities between form and fact, all the delusions intrinsic to conventional art and conventional society” (1). White argues that the characters possess the typical traits of the stock characters from the new comedies famous in Shakespeare’s plays, Moliere in France, and revived by Oscar Wilde: she calls Mr. Woodhouse the “killjoy” character (instead of the tyrannical father), Miss Bates the “old maid” or the “fool,” Mrs. Elton the “braggart soldier” and Frank Churchill the “trickster” or the “lover” (131). Austen did not create stock characters but she added a dimension to them (131): Mr. Woodhouse becomes a well-meaning, kind gentleman and a devoted father, Miss Bates is a lovely lady with a tragic past and future, and Frank Churchill is immature at worst, but is redeemed thanks to his love for Jane Fairfax, and Mrs. Elton is honestly trying to help Jane and actually finds her a suitable job. The stock characters of comedy are a typical characteristic of the genre of the comedy of manners. It might be argued which genre would *Emma* fit into, based on the slight mocking of gentry society, the circumstantial situations, trivial misunderstandings, and witty conversations. However, the *Emma* is a prose fictional work, albeit highly effected by the comedy of manners, therefore it remains a novel of manners, with comic features borrowed from the comedy of manners.

Misunderstandings provide comic outcomes for the novel. One can divide the main sources of comedy: the first source is the main character’s obvious lack of self-knowledge, which stands in contrast to her overconfident nature and how she interferes with other people’s lives and causes misunderstandings and false accusations of romance. The second source of comedy is the limited social and entertainment opportunities leading to small-town (or in this case, village) gossip and conversations about trivial things and happenings in a very circumstantial way, as if they were very important events; for instance, the handwriting of Frank Churchill, or the discussion about his decision to go to London for a haircut; other examples can be Miss Bates reading aloud Jane Fairfax’s letters sent to her, Mr. Perry buying a carriage, the rather exhaustive descriptions of the excitement of a ball at an inn, or the picnic

on Box Hill. The third main source of comedy is Austen's utilization of irony.. Kriker discusses the different exploitations of irony in the novel, which can be structural, verbal, dramatic, and situational (31). Greenham also sees irony in *Emma*, albeit in the case of classic gender roles and traits (168). Furthermore, it is also interesting to observe how Austen utilizes the basic conventions of fairy tales

Emma² is the heroine of the novel and one of the sources of amusement is her narrow-minded and misinformed views of her environment and observations of the happenings. The novel is written in third person singular and is influenced by Emma's thoughts and opinions. The narrative technique that Jane Austen utilizes is the free indirect discourse; in the early nineteenth century, a relatively modern style. Regarding free indirect discourse, Keymer mentions Roy Pascal's statement suggesting that "Austen creates a narrator 'who is (with rare lapses) non-personal, non- defined, and therefore may enjoy access to the most secret privacy of the characters'... these 'lapses' were a key part of Austen's repertoire" (Keymer). Furthermore, in contrast to the average reader, who finds Austen's style friendly and personal, critics think of it as monotonous and robotic. Keymer also mentions that Pascal constantly refers to the narrator as a "he", since he does not wish to mislead any reader to think that the narrator equals Austen. Mike Bal takes this case further by referring to the narrator as "it" (see Keymer).

Louise Flavin argues that character descriptions and the amount of irony they receive are influenced by both Emma's thoughts and the descriptions of the narrator. One of his examples is Miss Bates; the reason Emma mocks Miss Bates so much is because, just like in the case of Jane Fairfax and Mrs. Elton, Emma is jealous of the attention Miss Bates receives (Flavin 50-57). Emma's attitude towards Miss Bates and the ironic style in which Miss Bates is presented vanish after Mr. Knightley scolds Emma for mocking someone who is beneath her and is dependent on her good-will. Before that, Miss Bates is constantly mocked for her chattiness and talkative nature as it can be observed in the following dialogue. Also, Miss Bates's talking shows early signs of stream of consciousness:

[...] To have her haunting the Abbey, and thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane?—['so very kind and obliging!—But he always had been such a very kind neighbour!'] And then fly off, through half a sentence, to her mother's old petticoat. ['Not that it was such a very old petticoat either—for still it

² Chung notes that Jane Austen famously referred to Emma as "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" in her memoirs (qtd. in Chung 82).

would last a great while—and, indeed, she must thankfully say that their petticoats were all very strong’]. (*Emma* 146)

Another example Flavin brings up of the narrator utilizing the free indirect discourse which mocks a character’s judgement is the example of Mr. Knightley himself, who serves mostly as the voice of reason in the novel. After his proposal to Emma, he has a sudden change of heart regarding Mr. Churchill, which is almost comic to the narrator (Flavin 55):

[Frank Churchill] had found [Emma] agitated and low—Frank Churchill was a villain—He heard her declare that she had never loved him. Frank Churchill's character was not desperate—She was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned into the house; and if he could have thought of Frank Churchill then, he might have deemed him a very good sort of fellow. (*Emma* 284)

This example also serves as an ironic element, where Mr. Knightley and Frank Churchill are compared. Knight notes that Mr. Knightley is the ideal eighteenth-century gentleman (185). He used to have a very low opinion of Frank Churchill which was not entirely subjective. Knight recalls that Churchill is immoral for misleading Emma and humiliating Jane Fairfax, although Mr. Knightley does the same with Harriet, albeit unknowingly.

If we accept that the narrative style is not objective, one can conclude that the telling of the story is biased by Emma, which gives the novel a comic feature in itself. The narrator shares a figurative look with the reader as if everybody knew that Emma is not to be taken seriously. She has a horrible judgement of character and her attempts of matchmaking and meddling with someone else’s life are rather hurtful than useful.

There are several examples and extracts in the novel where the reader can witness how misunderstandings, Emma’s lack of knowledge, and irony shape the comedy and the comedic elements. Emma’s first disappointment occurs when Mr. Elton proposes to her. Timothy Erwin notes that the comedy is derived from the misunderstanding and cross-purpose that Emma paints a picture of Harriet and hopes that Mr. Elton will fall in love with the sitter, while Mr. Elton aims to court the painter of the picture (Erwin 100). One might find the mentioned situation comic, because this goes against the traditional anticipation of falling in love as people usually fall for the sitter and keep a painting because of the painted figure, not because of the artist. As it was mentioned above, this is an example that *Emma* and its plot defy the traditional points of a predictable love story. Another example of the embodiment of

irony and violation of the traditional romance plot is Harriet's admission of loving Mr. Knightley, or when she hears of the secret engagement between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, or Mr. Knightley's proposal.

The second main source of comedy might be the lack of social happenings in a small village of 325 inhabitants in Highbury. According to Trollope, of Austen's "heroes and heroines with wonderful adventures there are none in her novels. Of great criminal and hidden crimes, she tells us nothing" (see Trollope). Thus, the narrator exaggerates the importance of small happenings in small gatherings, giving them an amazingly detailed description and needless agonizing over small issues in everyday life. Mr. Woodhouse particularly enjoys those engagements. We learn that Mr. Woodhouse is sorry for "poor Miss Taylor" leaving Hartfield to marry Mr. Weston and having a house of her own. He is unable to refer to her as "Mrs. Weston" later in the novel. Mr. Woodhouse refers to "Mrs. Weston" as "poor Miss Taylor" twelve times during the novel and describes her wedding and marriage as a "sad" and "grievous" business. Another favorite topic of his is a constant fear of getting ill, so he often consults Mr. Perry about health issues. Erwin notes the comic situation regarding Mr. Woodhouse's obsession with short walks and small portions of food, purely for healthcare reasons (Erwin 101). Mr. Woodhouse expresses his disconcerted feelings when Emma paints Harriet in a summer dress and states that, "the only thing [he does] not thoroughly like is, that she seems to be sitting out of doors, with only a little shawl over her shoulders—and it makes one think she must catch cold" (*Emma* 32). The reader finds the thought of someone catching a cold in a painting at an imaginary place rather bemusing.

Moreover, Mr. Woodhouse worries about the consequences of eating sweet desserts: he is deeply concerned about children and people eating cake at Mrs. Weston's wedding. He makes serious efforts to convince people not to eat any cake at the wedding. Mr. Perry agrees that cakes are indeed unhealthy, although "there was a strange rumour in Highbury of all the little Perrys being seen with a slice of Mrs. Weston's wedding-cake in their hands: but Mr. Woodhouse would never believe it" (*Emma* 13). Austen uses this ironic turn, since Mr. Perry highly supports Mr. Woodhouse that cakes should be eaten only moderately. Furthermore, another amusing incident is when Mr. Woodhouse is convinced that supper is unhealthy, yet he wishes to be a good host (as a matter of fact, by modern healthcare standards, those tips of healthy eating sound nonsense):

Mrs. Bates, let me propose your venturing on one of these eggs. An egg boiled very soft is not unwholesome. Serle understands boiling an egg better than anybody. I

would not recommend an egg boiled by anybody else; but you need not be afraid, they are very small, you see—one of our small eggs will not hurt you. Miss Bates, let Emma help you to a little bit of tart – a very little bit. Ours are all apple-tarts. You need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here. I do not advise the custard. Mrs. Goddard, what say you to half a glass of wine? A small half-glass, put into a tumbler of water? I do not think it could disagree with you. (*Emma* 14)

His third worrisome topic is his eldest daughter Isabella constantly visiting the sea with her family, claiming that the sea almost “killed [him] once” (*Emma* 67).

Miss Bates, similarly to Mr. Woodhouse, enjoys showing her excitement over everything. Her favorite topic is the letters Jane sends her and she is more than happy when she can discuss them with Emma or other characters. Miss Bates is almost amusingly unaware of the fact that Emma might be even annoyed with her constant talking about her niece whom Emma might not even like. Mrs. Weston is also more than eager to talk about the letters Frank Churchill sends her and almost rivals with Miss Bates regarding which of them should read aloud the letters they have received. Interestingly, both Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are the most mysterious characters, who are introduced through letters, and when they appear in person, they cause ambivalent feelings among the inhabitants of Highbury. Frank Churchill’s letters are overanalyzed, even his handwriting comes into the discussion (Mr. Knightley reckons that it is too feminine, while the ladies find it lovely). Trivial trips and social gatherings also get chapters to be filled in. One might think that the characters overprepare themselves for a simple trip to Box Hill or a small ball in the Crown Inn. Nevertheless, the contemporary reader might have been bemused about the small activities having such a large role in one’s life.

Wiltshire explains that Harriet’s excitement over small events in her life causes amusing scenes in the novel (see Barchas 120). As an example, he mentions Harriet’s obsession with Mr. Elton, her habit of keeping every item which reminds her of Mr. Elton, her sudden determination of burning her painting and the frame Mr. Elton has given them, then her decision of never getting married. Harriet also exaggerates the event when she is attacked by the gypsies and calls it an “adventure.” (120) Even Emma is puzzled when she learns that the man Harriet has fallen in love with is the man who has offered her the “kind action” and the “act of service,” is Mr. Knightley not Frank Churchill. This turn can be taken as an example of misunderstandings and also: Emma thinks that Harriet is in love with Frank Churchill, but instead, she is in love with Mr. Knightley.

As for the irony, Greenham, in contrast to Kriker, believes that it lies in the traditional gender traits. Emma and Mr. Woodhouse share the unexpected trait of maintaining purity and avoiding dirt, albeit in a different way. However, ironically and rather unexpectedly, Emma possesses several masculine traits. Greenham highlights the beginning of the novel, stating that Emma is indeed “handsome” a trait that is mostly associated with men even in the nineteenth century and “handsome” is not a word that is not usually flattery, since it implies a certain amount of unwanted masculinity in a woman (165).

Furthermore, Greenham claims that Emma has an unusual masculine power, serves as the leader of community, and deals with masculine problems such as matchmaking, however she is still a positive female character (Greenham 166). Lionel Trilling notes that Emma is “extraordinary” for still having morals, albeit the morals of a man (see Greenham 166). On the other hand, Mr. Woodhouse could be described as “Mrs. Woodhouse” due to his keen interest of engaging in gossip and worrying about trivial things similarly to Mrs. Bennett (Greenham 166). In conclusion, Greenham thinks that Austen created irony by the inversion of traditional gender roles.

Kriker argues that irony is manifested in communication, in structure, and in situations. Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates’s constant worries and complaints cause an ironic tone in the novel. Also, Kriker sees the structural irony of the characters (31). Emma dislikes Mrs. Elton for her patronizing behaviour towards Jane; still, she does the same with Harriet, and she also resents Jane for being the accomplished woman she aims to be. But Jane has much less financial and social support. Emma claims she is good at analysing people and considers herself an expert in social relationships, still, she misses to recognize attraction and affection. As we would expect in a romantic story, Emma is supposed to marry Frank Churchill (even the Westons are dreaming of that); they have similar personalities, yet, Frank is engaged to Jane Fairfax, whose character is the opposite of his. Similarly, Emma marries the man who claims to be a bachelor himself. Mr. Knightley is a person very few people assume to harbour romantic affections towards Emma. E. Hughes, also explains that Emma attempts to act as the teacher through the whole novel, whereas due to her age and experience, she is supposed to be the pupil (69).

Thus, it can be interesting to observe that the plot goes against the traditional fairy tale convention. In fairy tales, the poor beggar or peasant (woman) earns their way to wealth and marriage into royalty or the gorgeous prince or princess falls in love with the mysterious prince or princess. In this interpretation, Emma, Harriet, and Jane Fairfax have traditional fairy tale-like heroine traits such as beauty, humility, intelligence, and hard-work, and a

sheltered and innocent background. Similarly, Mr. Knightley, Frank Churchill, Robert Martin, and Mr. Elton have archetypal fairy-tale-like traits: good looks, honor, chivalry, wealth. At the beginning of the novel or at least in the middle of it, the reader might start to anticipate the outcomes of the novel both character-wise and plot-wise (expect for the happy ending for almost all characters). Studying Vladimir Propp's works about the morphology of Russian (but practically, international) folkloric tales, one can draw a connection between the plot of *Emma* and the conventional narrative structure of fairy tales. The narrative of *Emma* employs the topics (out of the 31 topics) of "absentation" (the death of Emma's mother), "interdiction" (Mr. Knightley's warning about Emma not to matchmake), "violation of interdiction" (Emma suffering the consequences), "delivery"/"trickery" (Frank Churchill, the "villain" tricking everyone by his charm), "complicity" (Frank Churchill uses Emma as a tool to deceive people and to make Jane jealous), "struggle" (Emma against the villains of Jane and Mrs. Elton, and Mr. Knightley against Frank Churchill), "difficult task" (Mr. Elton's riddles, talks about the piano and Jane's secret love interest), "recognition" and "punishment" (Emma recognizing being in love with Mr. Knightley and feeling jealousy towards Harriet), "rescue" (Harriet being rescued by Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley), and the "wedding" (Propp 26-64). The humour comes from the fact that Austen did an outstanding job of taking an ironic turn at almost every sense. *Emma* might be regarded as a parody of fairy tales, since it has no real heroes or heroines, the characters are flawed, and there are no villains (Jane's "villain" arch vanishes, Mrs. Elton is an annoyance, and Frank Churchill juggles between the "villain" and the "prince"). Since it is an ongoing source of humor that Highbury is very sheltered, no magic or real harm occur in the novel (indeed, it is the least bold novel of Jane Austen). The female protagonist, Emma, is neither in distress or poor, but perfectly content in her situation. Harriet, based on her humility, beauty, and poor social situation, might have been a heroine "rescued" by several "princes" or "knights" (Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley) who show chivalry towards her; does not marry a prince with good looks and wealth, but a farmer slightly above her. Jane, based on beauty, hard-work, and ambiguous situation, could have been a better heroine who marries into handsome money; but her "prince" is reckless, irresponsible and does not offer the comfort of Mr. Knightley's character. Emma does not marry the mysterious "prince" intended for her and who is almost like her male embodiment, instead, she marries her long-time neighbor and basically an everyman who constantly scolds her. Similarly, how Austen shares a metaphorical look with the reader regarding Emma's self-knowledge, might give an odd effect on a real-life fairy tale.

The plot of *Emma* is affected by humour and comedy and it can be analysed from

several aspects. Jane Austen was keen on utilizing irony in the structural, verbal, situational, and characteristic aspects of her narrative and even the most moral characters cannot escape being the victims of her mocking and irony. Out of respect and because of her sentimental feelings towards English countryside and small town life, Austen also points out that there is too much agonizing and too much overthinking regarding the small events of the small community which might occur due to the lack of actual happenings. Even if *Emma* resembles the most comforting, safe, and fairy tale-like plot amongst Austen's novels, the reader is reminded that characters and the narrative conventions would not work in the real life. On the other hand, Austen also shows affection for her characters by adding them layers to also maintain the idea of the classic comedic two-dimensional characters. The narrative utilizes free indirect discourse as its dominant style, and it illustrates the comic side of the story by offering episodes of misunderstandings and love triangles. The reader might not recognize them at first as they are not as overt as they appear in *Pride and Prejudice*, yet one cannot miss the subtle irony.

IV. Conclusion

Emma fits the genre of the novel of manners. It describes the social world of Jane Austen's time, the Georgian era, and the micro-world of Highbury which describes every layer in the middle class. It also shows the customs and the responsibility of the different classes and what values and virtues are held important in the society. Austen describes the features of a polite society where social interaction is based on hospitality and politeness. The small society of Highbury still maintains traditional family background, blood, and education as more important values than money and wealth. Although it is a romantic novel, the characters express their sentimental feelings towards traditional Anglo-Saxon values and professions and show a reluctant behavior towards the rising middle class and outsiders such as the characters of Mrs. Elton and the Coles. The story also gives an example of how impoverished gentlewomen were forced to deal with their future and their situation. It gives an account of the responsibility the traditional gentry and the respect it is required to show towards the less fortunate, such as charity towards poor people, courtesy towards the new bride, supporting impoverished gentlewomen, and holding social events and how easily these rules could be violated by just one misplaced comment.

On the other hand, Austen does not leave comedy out of the novel. Giving an example of a micro-world of England is also a source of amusement due to its small size and lack of real happenings. The reader is also amused by Emma's lack of self-knowledge and how she causes misunderstandings between people. Austen also utilizes irony in the description of her characters, the plot, the structure, and verbal communication.

Emma is a novel which shows features of the novel of manners while it adds further layers by bringing subtle comedy into it. However, it cannot be considered a pure comedy, since the characters are more complex and they do not fit into the typical stock characters of comedy. It can be argued that *Emma* is a comedy in prose but, through the many examples that I quoted from the novel, I tried to prove that it properly belongs to the genre of the novel of manners because it focuses more on the everyday life of a local community in the country, while it also borrows some of the elements of comedy.

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