

Shelby Vogl

Dr. Joan K. Peters

English 499

December 2013

Jane Austen and the Model Woman:

Elizabeth and Emma's Feminism

Marriage is a central theme in all of Jane Austen's novels. In her novels, it is presumed that her heroine will live happily ever after with the right man. However, her work is much more than a stereotypical love story. Through the marriage of her heroines, Austen presents what would eventually be considered feminist traits. She does this by presenting readers with strong and independent women who display choice in their marriages. The heroines in her novel exhibit admirable traits that allow them to enter into a happy and equal union. Both Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma Woodhouse from *Emma* embody characteristics that are admired by other women. They both represent Austen's model woman, which Austen perhaps used as a tool to show other contemporary women that even though they have little choice in life, one area that they do have some say is in their marriage partner. Through the marriage of her heroines, Austen is showing readers that they can choose a husband who respects and admires them, one that considers them as equals. Through heroines like Elizabeth and Emma, Austen is creating a model woman for other contemporary women to look up to. These woman posses both a rational mind and the ability to challenge their society's expectations, it is these independent, clever, and strong-willed traits, that show readers that women can choose a husband who treats them as equals in a society that didn't.

When examining Austen's past, it's not surprising that she had a unique outlook on the institution of marriage. Unlike other contemporary women, Austen was encouraged to pursue her passion as writer by her family and she never married. Austen, was born on December 16, 1775. She was the seventh child and second daughter to George and Cassandra Austen. According to Steven Marcus, an American academic and literary critic, "Jane's father, the Reverend George Austen, was the well-read country rector of Steventon, and her mother, Cassandra, was descended from a well-connected line of learned clergyman," (Austen ix). Although Austen's family wasn't particularly wealthy, they led a comfortable and socially respectable lifestyle.

According to Marcus, "Jane and her beloved elder (and only sister) Cassandra, were schooled in Southampton and Reading for short periods, but most of their education took place at home," (Austen ix). Nevertheless the two sisters were encouraged to explore their creativity through writing, putting on plays, and reading books from their extensive library. Austen's nurturing childhood most likely helped her into becoming one of the greatest English novelists.

Austen exercised her choice in marriage by choosing to remain single throughout her life. She was briefly engaged in 1802 but called it off after she realized that she did not feel any affection for the man. She was a strong believer that one should not marry without affection. This is seen clearly through her letters to her niece, advising her never to marry where love is not a possibility.

All of Austen's novels center around a young woman and her eventual marriage. Although this modern fairytale-like structure doesn't seem to have any feminist values, Austen uses marriage to demonstrate what it means to be a powerful and independent woman in the 18th century. According to Kellye M. Nye, a professor at the University of Houston-Clear Lake:

Taken from an anti-feminist view, Jane Austen appears to be anything but feminist because her heroines seemingly submit to the dictate of their own patriarchies by choosing, in the end, to marry the ‘handsome prince.’ However, Austen’s heroines are unique women who stand up for themselves in a society that tries to take every choice from them. They are women who use their minds and their strength of will to change the traditional patterns that their mothers would have them sustain. (Nye 1)

Characters like Elizabeth Bennet, from *Pride and Prejudice*, and Emma Woodhouse, from the novel *Emma*, clearly demonstrate characteristics of independent women. The women in both of these novels present a model for women look up to. Austen uses the independent nature of her heroines to show her readers how they have a choice in their marriage. By presenting different types of marriages in her novels and comparing them against a marriage where both partners love and respect each other, and by showing the growth of her heroines into strong women, Austen is exhibiting what would eventually be considered feminist values.

Pride and Prejudice centers around the Bennet family. In the family there are five unmarried daughters, Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia. The entire novel is focused around Mrs. Bennet attempting to marry off her daughters in order to have financial stability. Elizabeth Bennet is the heroine of the novel and it is her marriage to Mr. Darcy that all others in the novel must be compared to. The main marriages present in the novel include Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s, Jane and Mr. Bingley’s, Lydia and Mr. Wickham’s, Charlotte and Mr. Collins’s, and finally Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s.

Elizabeth Bennet is the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*. When describing Elizabeth’s character, Margaret Kirkham, a lecturer at Bristol Polytechnic says, “none of the Austen heroines

is more attractive than Elizabeth Bennet, none more clearly possessed of intelligence and warm affections..." (Kirkham 92). In the novel she is represented as quick-witted, sharp-tongued, and independent. In this regard, she is different from any of any other women in the novel. When describing Elizabeth, Xiaoping Yu, a professor at the college of foreign languages at Qingdao University, says, "Elizabeth is well-mannered, but possesses a very sharp wit and refuses to be intimidated by anyone," (Yu 680). This refusal to be intimidated is made clear through her interactions with Lady Catherine, Mr. Darcy's Aunt. Lady Catherine is a powerful woman who demands to be obeyed. When Lady Catherine comes to Elizabeth's home to try and make her promise that she will never marry Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth refuses to back down. In response to Lady Catherine's request Elizabeth says:

I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable... you have widely mistaken my character if you think I can be worked on by persuasions such as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in his affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine. I must beg, therefore, to be importuned no more on the subject. (Austen 376)

Even though Lady Catherine comes from a much higher social status than Elizabeth, Elizabeth is not afraid to stand up for herself when she feels like she is being disrespected. A lesser character in the novel would simply succumb to Lady Catherine's demand but that is not in Elizabeth's nature. This refusal to be intimidated by anyone is also seen in Elizabeth's rejection of both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy. It is in these two rejections that Elizabeth truly embodies what it means to be a strong woman in the eighteenth century.

The first proposal that Elizabeth receives comes from Mr. Collins. He is the cousin of the Bennet girls and will therefore own the property that they live on after their father passes away.

When he comes to the Bennet's house in search of a wife, it seems to be in everyone's best interest. Mr. Collins will get a wife and the Bennets will have a place to live after their father passes away. Mr. Collins first sets his eyes upon Jane. But when he learns that she will soon be married to Mr. Bingley, he quickly turns his affections towards Elizabeth. In just a few days Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth, which Elizabeth immediately refuses. However, after Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins continues to believe that he will get the answer he wishes for. After much conversation Elizabeth says:

I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female, intending to plague you, but as a rational creature, speaking the truth from her heart. (Austen 119)

At this time, it was believed that women could not think for themselves, especially when it came to marriage. Even though wealthy women were educated, there were still thought to be irrational creatures. When a wealthy man offered his hand in marriage it was expected that a woman would accept without hesitation. Refusing a man of power was not something a woman would normally do. Women were expected to blindly accept a wealthy man's proposal without considering their own happiness. There was no need to think about the decision because in men's eyes, women were not capable of making these decisions rationally. Females were believed to be ruled by their emotions rather than their minds. It was believed that these 'female emotions' would cause women to make the wrong decision. As Elizabeth so harshly points out, in this society, women were not thought to be rational creatures.

Mr. Collins sees Elizabeth as a woman, not as a rational creature, and can't believe that Elizabeth could refuse him. According to Judith Lowder Newton, a professor of women and gender studies at U.C. Davis, "male privilege, then, and access to money in particular, makes men feel autonomous. It also makes them feel empowered to control others, especially women to whom they make their advances," (Newton 31). This is why Mr. Collins finds it so hard to believe that Elizabeth is refusing him. He can't fathom the idea that Elizabeth would deny his proposal when he can give her a comfortable lifestyle and help provide for the rest of her family. However, Elizabeth knows that Mr. Collins could not make her happy and vice versa. She isn't willing to risk her happiness and independence in order to provide for the rest of her family. In this society, women were expected to marry to provide for their family. In the process, many women were forced to marry without affection. They couldn't marry for love, they had to marry for necessity. Elizabeth chooses to go against this societal norm. She isn't willing to sacrifice her own happiness. She knows that Mr. Collins is not the right match for her so she defies her mother's wishes to have her married off to a man not worthy of her. She does not bend to the expectations of her society.

Mr. Collins eventually goes on to marry Elizabeth's closest friend Charlotte. Charlotte enters the marriage because she knows that he can provide for her and she feels like she is becoming a burden to her parents. Unlike Elizabeth, she is willing to sacrifice her happiness in order to follow societal norms. Charlotte feels the prying eyes of her society and succumbs to it. She doesn't marry because she loves Mr. Collins. When describing Charlotte's view towards marriage Austen writes, "without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune..." (Austen 134). Charlotte isn't marrying Mr. Collins because she thinks it will bring

her joy. She is marrying him because she feels like she has been backed into a corner and marriage is her only option.

Unlike Charlotte, Elizabeth is unwilling to marry without affection. This is made even clearer through her second proposal rejection. This time it is Mr. Darcy who makes the proposal of marriage. When Mr. Darcy is proposing to Elizabeth for the first time, he delivers his proposal of marriage as so, “his sense of her inferiority-of its being a degradation-of the family obstacles which had always opposed to inclination, was dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend him suit,” (Austen 201). In his proposal, Mr. Darcy is making it clear to Elizabeth that he knows that she comes from a lower status. He is admitting his love towards Elizabeth while continually insulting her family and her position in society. When he is proposing he says, “In vain I have struggled. I will not do. My feelings will not be repressed,” (Austen 201). Mr. Darcy is telling Elizabeth that he has tried to suppress his feelings for her long as he could. This is presumably because he knows that loving her will hurt his own social status.

In response to his proposal Elizabeth says, “‘I might as well inquire,’ replied she, ‘why with so evident a desire of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character,’” (Austen 203). Elizabeth is refusing Mr. Darcy because she cannot be with someone who finds loving her embarrassing. She refuses to be with a man who doesn’t show respect for her.

Through a modern perspective Elizabeth’s refusal and her reasoning behind it seems completely justified. But in the 18th century, refusing a man as powerful and rich as Mr. Darcy would have been unthinkable. According to LeRoy Smith, and award winning fiction writer, “Darcy makes the assumption about a female’s dependence and limited choice. Elizabeth’

rejection of his proposal is the most courageous act of her independent spirit and her boldest challenge of the view of marriage in her society, “(Smith 93). In the eighteenth century, men like Mr. Darcy were used getting what they want. When Elizabeth rejects Mr. Darcy she is demonstrating her power as a strong woman.

When Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy do get married it is because they have found love and respect for one another. When speaking about his first proposal to Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy says:

The recollection of what I then said, of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it, is now, and has been many months, inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget: ‘had you behaved in a more gentleman like manner.’ Those were your words. You know not, you can scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me; though it was some time, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice. (Austen 388)

Austen is not only providing readers with a strong heroine to look up to but also a worthy man. Mr. Darcy is a man who like Elizabeth, can learn from his mistakes. When Mr. Darcy admits how ashamed he feels regarding his first proposal he is admitting to Elizabeth how wrong he was. By admitting this, he is essentially putting himself and Elizabeth on equal ground. Because he realizes how foolishly superior he acted towards Elizabeth, he is learning to respect her and to treat her as an equal. According to Nye, “Because her heroines earn the respect of their mate before marriage, Austen implies that they will be freer within that marriage than the majority of women who have lived before them,” (Nye 29). Because of this, it is important that they both learn to respect each other before entering into matrimony.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s marriage not only affects their own ideas about status and equality but also those around them. This is shown through Elizabeth’s sister Kitty and Mr.

Darcy's sister Georgiana. When describing Kitty's change in attitude Austen writes, "In a society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great... removed from the influence of Lydia's example, she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid," (Austen 408). By spending her time at Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's residence, Kitty becomes a more mature and independent woman than she ever could have hoped for if she continued to remain under her mother and sister Lydia's influence.

The effect of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's marriage is also seen on Mr. Darcy's sister Georgiana. When describing Georgiana's attitude towards Elizabeth, Austen writes:

Georgiana had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; though at first she often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm at her lively, sportive manner of talking to her brother... Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. By Elizabeth's instructions, she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband. (Austen 410)

Through Elizabeth's example, Georgiana learns that she doesn't always have to be subservient to men. She can speak her mind and still have a healthy and loving relationship with her future husband, just like Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy do.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's superior marriage is made even clearer through marriages of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Lydia and Mr. Wickham, wherein readers can see what an unequal marriage in the 18th century consisted of.

In the 18th century women did not marry for love. In fact, love wasn't even considered necessary to enter into a marriage. This led to unhappy marriages. Because, the man and the woman did not learn to love each other before they entered into matrimony, the chances of happiness within that marriage were slim at best. During this time marriage was more about an

exchange of money and the woman's abilities to perform her duties as a wife. According to Marilyn Yalom, a professor of French and comparative literature, when women got married their duties were as follows, "obeying and satisfying one's husband, keeping one's children physically and morally sound, and maintaining the household," (Yalom 172). Because women were not able to contribute to the income of the household they were considered less valuable than their husbands. Since most marriages did not come out of the love and respect that two partners have for each other, the inequality within an already unequal marriage was greater. Women were basically just there to make their husbands happy. When couples in Austen's novels marry without the admiration that Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth show for each other, they are more likely to fall into an unhappy marriage. The unequal and unhappy marriages that are shown in *Pride and Prejudice* are marriages that come out of necessity. They are marriages where the man doesn't love his wife and the wife only does silly, activities. This is shown through Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet's marriage as well as Lydia and Mr. Wickham's marriage.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are a couple who married without the love and respect for each other that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy share. As a result they are forced to be in a loveless and marriage. Although, an unequal marriage can arguably be a happy one, the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is not. Instead, Mr. Bennet only looks at his wife as a silly woman.

Mr. Bennet is a respectable man who prefers to be alone in his library and talk with his favorite daughter Elizabeth for a majority of the novel. He holds his daughter Elizabeth in high regard. He recognizes her sharpness and quick wit and understands how exceptional she is. When Elizabeth leaves her home to move to Mr. Darcy's residence at Pemberly, Mr. Bennet visits her often. Austen writes, "Mr. Bennet missed his second daughter exceedingly; his affection for her drew him oftener from home than anything else could do," (Austen 407). It is

clear that Mr. Bennet shows a great amount of love for his smartest and most independent daughter.

On the other hand, Mrs. Bennet is a character whose only goal in life is to see the marriage of her five daughters. Yu describes Mrs. Bennet as so, “a miraculously tiresome character. Noisy and foolish, she is a woman consumed by the desire to see her daughters married and seems to care for nothing else in the world,” (Yu 678). Mrs. Bennet perpetuates the patriarchal idea of marriage in the 18th century. She can’t consider anything else besides the marriage of her daughters. According to Lloyd W. Brown, “Miss, Bingley, Lydia, and Kitty are all sex-seekers, determined to complete their identity within a narrow concept of sexual roles—a concept that is embodied, on the parental level by Mrs. Bennet, whose “business” in life is getting her daughters married,” (Brown 331). Mrs. Bennet can’t look beyond the idea of a woman needing a man. There is nothing more important to her than marrying off her daughters.

Mrs. Bennet’s only prospect in life was to marry so she can’t see beyond that life for any of her daughters. She holds firm to this belief even when it means risking her daughter’s happiness. This is seen through Mr. Collins proposal to Elizabeth. When Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins her mother is furious and in a conversation with Mr. Collins tells him just how foolish she thinks her daughter is. In the conversation with Mr. Collins she says, ‘Lizzy shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it directly. She is a very headstrong, foolish girl, and does not know her own interest but I will make her know it,’ (Austin 121). Mrs. Bennet believes that Elizabeth should marry Mr. Collins and she can’t see anything beyond this idea. Even though she knows that Mr. Collins will not make Elizabeth happy, she continually pushes the marriage onto Elizabeth. It is clear that Mrs. Bennet believes that a woman needs a man in her life, even if that means it will cause her unhappiness.

Even though Mrs. Bennet makes it her business to marry off her daughters, they are only able to marry in spite of her efforts. According to Margaret Mary Benson, a librarian at Linfield College Library, “Mrs. Bennet is a constant source of embarrassment and irritation-though of her five daughters, only Elizabeth has the perception to realize the extent of her mother’s shallowness and negative influence,” (Benson). The way that Mrs. Bennet tries to marry off her children is often silly and mistaken. This can be seen through Mrs. Bennet’s perception of Mr. Darcy. Before she knows that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are engaged all she can talk about is how horrible a man Mr. Darcy is. But after they are engaged, Mrs. Bennet is thrilled with the ensuing marriage because of how much money Elizabeth will be coming into. When she is talking to Elizabeth about her marriage she says, “‘My dearest child,’ she cried, ‘I can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more,’” (Austen 400). Mrs. Bennet isn’t concerned with the happiness of her daughter. All she cares about is the amount that Mr. Darcy is worth.

Mrs. Bennet’s constant meddling puts a strain on her marriage with Mr. Bennet. Mrs. Bennet is portrayed as an uneducated and silly woman while Mr. Bennet is a respectable man. The differences between their characters make their marriage extremely unequal. When speaking about Mr. and Mrs. Bennet at the end of the novel Austen writes:

I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman for the rest of her life; though perhaps it was luck for her husband, who might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form, that she still was occasionally nervous and invariably silly.” (Austen 407)

At the end of the novel, the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is just as unhappy as when it began. Since they don't respect each other, Mr. Bennet is forced to find comfort in his books and his daughter Elizabeth, while Mrs. Bennet still finds comfort in marrying her daughters off to the highest bidder.

Lydia is another example of a character in *Pride and Prejudice* who can't see beyond her societal role to marry. She is the silliest of the Bennet sisters and it is this quality that leads her into a loveless marriage. Throughout the entirety of the novel all Lydia seems to care about is men and parties. She is obsessed with the soldiers visiting her town and makes it her goal in life to be noticed by them. This longing causes problems with Mr. Wickham. When Lydia's parents allow her to travel to Brighton for a few months, Lydia makes the immature decision to run off with Mr. Wickham before they are married. When Jane is relaying the terrible news to Elizabeth in a letter she writes, "What I have to say relates to poor Lydia, an express came at twelve last night...from Colonel Forster, to inform us that she has gone off to Scotland with one of his officers; to own the truth, with Wickham," (Austen 287). The situation that Lydia has put herself in is so serious because it could not only ruin her reputation, but the reputation of her family as well. The immature decision of a silly little girl could cause the inability of any of her sisters to marry.

Luckily, Mr. Darcy steps in and essentially bribes Mr. Wickham to marry Lydia and prevents any further ruin of the family name. The fact that Mr. Wickham had to be bribed into the marriage makes it clear that Lydia and Mr. Wickham are far from equals both in love and marriage. Mr. Wickham doesn't respect Lydia and Lydia only shows a young girl's infatuation with Mr. Wickham. This is clearly shown near the end of the novel when Mr. Wickham has grown tired of Lydia and vice versa. When discussing Lydia and Mr. Wickham's marriage

Austen writes, “His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer; and in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her,” (Austen 409). Since Lydia and Mr. Wickham marriage came out of a desperate situation, Mr. Wickham is forced to live with a wife who he does not show affection for and Lydia is forced to remain the same, silly girl that she had always been. It is safe to make the prediction that Mr. Wickham and Lydia will experience the same marital woes as Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.

When critics try and show Austen as an anti-feminist writer they often turn to her novel *Emma*. According to Wendy Moffat, a Professor of English at Dickinson College, “Our difficulties with *Emma* reside in part in the resolution of the plot, her marriage to Mr. Knightly,” (Moffat 51). In the novel Emma is seen as giving up her independence when she chooses to marry a man sixteen years her senior. In addition to giving up her independence, it seems as if Emma’s happiness relies solely on Mr. Knightly. However, I would argue that the marriage between Mr. Knightly and Emma is much less significant than her growth as a character. It is her growth into a character that is equal in wit, strength, and independence to Mr. Knightly that eventually allows her to enter into a happy union with him.

Emma centers around a young, rich heroine who lives with her elderly father. She is convinced that she will never marry. However, this doesn’t stop her from playing matchmaker with all her friends. In the novel she sets up her former governess and Mr. Weston (who are married before the novel starts as a result of Emma’s meddling), and Harriet Smith (a young girl from a lower class whom Emma befriends) and Mr. Elton. Emma is so convinced that Mr. Elton and Harriet will work out that she convinces poor Harriet to refuse a proposal from a man she truly admires.

Emma realizes her mistakes with Harriet and Mr. Elton when Mr. Elton proposes to her. Emma is shocked and refuses immediately. Mr. Elton is equally shocked and embarrassed, and in just a few months time, takes up a wife who is arguably the most annoying character in the novel. Instances of Emma's immaturity and misconceptions of events come up a lot in the novel and cause problems for many of her friends and family. However, this doesn't stop her from continually growing as an individual.

Later in the story, Emma falls for a young handsome man named Frank Churchill but quickly realizes that it was nothing but infatuation. All throughout the novel, her brother-in-law, Mr. Knightly shows himself as being a true gentleman and a great admirer of Emma. He sees the many faults in her but patiently waits for her to grow as a person and learn from her own mistakes. By the end of the novel, Emma realizes that she has been in love with Mr. Knightly the entire time and the two happily wed.

Emma can be considered a problem character for a lot of readers. While writing Emma, Austen said, "I am going to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like." Emma does not fit the traditional mold of an eighteenth century woman. In addition, Emma does not start out as a strong, likable female heroine, like Elizabeth Bennet. Instead, Emma displays growth throughout the novel that eventually molds her into a heroine equal to Elizabeth Bennet.

When describing Emma Woodhouse, Margaret Kirkham says, "'Emma Woodhouse is certainly the furthest of all Austen's heroines from 'a picture of perfection,'" (Kirkham 125). Emma's imperfections and immaturity are due to the fact that she has no mother and a silly father. Because she has no appropriate guardians to look up to, Emma is forced to mature and make mistakes without any guidance. According to Benson, "Emma is unusual among our heroines in that she sets herself in the maternal role... she is left to choose her own path, and

chooses the wrong one. She is perhaps the heroine most harmed by lack of proper family, “ (Benson). As a result Emma must try to learn from her own mistakes without any proper guidance. Unlike Elizabeth, she is much less equipped to provide herself guidance. It is not until the end of the novel that she is truly able to learn from her mistakes.

Even though it is clear that Emma would have benefited greatly from a proper parental figure, Emma has many good qualities. She is a devoted daughter, well-liked by her friends and family, and it is clear that she is quite clever. When describing the relationship between Emma and her father Austen writes, “She loved her father dearly, but he was no companion to her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful,” (Austen 4). There are several other instances in the novel in which Emma is described as being very clever and intelligent. So clever that she outwits her father numerous times.

Emma is an interesting character because of her plan to never marry. One reason for this is she never wants to leave her elderly father’s side and another reason is because she doesn’t see it as a necessity. Emma is one of Austen’s few heroines who have this option. She is rich enough where if she never found a partner equal to her, she would never have to marry. When discussing marriage with her friend Harriet Smith Emma says, “I have none of the usual inducements of woman to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing; but I never have been in love: it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine,” (Austen 76). This line shows Emma as an independent heroine. She is intelligent enough to realize that she doesn’t need a man to complete her life. She understands that her present situation is a good one and that it doesn’t need changing. In addition, she is aware that she doesn’t need a man in order to be happy. Emma chooses not to marry. She is in the proper position to make that choice and is, as a result able to

make it. The choice that Emma makes to remain unmarried is a feminist trait in itself. In a society that frowned upon young girls becoming old maids, Emma is openly admitting that she may never marry. According to Nye, Emma exhibits, “the feminist ideals of her time: choice in marriage and the rational female mind,” (Nye V).

Although Emma is constantly saying that she never intends to marry, she does end up marrying Mr. Knightly at the end of the novel. This ending is what causes a lot of problems for feminist critics. However, I would argue that this too was a choice. Emma didn't have to marry Mr. Knightly. She had the means to provide for herself without ever having a husband. Instead, she chose to marry Mr. Knightly because she loves him and chooses to be with him. And as Emma states, the only way that her views on marriage will change is if she falls in love.

Emma emphasizes her ability to choose a marriage partner when she rejects Mr. Elton's proposal. Although she rejects the proposal because her friend Harriet Smith is fond of Mr. Elton, the fact that Emma is able to reject a powerful man like Mr. Elton is a powerful statement. When Emma rejects Mr. Elton's proposal she says, “so far from having long understood you, I have been in the most complete error with respect to your views till this moment. As to myself I am very sorry that you should have been giving way to any feelings-Nothing could be farther from my wishes,” (Austen 117). It is at this point that Emma realizes that she has made a terrible mistake by allowing Harriet to pursue her feelings for Mr. Elton. Through her immaturity Emma has led Harriet to believe that a man much above her in status would want to marry her. If Emma had evaluated the situation more thoroughly, she would have realized that Mr. Elton is not the type of man to marry someone with a status as low as Harriet Smith's.

Emma's mistakes are portrayed numerous times in the novel. When speaking about Emma's mistakes, Margaret Lenta, a former Professor at the University of Natal, says, “although

the novel is certainly concerned with self-correction, and we are given periodic insight into Emma's understanding of her major mistake, the theme of self-determination runs from the book's first page to its last," (Lenta 33). Instead of continually making the same mistake, Emma learns from them and grows as a character in the novel. Her continual growth allows her to become Austen's "model woman."

Even though her immaturity causes her friend pain, she handles the proposal rejection in a mature way. When she is rejecting Mr. Elton she explains why she does so and later on takes the blame for Harriet's pain. In addition, she sticks to her desire to never marry unless she falls in love. Even if that means rejecting a powerful man like Mr. Elton.

Throughout the novel Emma grows into a mature and likable character. This can be seen both through her relationship with Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax. Both of these women are mistreated and misunderstood by Emma through a majority of the novel. However, by the end of the novel Emma has come to respect and care for them both. She begins to grow from a rude and spoiled young girl to a strong and mature woman.

This growth is due in part to Mr. Knightly. Emma doesn't just learn from Mr. Knightly, rather, they both learn from each other. According to Kirkham, "Austen carefully balances her heroine's faults and merits against those of the hero-his irritability and her snobbishness; his generosity and warm affections and her charitableness and loyalty to her governess," (Kirkham 133) It is by showing the best and worst traits of these characters that Austen allows them both to grow as individuals.

Once both of the characters have learned to respect each other and consider themselves as equals they are able to enter into wedded bliss. When describing the marriage between Mr. Knightly and Emma, Kirkham states:

While giving us in Miss Woodhouse anything but a ‘picture of perfection’, she manages to portray a heroine whose qualities fit her to become mistress of Donwell Abbey and to marry not as a shrew or idiot, now reformed and subservient, but as one whom he rightly, recognizes as equal, capable of becoming his partner in life. (Kirkham 131).

It is clear that Mr. Knightly and Emma both recognize themselves as equals and therefore are more likely to enter into a happy marriage. When Mrs. Weston, Emma’s former governess, describes their marriage she says, “and it was in every respect so proper, suitable, and unexceptionable a connection, and in one respect, one point of the highest importance, so peculiarly eligible, so singularly fortunate, that now it seemed as if Emma could not have safely attached herself to any other creature,” (Austen 422). It is through their continual growth as individuals and their unwavering respect towards one another that leads readers to believe that Emma will lead a happy and free life in her marriage to Mr. Knightly.

Both Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse represent an ideal woman in the 18th century. Although their eventual marriage is difficult for some modern readers to grasp, at the time, the eventual marriage of the heroine was nearly impossible to get away from. Austen is using her society’s rigid standards to help empower women. Women like Elizabeth and Emma didn’t enter their marriages because of their society’s expectations. Instead, they both entered their marriages because they found a partner that could respect them. The marriages between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy and Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightly, are both built on equality. Austen is displaying feminist traits in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. The heroines in her novel are model women who find respect in love. Austen is essentially telling her women readers that they don’t have to settle for a man not worthy of them just because their

society expects them to. Austen is showing readers that women are capable of making their own decisions and they are rational enough to understand what is best for them. In a society where a women's only choice was to whom she would marry, Austen is presenting readers with heroines who model the abilities to make that choice.

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