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Rise Of The Novel (ENGL 22)

June 2025

The Art and Craft in Arts and Crafts: Close Reading Art in Jane Austen's *Emma*

Handsome, clever, rich — and artistic, to boot. Emma Woodhouse has it all. Yet in her hands, Jane Austen makes art a tool for Emma to manipulate the people around her through flattery and deception. Emma relies on art to further her fantasies for Harriet, Mr. Elton, Jane Fairfax, and Frank Churchill because art is subject to individual bias and difficult to criticize. Harriet's overly flattering portrait and Jane Fairfax's mysterious piano are prime examples of this truth, revealing Emma's wishes for the world to follow her misguided beliefs. Yet while Harriet's portrait is entirely Emma's own plot, Jane Fairfax's piano and the underlying secret engagement to Frank Churchill elude Emma because she is an accomplice rather than the primary focus of Frank Churchill's scheme. Therefore Emma's use of art reveals her desire to indirectly manipulate the world around her, by making the objects of her crafty schemes subjects of her art, yet it also illuminates her larger cluelessness towards the feelings of others when read in companion with Michael Suk-Young Chwe's 'Austen on Cluelessness'. Emma believes she is secretly more analytical and articulate than the rest of the world, but her tendency to focus on an individual and literal meaning often leads her astray, especially when it comes to art and its infinite interpretations. While playful and comedic, *Emma*'s use of the arts examines the literary extent of creative liberties and gives Emma an unusual amount of autonomy in shaping the futures of those around

her. At the same time, such autonomy is a literary conceit that can only be imagined by removing Emma's credibility. It is only in her own considerations of art that Emma can imagine her friends as the subjects, and therefore give herself occupation as the artist. Emma's portrait with Harriet and Mr. Elton, and her cluelessness about the piano being taken advantage of by Frank Churchill, demonstrate Emma's singular approach to art and more largely, other people, extending Chwe's theory from self-referent cluelessness to referencing others as an extension of the self.

Michael Suk-Young Chwe unfortunately did not write extensively on *Clueless* (the cult classic movie), but did identify elements of Emma's cluelessness (the quality of ignorance), chiefly her purposeful social stratification, literalness, excessive self-reference, and presumption (Chwe 2). All of these hint at Emma's overly analytical view of the world, to the point of assuming others follow what she believes to be true. Mathematical thinking and art are usually at odds, however, and when Emma believes herself to be helping her protegeé Harriet's romantic prospects through art, she is sorely mistaken. Attempting to matchmake, Emma proposes a portrait of Harriet to highlight Harriet's best qualities for Mr. Elton, and yet when Mr. Elton praises her artistic abilities, Emma immediately finds him foolish. "'You know nothing of drawing. Don't pretend to be in raptures about mine. Keep your raptures for Harriet's face'" (Austen 34) she thinks to herself. Chwe's social stratification is exemplified here, as Emma perceives herself as socially superior to Mr. Elton because she is more artistic than him. Because of this, she makes the a priori assumption that because she knows more than Mr. Elton, he must know nothing at all — a form of social stratification pushing him down to Harriet's level, because Emma sees Harriet as more a pet than human at this point. Therefore Mr.

Elton ought to be less enthusiastic about Emma, and more malleable to her desire to push him towards Harriet. Emma interprets Mr. Elton's praise on a very literal level, believing that he is praising her art because she is skilled at portraiture. Yet the enthusiasm and agreements of Mr. Elton led readers to question whether Mr. Elton's intentions match Emma's — his praise is so energetic that it seems fake. Readers know it to be disingenuous because of the immediate concession of Emma's artistic ability wanting a fair bit of practice to match its reputation — "steadiness had always been wanting; and in nothing had she approached the degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command… but she was not unwilling to have others deceived" (34–35). Emma knows that her art is wanting, but is nevertheless flattered by Mr. Elton's praise because she takes it to praise her art, and having been praised for her portraits her whole life, she does not conceive that Mr. Elton might have an ulterior motive. Moreover, the underlying reason Emma is pleased by Mr. Elton's praise is because she believes that Mr. Elton's reception to her art must signify some interest in Harriet, and therefore the portrait becomes another success of her scheme, despite her disparaging his taste. "She could not respect his eye" — social stratification — "but his love and his complaisance were unexceptionable" (37) — literalness. Mr. Elton endears himself to Emma because of his 'complaisance', i.e. playing the part of the besotted lover that Emma wants. Emma literally paints the part she wants for Harriet and Mr. Elton to play for her own satisfaction of playing matchmaker, yet does not consider the more credible explanation behind Mr. Elton's praises, attraction to Emma.

A less happy example (for Emma) lies in Jane Fairfax's and Frank Churchill's relationship, which Emma had conceived as a perfunctory relationship and not much

else. Textually, art provides a useful window into the true thoughts of *Emma*'s characters when character's dialogue deliberately conceals, which adds a layer of secrecy to other's schemes that Emma is not privy to. Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill's relationship is obfusticated by not only Jane and Frank's schemes, but also by Emma's delusion that Frank is interested in courting Emma. Readers are also somewhat in the dark until Frank Churchill and Emma watch Jane play the piano, where it becomes evident that Frank and Jane are involved through the subtext of Jane's piano playing. While Emma is convinced that Jane is carrying on an illicit affair with Mr. Dixon (and the gift of a piano furthers it), Frank's dialogue about Jane clues readers in to something else going on — his endless compliments and attention to Emma take on an air of artifice as he indirectly uses Emma to praise Jane, and wonder at the origin of her new piano. As Jane plays, Frank begins talking to Emma and praising the mysterious patron's taste in instruments, especially delighting himself by directly addressing Jane through Emma, as he praises 'Col. Campbell's' taste, hinting that he either "gave his friend very minute directions" (this friend is transparently a pseudonym for Frank himself) or "wrote to Broadwood himself" (193). Music serves as a useful disguise for Frank to take advantage of Emma's delusions to keep his own secrets, for in praising the piano he indirectly praises Jane Fairfax's ability to play. He also praises Jane's artistry in order to solicit another waltz so that he might be closer to her, which displeases Emma because she is not privy to Jane's feelings on the idea. She constructs Jane's blushing and smiling at Frank Churchill as an obvious sign of her "reprehensible" feelings for someone else, and is incensed that Jane will not reveal her private feelings aloud for Emma to verify this (for some of Emma's less than stellar

opinion of Jane is that Jane is a naturally private person and not as easy to construct an opinion about). Emma interprets Frank's schemes, which "contrived that she should be seated by him; and was sufficiently employed in looking out the best baked apple for her, and trying to make her help or advise him in his work, till Jane Fairfax was quite ready to sit down to the pianoforté again" (193) are to occupy Emma, when really they are intended to care for Jane preparing to play. In fact the larger scheme here is literally written out: Frank contrives to occupy Emma with trivial and meaningless things until Jane is ready to play the piano, understanding Jane to be more withdrawn. Frank's gift of the piano signifies that Jane's playing it is her way of communicating. Unfortunately Emma is not listening to their song. She is probably on an entirely different album.

Chwe's analysis of Emma's cluelessness focuses on her ideas of social roles as a mechanism to understand the world around her, meaning the root of this cluelessness is Emma's use of herself as the superior reference — consider Emma's aversion to Mr. Martin and characterization of Harriet's attraction to Mr. Martin as 'inferior' (25). But Emma's emphasis on the visual arts as a tool of trickery instead focuses on Emma's tendency to meddle with *others*, muddling her own observation skills. Emma believes objects of her schemes are flat subjects, rather than dynamic characters with their own motivations. As Chwe writes, mathematicians may not be artists, yet in *Emma* both analytical and artistic characters fail to understand their 'fixation on literality': not all schemes work when considering human emotions, particularly cluelessness. Emma's analysis of Mr. Elton's praise focuses entirely on Mr. Elton in relation to Harriet, and Emma as the secondary (but all powerful) figure (39). She derives her pleasure in manipulating others, though Mr. Elton's focus is really on Emma without her knowledge.

Emma regards Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax harshly when they are found out because she is not the artist of this scheme, and the very existence of their relationship proves everything she believed wrong, particularly that “his having a decidedly warm admiration, a conscious preference of herself” (210) must be attributed to Frank being in love with her, and absolutely nothing else. While Mr. Elton’s praises are genuine and Frank Churchill’s are intended as a coverup, Emma interprets both in the same manner, which is as a reflection upon her character. She reduces both men to pieces on her chessboard which may be manipulated at her will, without considering their own lives. Although both turn out to be quite manipulative on their own end, Emma’s initial charming impressions of them show that she constructs an image of them as they might fit in her life, and is easily convinced that she enhances them by virtue of existing in proximity. Chwe proposes that good performers are better at imagining what the other will do, which allows for emotional forecasting, but only when they focus on the other as a person, rather than as an opponent to one’s self. Emma’s meddling runs counter to this theory, since she seems to entirely fixate on other people’s lives, but also reinforces her own easily flattered nature, since she does not consider that Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill might have their own lives outside of their role in hers. One might consider this a reinforcement of Chwe’s theory, but *Emma* really extends the idea of cluelessness to not just an activity of the self, but other people. There is more to cluelessness than just focusing on one’s self. Emma is the ultimate comedic example of turning everyone into her preferences, at her will (Chwe 205), but paradoxically does seem to care about the people she manipulates, counter to Chwe’s theory. This is because she uses other people as a reflection of herself by painting them as clueless without regard for their

emotions, and especially as reflections of her own nature. Frank Churchill was naturally in love with her, and Mr. Elton was naturally in love with Harriet. The reality of these relationships greatly displeases her because it reflects that she is not in control of the portraits she wishes to paint of a harmonious and eternally grateful Highbury.

This is not to diminish Emma's novel character; the hilarity of Jane Austen is that she writes imperfect people. The art of deception and surprise plays just as much a role in her character as does the art of portraits and pianoforte. Chwe writes that Emma does not 'socially contextualize' (209) her interactions with other people, but novelistically who needs that when they can just become adoring extensions of her? As Chwe and Austen put it, not everyone has a natural propensity for art, but it is up to the characters in *Emma* to decide how to interpret it. In Emma's world, everyone is her flattered sculpture — until they choose to break from her mold.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Penguin Threads, 2011

Chwe, Michael Suk-Young. “Austen on Cluelessness”, *Jane Austen, Game Theorist*. Princeton University Press, 2014