

# Emma's Quest in Time and Space

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**This** paper addresses the quest in terms of time and space in Jane Austen's novel *Emma*. The concept of "quest" is commonly viewed as a journey towards an objective. It is a trip through which a character seeks for some better experience. It is also characterized by motion in space, time passing, and change of setting. The ultimate goal of the quest, therefore, is self-awareness and the building up of the character's personality. The quest was the only route to achieve self-awareness in the age of Enlightenment in the 18th century. It generally involves much travel, and after obtaining his/her objective, the protagonist returns home. However, Jane Austen's novel, *Emma*, has its own concept of "the quest" because the learning process is carried out only within the social borders of the novel itself. Thus *Emma*'s world can be seen as a "microscopic" view, which reflects the limited milieu of the novel, as Hughes (1983) has judiciously pointed out in his analysis of *Emma*.

The point I wish to stress is that this world also bears an "infinitesimal" view of the universe since it stands for the world at large and conveys a timeless and universal experience (cf. Hughes, 1983: 24). Jane Austen's world shows clearly that relationships could thrive despite distance, which means that Time and Space are not necessary for the protagonist's experience. And although Jane Austen's novels are formulaic novels, they provide the reader with a psychological insight into human nature because the characters are not isolated entities, but they are members of interconnected communities that shape and influence them as individuals.

Jane Austen's world isn't simply idiosyncratic like the Brontes, but she uses irony to maintain a certain detachment. Moreover, her love is considered as "Intelligent love", rather than "Romantic love". It might be argued that Jane Austen scrutinizes scrupulously the real problems of her world and environment with its intricacy and complexity of human relationships.

The reader should not be misled by what Jane Austen says about her novels: "3 or 4 families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (cited in Lodge, 1983:13). Nevertheless, the perusal of her novel reveals a complex evolution of the protagonist in terms of time and space. Far from being simplistic as she humbly claims, the structure of her novel reveals a valid progression from lack of experience to mental and emotional maturity and from irresponsibility to responsibility. In fact, Jane Austen belongs to a large and lively family from which she has learnt how to deal with people. Furthermore, she is endowed with a mind of singular vivacity, an eye characterized by a power of accurate observation, and a heart capable of highly intense feelings. This helps her a great deal not only in her realistic and vivid characterization, but equally in her deep understanding of human relationships. Such insight reminds us of George Lakoff's (1999:551) apposite observation that "At the heart of our quest for meaning is our need to know ourselves - who we are, how our mind works, what we can and can't change, and what is right and wrong."

Notwithstanding the rather confined environment of Highbury, Emma has laden it with a universal significance and dimension. There is, indeed, a larger society than the Highbury one that lies outside the confines of the scope of the novel. For instance, many critics emphasize the match-making theme in Emma, but ignore the materialistic significance and dimension of marriage in the nineteenth century. For everything is measured by means of material profit and benefit in that limited milieu – so to speak – which is the representative of the English society at a larger scale. Emma would accept or reject a match for this or that character according to his/ her societal position. So, economics and calculation are important factors in Jane Austen's society.

Frank Churchill stands for such a materialistic world. The economic status of the character is always a yardstick against which all his deeds and words are measured in such acquisitive society. The world of Jane Austen is not totally different from the world of London or New York, for instance. Frank Churchill's presence and Mr. Knightley's sporadic trips to London are highly emblematic and symbolic of the influence of the world at large upon the Highbury, Randalls and Donwell world of the novel. Both characters play a major role in shaping the notion of quest upon which the novel is built.

Emma is neither a foolish protagonist nor a gullible young lady for irony purposes. Instead, we are led to witness a certain display of intelligence, wit and even “maturity” in her character. That’s why the novel, which bears Emma’s name, opens as follows:

“Emma woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her”

The process of self-discovery has already started for Emma who sets out on a quest where she will eventually acknowledge the fallibility of her understanding and perception of life by the end of such a quest. The experience of Emma is so striking and wonderful, well beyond the course of ordinary life and the limited environment of “3 or 4 families”.

The opening page of the novel shows that Emma is inside an enclosure, and that she cannot see the outside of the enclosure unless she enters into real interpersonal and social relationships with other people in her society. In other words, she has to “get outside herself,” as Lakoff would put it, in order to evaluate her own actions in terms of how Mr. Knightly evaluates the members of Highbury society according to the implicit values in such society rules. It is thanks to Mr. Knightly, who maintains an upright and balanced moral posture in society, that Emma gets a full and an adequate awareness of the notion of her spatiotemporal environment.

The blurring of boundaries between the interior and exterior creates depth and mobility in characters, making them seem more realistic. Emma’s individuality interacts more dynamically with her network of social relationships. Hence, perpetual motion and potential for change allow for the projection of imagination within the realm of probability. Emma is a character who has the potential to escape the narrative frame of Jane Austen’s novels. It is only when a character considers her own experience and can escape detection by those in power that it is possible for her to choose an identity.

However limited the world of Emma may be, it cannot be denied that it is enriched by Jane Austen’s deep knowledge of the world and her sharp perception of society around her. For Jane Austen demonstrates the miniature world of the English rural gentry at the turn of the 19th Century. And when Emma says to Mr. Knightly: “Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be,” she undoubtedly voices Jane Austen’s deep perception of life and her accurate social observation and wit. The dialogues in her novel look trivial, and yet they are extremely ambiguous and witty.

Within her own “limits” she comes as near perfection as any human genius can. That’s why Macaulay (1984) has compared Jane Austen to Shakespeare since she is

endowed with a sharp vision that even detects the foibles of human character. Her novels sparkle with touches of wit and irony, which is highly reminiscent of the battle of wits displayed by George Bernard Shaw in his famous plays. In this respect, she is their equal. It is worth noting that women at that time were oppressed and subjugated and had no voice of their own. Hence, Emma – like the protagonist in Mrs Warren’s Profession – is provided with a discursive space from which she could resist the dominant ideology as well as the societal dictates.

Though the quest of Emma is a bit confined in time and space, I should say that it remains highly impressive and enriched by means of the experience of some characters who are Men of the World. Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightly bring their wide experience as well as their vision of life to Highbury to broaden the mind of the protagonist.

At this juncture, I would like to argue that instead of sending Emma on a quest outside her territory, Jane Austen has made the world come to Emma. In fact, Emma has benefited from the proximity of both Frank Churchill and Mr Knightly. From the former, who despite being still young, she has immensely benefited from his wide travel experiences, and from the latter, who is sixteen years older than her, she has gained the wisdom normally acquired with age.

Jane Austen’s writings represent a breakthrough in literature because they depict women’s situation at that time when young women were pioneers of wit. Besides, her quest is performed without any harm since there is neither physical torture (as it is the case in King Lear), nor loss of dignity (as it is the case in Wuthering Heights, where Heathcliff has controlled three generations). And instead of making the quest encompass the characteristic items of the romantic and gothic novels, namely romance, a dead father/ mother, a vulnerable character, a hostile world, a lot of tears and suffering, one can notice some unknown antagonistic forces such as forests, nasty and enigmatic relatives, and ghosts, which Jane Austen has so strangely left out. Instead, she has successfully managed to reach such insight just through her quest, which is principally based on societal dimension and framework because her works are society-oriented novels. Her quest ends up with a sort of understanding between “self” and “society”, the goal of which is to make the protagonist achieve the ultimate compromise and harmony within society.

Unlike the eventful life of Romantic figures in Literature, Jane Austen presents Emma in a peaceful quiet life, which helps her have an overall vision of society around her. Moreover, Jane Austen’s novels reflect changes in the manner people regard “not only their relationship with the physical environment but their relationship with one another” (Elvira, 1993).

In brief, Jane Austen is anti-romantic in an age of romanticism. Unlike the Brontës' novels which deal with the overflowing of emotion and which are set in mysterious locations, peopled with stereotypical characters: heartless Villains, heroines in distress, revengeful characters whose jealousy leads to disaster, Jane Austen has managed to elaborately enclose hers in a limited but largely intricate environment. Jane Austen's relegation to the domestic realm is worth examining not as a sign of restriction but as an opportunity for understanding deeply the situation of women. In other words, the domestic and limited sphere gives Emma a power, unrecognizable by male standards which constitute a femininity independent of male authority.

Amidst this burning polemics, Jane Austen is far ahead of time because she has marvelously aroused a heated critical debate by posing a big issue: is the quest based on motion outside in time and space, or can it be conducted just at home? And as her focal points are social and moral issues, she emphasizes "conduct" as the outcome of her quest. Her young protagonist, Emma, guarantees her position in society despite her age, which is reminiscent of Henry James in *What Maisie Knew*. In fact, access to consciousness, one of the hallmarks of the modernist novel, pervades Jane Austen's novels (cf. Oberman, 2007). In *Emma*, physical space reflects social conditions, and concerns about space reflect internal, emotional reality. Jane Austen's heroines seldom control the physical spaces around them. Instead, they move beyond the limits of physically defined spaces, the setting of the novels, to the creation of an alternate type of space, preponderantly based on manners and social interaction. In this respect, Charlotte Brontë (1... :50) criticizes Jane Austen, stressing:

I have.... read one of Miss Austen's works – *Emma* read it with interest and with just the degree of admiration which Miss Austen herself would have thought sensible and suitable. Anything like warmth or enthusiasm- anything energetic, poignant, heart-felt is utterly out of place in commending these works.

Brontë, however, overlooks the important and intricate "web of relations" (cf. Mudrick, 1983:126). Accordingly, Reginald Farrer maintains that *Emma*

..... is not an easy book to read; it should never be the beginner's primer, nor be published without a prefatory synopsis. Only when the story has been thoroughly assimilated, can the infinite delights and subtleties of its workmanship begin to be appreciated, as you realize the manifold complexity of the book's web, and find that every sentence, almost every epithet, has its definite reference to equally unemphasized points before and after in the development of the plot. Thus it is hard, while twelve readings of *Pride and Prejudice* give you twelve periods of pleasure, not repeated only but squared again with each perusal, till at every fresh reading you feel anew that you never understood anything like the widening sum of its delights.

It is noteworthy that Jane Austen's irony shows that the spirit is not free, but rather limited, which displays the idea of secularization of spirituality, for irony is not only used as a figurative device but it is a structural device, as well. The plot of *Emma* is characterized by concealment and revelation. This gives the novel an intricate plot which reminds the reader of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*. All these novelists are fascinated by the complexities of personal relationships; moreover, their characters assemble an insightful philosophy of life. (*Emma*, p. 90)

A close perusal of the plot clearly shows such intricacy and complexity of human relationships. As the story unfolds, we are forced to perceive some moments of fine intensity and feelings. *Emma* has got a strong imagination as Douglas Bush (1985:138) has pointed out:

“Emma has just encountered her first distress, which will be lasting: Miss Taylor has married the genial and well-to-do Mr. Weston, the wedding party has left, Mr. Woodhouse is as usual asleep after dinner, and Emma is alone with her thoughts of past, present and future. Thus, at the moment of a great change in her way of life, we are taken, naturally and almost imperceptibly, inside her mind. Although ‘she had always wished and promoted the match’, and although the Westons are to live only half a mile away, Emma thinks of long days and evenings stretching out before her, with no intimate friend to talk to. She dearly loves her father, but that valetudinarian, incapable of any ‘activity of playful’. The large village of Highbury contains many acquaintances but no possible friends.”

In this respect, Emma's self-lacerating thoughts make her transcend both the notions of Time and Space in order to reach an insight into the societal surrounding. The eponymous heroine of *Emma* learns that she is not the centre of consciousness for the Highbury Universe; she expands her consciousness to make room for other voices, as we can see in the repeated use of the quoted language of others within Emma's narrated monologues. One can notice that Emma has always needed Mr. Knightley to help her during her quest in time and space. She relies on him to make things “intelligible” to her because it is he who would enable her to see clearly the world around her:

High in the rank of her most serious and heartfelt felicities, was the reflection that all the necessity of concealment from Mr. Knightley would soon be over. The disguise equivocal mystery, so hateful to her to practice, might soon be over. She could now look forward to giving him that full and perfect confidence which her disposition was most ready to welcome as a duty.

On the other hand Emma cannot deny the fact that Mr. Knightley has played an important role in her quest.

“ Emma laughed, and replied: “But I had the assistance of all your endeavors to counteract the indulgence of other people. I doubt whether my own sense would have corrected me without it”

“ Do you? –I have no doubt. Nature gave you understanding—Miss Taylor gave you principles. You must have done well. My interference was quit as likely to do harm as good. It was very natural for you to say, what right has he to lecture me?”

“ I’m sure you were of use to me” cried Emma.

“I was very often influenced rightly by you—oftener than I would own at the time. I am very sure you did me good.”

In addition , her quest, can be cogently conceptualized , to adopt Lakoff and Johnson’s theoretical framework (1999:236) , as “Thinking is Moving”. Emma’s imagination is so fertile that she often manages to transcend the limited spatiotemporal environment, the here and now. It is owing to this rich imagination that she can move to a much less restrained realm and reach a much inviting fancied future time.

Emma Woodhouse cannot set out on her quest without relying on unconscious conceptions of the internal structure of the self.

To follow the same trend of thought, we dare say that Emma is conceptualized as a traveler: an imaginary, not a physical traveler. Lakoff and Johnson (1999:6) argue that “a person living a life is a traveler” and that “love is a journey”. The lovers are, thus, travelers towards common life goals. Such love provides them with “motion” through space and helps them make progress on their journey. In view of this , we can say that Emma does not, of necessity, need to physically travel through Time and Space to seek a lover; the lover does come to fetch her.

Jane Austen’s novels are deeply involved in love and concealment and even Mr. Knightley – the oldest , wisest, the most serious and reliable character – is capable of expressing his feelings towards Emma by the end of the novel. For despite Emma’s seeming indifference towards Mr. Knightley, she enjoys being with him, and she is also willing to compromise. Moreover, despite her mistakes of judgment, there are no real impediments that show that the couple have different “life goals”. Contrary to the general but unfounded belief that Austen’s novels scarcely deal with passionate love, the alert reader can decipher some scenes of love that constitute the corner stone of most of her novels. These scenes give a sort of energy, enthusiasm and emotional depth to the so-called cold relationships, of which she is wrongly accused by the Brontes, for example. To illustrate this idea, let us consider the following instances depicted in some scenes in the novel

Mr. Elton declares his love for Emma.

Emma's has a flirtatious relationship with Frank Churchil.

Harriet is heart-broken after Mr. Hilton rejects her proposals.

Jane Fairfax and Emma hate each other and display mutual signs of jealousy.

Jane and Frank are secretly engaged.

Harriet Smith displays her feelings and interest in Knightly, which makes Emma soon realize that she loves Knightly herself.

Mr. Knightley enables Emma to have an overall understanding of the fit between her mind and reality. Thus, she has eventually managed- through her quest- to function and behave successfully in her physical environment, and to accommodate to, and even transform, her surrounding. It is worth emphasizing that Jane Austen's heroines all decline proposals that are offered in confined, indoor spaces and accept those that take place outdoors. Although many critics think that Jane Austen's novels are formulaic and that the space in her novels is the domestic space of a house, I contend that this seemingly formulaic aspect provides us with a psychological insight into human nature. Jane Austen foregrounds the importance to women of cultivating their own critical judgment: such women grow into conscious mature ladies.

To recapitulate, one of the major findings of this paper is that in spite of being retained in space and time, Emma has a desire to learn and do better in life because she has participated in critical reflections. To me, Jane Austen has successfully rendered the rich inner life of Emma.

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