

## The Art of Manipulation in Jane Austen's *Emma*

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### Abstract

This article examines the theme of manipulation in Jane Austen's *Emma*, focusing on how the protagonist, Emma Woodhouse, influences those around her, particularly Harriet Smith, to conform to her ideals. Manipulation is a power that is used by people to control someone or direct them in the way they want. Emma, a privileged and self-assured young woman, engages in matchmaking by subtly imposing her opinions on Harriet, shaping her romantic choices and perceptions. Through free indirect discourse, Austen provides insight into Emma's self-deception, allowing readers to critique her role as both an orchestrator and an unwitting agent of misunderstanding. The manipulation occurs subtly, and those being manipulated remain unaware of it. The novel contrasts Emma's well-meaning yet flawed manipulation with Frank Churchill's deliberate deception, emphasizing the moral implications of influence and control in social relationships. Austen, through the characters, portrayed how manipulation works. Additionally, Mr. Knightley's rational perspective serves as a counterpoint, guiding Emma toward self-awareness and moral growth. By exploring these dynamics, this paper highlights Austen's commentary on class, agency, and the consequences of unchecked influence in *Emma*.

Keywords: Manipulation, Influence, Free Indirect Discourse, Social Hierarchy, Female Agency

Jane Austen is considered one of the most intelligent writers of her time. She was praised for her satire and her comments on society. Her works are appreciated and criticized by many.

She was the one who used "free indirect discourse" for the first time in her novels which gave her the power to express her characters with clarity to her audience. Jane Austen belongs to the late 18th century, a period of Regency-era and her novels carried the era's theme. During that era novels were considered cheap compared with drama and poetry Austen tried to explore human behavior, view of society, and complications in relationships, which made her novels a huge hit. The predecessors of Jane Austen gave importance to the writing technique, form, and genre. Their writings were experimental, which paved the way for modern novels. Austen made slight changes in writing novels, which made her a successful novelist. She dealt with universal themes and simple characters and also did the narration from the protagonist's point of view. She did not reveal her identity and published her novel as written: "By a Lady". Her reputation grew after her death and still people celebrate her works she created a lasting impact in English literature.

Jane Austen's novels portray a relatable storyline that seizes the attention of the readers and the critics. Her novels focused on the lifestyle of upper-class society, marriage, and women's role in society. Her novels have strong female characters. For instance, *Sense and Sensibility*: Elinor Dashwood; *Pride and Prejudice*: Elizabeth Bennet; and *Emma*: Emma Woodhouse. Austen wrote six novels during her lifetime and all featured women as protagonists. This shows us how she reflected herself in the novels. The characterization in novels was straightforward and she wanted realism in her works for which she equipped common places, ordinary characters, domestic settings, and universal themes. She aimed to reflect society in her works through the characters which she successfully attained. Her novels were adapted into movies and TV series and it is also a huge success. Jane Austen's female characters lead the story, one such novel which has a powerful female character is Emma.

In the novel Emma, Austen uses the device of manipulation to inspect the characters and how they drive the situations and events that change the storyline. The manipulation done by characters serves as the central theme, which leads to the story. When a person tries to inject their ideas without facts or truth and makes them blindly believe in themselves, it is called manipulation. Emma Woodhouse, the protagonist of the novel, has mastered the art of manipulation. Austen introduces Emma as an intelligent woman who belongs to an upper-class society and is very proud of her intelligence and her matchmaking skills. When Miss Taylor got married to Mr. Weston, he felt so happy and proud because she promoted the match. The

relationship between Emma and Mrs. Weston was more like a friend than between the governess and her ward. Usually, governesses will guide their wards and teach them. Here, Emma kind of instructs Mrs. Weston, and she makes her do things for her. She is very persuasive over others. In chapter V, Mr. Knightly and Mrs. Weston discuss Emma's character and how, since the age of twelve, she has had her ways to manipulate others. "Emily has been the mistress of the house and of you all." (Emma, 30). Emma is an egoistical person. She boasts about her intelligence throughout the novel.

At the end of Chapter I, Emma wants to find a match for Mr. Elton, though she knew little about him, knew as if she knew what Mr. Elton expected, and wished to arrange a partner for him. When Emma was introduced to Harriet Smith, she found a spark in her, but Harriet Smith is an orphan, and there are no details about her birth or her social status. When Harriet herself had no idea about her parentage, Emma guaranteed that Harriet belonged to high society and that her father must be a gentleman. Emma tries to make Harriet and herself believe what might not be true. It is evident from this scenario that Emma started manipulating Harriet from the first meeting itself, and poor Harriet could not find the manipulation of Emma, and she trusted her blindly without questioning her. The reason behind Emma's affection for Harriet is that she longed for a companion. Mrs. Weston used to be Emma's companion until she got married. When she was introduced to Harriet, she thought that she would be a perfect companion for her. Emma's pride shadowed the truth that was in front of her. Emma uses her manipulative skills on Harriet. She wanted to raise the standards for Harriet. To do so, she always speaks positively about her and compliments her. Though Emma is manipulative from first sight, it is very subtle until Harriet speaks about Mr. Martin, who is a farmer, rents a farm from Mr. Knightly, and is also a good man. He is interested in Harriet, and when she was talking about the time she spent with Martins during the summer, Emma interrupted and distracted Harriet by telling her that she had nothing to do with them as they were a degree or two lower. Emma doesn't value the feelings of Harriet, and she stops her just because she is not interested, indirectly telling Harriet that she should also avoid them. Emma is guiding Harriet, which is fine, but she is restricting her feelings and thoughts and not allowing her to think independently. Harriet seeks the approval of Emma in all matters. Emma made Harriet dependent on her. When Emma is not interested in Robert Martin, Harriet also convinces herself that she should not think about Mr. Martin, but Harriet is interested in him. Emma is very persuasive, and Harriet is malleable. She misuses the innocence

of Harriet and wants to play by her rules. Harriet is emotionally weak and always seeks Emma's validation, which is an added advantage for Emma to manipulate her emotions.

Miss Smith never had any idea about Mr. Elton until Emma told her that Mr. Elton must be interested in her. Mr. Elton never showed any sign regarding Harriet; it was Emma who derived this idea, and she made up her mind that Harriet would be the perfect match for Mr. Elton. To set things up between Mr. Elton and Miss Smith, Emma always speaks highly about Harriet in front of Mr. Elton. Mr. Elton had no idea about Emma's secret plan, and he played along with her. Emma didn't stop there; to set things up between Mr. Elton and Miss Smith, Emma always spoke high about Harriet in front of Mr. Elton. She injected her thoughts into Harriet's mind, and Harriet was completely lost in Emma's promising words. Not only does Emma try to induce her ideas, but she also stirs the emotions of Harriet. Emma wanted to remove the image of the farmer from Harriet's mind, and she reckoned Mr. Elton would be the perfect candidate for that. Emma exploits the innocence of Harriet in the name of guiding and favoring, but all that Emma wants is to prove to everyone that she is always right and no one can question her intelligence. Mr. Elton's character and intentions are cloudy from the beginning; he manipulates Emma and also makes the readers believe that he is in love with Harriet. When Emma introduced Harriet to him, he always tried to flatter Harriet. "She was quite convinced of Mr. Elton's being in the fairest way of falling in love, if not in love already." (Emma, 33). Emma was very confident about Mr. Elton's feelings, and she gave hope to Harriet that Mr. Elton was in love with her. He never confessed his feelings, but his actions indicated that there was a chance that he may be interested, which confused everyone. She pulled one of her tricks to bring them together by presenting the portrait of Harriet Smith to Mr. Elton and asking him to frame the picture. After Emma finishes the portrait, Mr. Knightly comments, "You have made her too tall, Emma." (Emma, 39). Emma didn't reply to that comment, but Austen said, "Emma knew that she had, but would not own it." (Emma, 39). She never admitted her mistakes because it might make her feel weak, so she always tries to defend herself even though she knows that she is wrong. Emma thought that by giving the picture to Mr. Elton, he might develop feelings for Miss Smith, and eventually, he would ask for the hand of Harriet Smith. Mr. Elton praises and admires the beauty of Harriet. "She was a beautiful creature when she came to you, but, in my opinion, the attractiveness you have added is infinitely superior to what she received from nature." (Emma, 33). Emma felt so happy and proud when she heard Mr. Elton. She thought that once again she

proved that she was a good matchmaker, and she could stop thinking highly of herself. Mr. Elton volunteered himself to frame the portrait. Emma thought that Mr. Elton was in love with Harriet, but that is not the truth. Emma deceives Harriet in the process of matchmaking, and the only character in the novel who pinpoints Emma's mistakes is Mr. Knightly. The truth is, Mr. Elton was never in love with Harriet. After the dinner at Mr. Weston's house, Emma and Mr. Elton traveled together, and he confessed that he never thought about Harriet, and all along it was Emma who he was in love with. She also tries to manipulate Mr. Elton by telling him that Harriet would be the perfect match for him, but unlike Harriet, Mr. Elton is conscious and tells Emma that he was never interested in Harriet. "I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence; I never paid her any attention, but as your friend; I never cared whether she was dead or alive, but as your friend." (Emma, 116). Emma was horrified to hear a proposal from Mr. Elton, and she rejected it. For the first time in her life, she realized that she was wrong. The character of Miss Smith is weak and always looks after Emma's words. On the other hand, Emma is an intelligent woman who knows how to make this work in her favor. Harriet was too dependable on Emma, and she could not make decisions on her own. Maybe the pampering she got from Emma made her lazy, comfortable, and not obligated to do things on her own. Emma was against the union of Harriet and Robert Martin, and she was confident about it.

In chapter VII, Robert wrote a letter to seek the hands of Harriet, and she was thrilled to receive it. It is evident that Harriet is attracted to Mr. Martin, and she also expresses her feelings to Emma. Although Emma knows Harriet's intentions, she tries to deviate from them. When Harriet asked Emma to guide her on this matter, she didn't directly tell her to reject the proposal. Rather, she gave her hints and told her that she decided to make. Poor Harriet never wanted to disappoint Emma, and she thought for a second or two, then told her that she was going to reject the proposal. This gave relief to Emma. This is how manipulation works. A manipulator never instructs people to do things; they just give hints and tell them what they want subtly, and the victim will not realize that they are being manipulated; without knowing, they end up doing things as the manipulator wishes. This is what happened in the letter scene. When Harriet was in confusion, she told Emma that she had doubts. Immediately, Emma told her, "If a woman doubts whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him." (Emma, 43) Emma didn't tell her to refuse him openly, but she manipulated her to do so. Mr. Knightly is the one who questions Emma's actions. The news reached him, and he was outraged, and he scolded

Emma for her mistake. Emma never considered it a mistake; she told him that it was her answer. Mr. Knightly was always aware of Emma's doings. He asserts, "You saw her answer! You wrote her answer too. Emma, this was your doing. You persuaded her to refuse him." (Emma, 51). This was the strongest line in the novel, as Mr. Knightly instilled the true color of Emma. Martins met Harriet, and they invited her. Emma was very hesitant to send her to their farm. Before Harriet left, she told her that she was doing a great job, but Emma knew Harriet was nervous. Anyhow, she made Harriet believe that everything was fine.

The whole drama between Emma and Harriet on the matter of Mr. Martin's proposal is where the audience can find the manipulation at its finest, though Mr. Knightly points out that she is persuasive, she doesn't mind, and she stuck with her instincts. Being a manipulator is not an easy task because it takes a lot of skills and practice to make people believe in you. That is where Emma outshines everyone. She has been doing this from a young age, and it makes her a fine manipulator. Her manipulation causes a drift in the storyline where not only Harriet is Mr. Martin but also Mr. Elton. This creates tension in the novel, and Emma manages to pull out of the situation. Even after all this, Emma didn't stop her matchmaking hobby, and when she heard about Frank Churchill in the town, her interest turned towards him. At the Coles party, she laid her eyes on Frank Churchill. All she could think about was whether he would make a good match for Harriet, even though she showed some sort of interest in him in the beginning. Later, she wanted to set things up between Harriet and Mr. Churchill. From the beginning of the novel, Emma is portrayed as an impeccable character, and she manipulates everyone. She always instructed her father what to think and what to do. In chapter XXXII, Mr. and Mrs. Elton visited Hartfield. Emma was prejudiced, and she was not comfortable with Mrs. Elton. From the very first conversation with her, she hated her, and she didn't like it when Mrs. Elton addressed Mr. Knightly as Knightly. Mr. Woodhouse was pleased to have her in Hartfield. He thought that Mrs. Elton was a good woman, and he wanted to pay his respect, but Emma controlled her father's actions. "But, my dear papa, you are no friend of matrimony, and therefore, why should you be so anxious to pay your respects to a bride?." (Emma, 250). She didn't want her father to talk to Mrs. Elton; she diverted the topic, and he forgot what he ought to do without thinking. Mr. Woodhouse followed Emma's words. She also told Mrs. Weston about Mrs. Elton's manner: Emma wants everyone to have the same opinion as hers, and if not, she persuades them to believe in her.

Frank Churchill was the most hyped character in the novel, and Emma was very eager to meet him since she heard of him. Austen crafted the character as an equal to Emma's. In terms of intelligence, wealth, elegance, and manners, they both share common things, except that Mr. Churchill manipulated Emma. He fooled everyone, including the great Miss Woodhouse. The way he manipulated was different from Emma's. Emma persuades others and makes them believe in herself to prove her superiority; on the other hand, Frank Churchill manipulates Emma to hide his relationship with Jane Fairfax and their secret engagement. When Miss Bates spoke about Jane Fairfax, Emma discovered that they were both in Weymouth in October. Emma was curious to know about the acquaintance between Mr. Churchill and Miss Fairfax. Jane changed the topic to avoid Emma's question. Maybe she might have informed Frank Church about this, and because of that, he might have acted like he had no business with Jane Fairfax. Ever since he met Emma, he flirted with her in front of everyone. "Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted excessively." (Emma, 332), not only does he manipulate Emma but also the whole of Hartfield. In the ball, he asked Emma to dance with him; during his stay at Randall, he ignored Miss Fairfax and paid all his attention to Miss Woodhouse. Mr. Knightly was not pleased with this bond between Emma and Frank, and he grew envious. Mr. and Mrs. Weston planned to match Emma and Frank Churchill. But Emma had different ideas; she wanted Harriet to get married to Mr. Frank, and Emma fell in love with Mr. Knightly. Because of a misunderstanding between Emma and Harriet, when Harriet said she fell in love again, Emma thought that it might be Mr. Frank, and Harriet thought Emma was in love with Mr. Frank because they flirted. But actually, they were both in love with Mr. Knightly. The truth about Mr. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax was revealed by Mrs. Weston. "Engaged since October, secretly engaged. It has hurt me, Emma, very much. It has hurt his father equally. Some part of his conduct we cannot excuse." (Emma, 357). Emma was shocked that he played all along, and she felt sorry for Harriet.

Austen used manipulation as the central theme, which altered the course of events. The manipulation of Emma changes Harriet's life, which leads to confusion and hurt. If Emma had never manipulated Harriet, she might have married Mr. Martin. Mr. Elton was never the match for Harriet, but Emma failed to see that, and even when Mr. Knightly pointed at her mistakes, she didn't listen to them, and that caused heartbreak for Harriet Smith. Mr. Churchill's manipulation moved the storyline to the climax; everyone thought that Emma and Frank were interested in each other, and his secret engagement shocked everyone. He covered the truth so

well that even Emma could not find his true intentions. After hearing Harriet's interest in Mr. Knightly, Emma realized that she was in love with Mr. Knightly. Emma usually won't accept her flaws, but at the novel's end, she realizes that she is not perfect and that it is okay. When Emma discovered that Harriet was in love with Mr. Knightly, she felt sorry for Harriet, and once again, Emma hurt her feelings. To make things right, Emma went to Mr. Martin's house, apologized for her mistake, and proposed a marriage between Harriet and Mr. Martin. At the end of the novel, the character of Emma is completely transformed, and Emma, who never wanted to marry, marries the love of her life, Mr. Knightly.

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