

“Real Evils”: Mr. Woodhouse’s Creation of a Damsel in Distress

by Mary Oakley Strasser

“Emma Woodhouse” are the first two words of *Emma* (Austen 1). As this suggests, Emma is the center of attention in her family, her home, her village, and the novel. The remainder of the sentence partially explains why: “...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.” At first glance, the reader is probably a little jealous: pretty, smart, blessed and rich? It seems that the plot is about to unfold into the story of a fairy-tale princess. However, rereading the sentence raises some questions. Emma “seemed to...” be perfect with “very little” to endanger her world. So what evils threaten Emma’s fairy-tale world? The answer lies in the second sentence of the novel: “...a most affectionate, indulgent father.” Mr. Woodhouse poses no active danger to Emma’s physical well-being. He harbors no dragons, spindles or poisoned apples. Instead, Emma’s moral character is in danger. Mr. Woodhouse neglects his paternal duties in his passive, indulgent, and blind affection for his daughter.

Within the first two pages of the novel the words “danger” and “evil” occur four times, each in reference to Emma’s relationship with her father: “The evil of the actual disparity in their [Emma and her father’s] ages (and Mr. Woodhouse had not married early) was much increased by his constitution and habits; for having been a valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body, he was a much older man in ways than in years.” Mr. Woodhouse cares deeply for his family and friends, but only in matters that relate to himself. He is concerned about what others eat at his home, how they travel to his home, and how they disrupt his quiet life with changes such as marriage. Mr. Woodhouse cannot imagine that other people are different from him. He expects others to share his focus on health concerns and does not understand when they do not. To him, every party or outing poses a danger, and his language reflects his fearful attitude towards such dangers. “When Mr. Woodhouse speaks to dinner guests, he employs the language of a dangerous outing (venture, afraid, hurt) to describe eating” (Auerbach). At the evening party with the Bates, Mr. Woodhouse encourages Mrs. Bates to “venture[e] on one of these eggs” advising her that “you need not be afraid—they are very small, you see—one of our small eggs will not hurt you.” (Austen 22). Mr. Woodhouse expects Emma to protect their guests from unhealthy food, when, in fact, he is placing Emma in social danger by not allowing her to be a gracious hostess. At that same party, he exclaims, “Miss Bates, let Emma help you to a little bit of tart—a very little bit...you need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here.” Emma recognizes the social repercussions of her father’s advice and fills her guests’ plates “in a much more satisfactory style” (Austen 23).

Mr. Woodhouse’s fears extend beyond the dining table and inhibit Emma’s freedom, sometimes severely. His fear of driving to the Westons’ home prevents frequent visits. His fear of foul weather forces them to leave the Christmas party early. His fear of change, especially through matrimony, forces Emma to declare to Mr. Knightley that “While her dear father lived, any change of condition must be impossible for her. She could never quit him” (Austen 367). Finally, Mr. Woodhouse’s fear of leaving his home forces Emma and Knightley to reside at Hartfield after their marriage because “such a transplantation would be a risk of her father’s

comfort, perhaps even of his life, which must not be hazarded. Mr. Woodhouse taken from Hartfield!—No, he felt that it ought not to be attempted... and that so long as her father's happiness—in other words his life—required Hartfield to continue her home, it should be his likewise.” (Austen 368) Mr. Woodhouse's constant fears burden Emma. As Leavis dramatically explains, Mr. Woodhouse is his daughter's “paternal jailor” he “battens on Emma, thwarting her own healthy instinct for living.”

However, Mr. Woodhouse is as much Emma's liberator as her “jailor”. His excess concerns are purely those that relate to his own health, and he is completely uninvolved in her character or moral development. Not only is he passive towards Emma's moral education, but he is also blind to her faults. Mr. Woodhouse cannot endure others' teasing or criticism of Emma. When Knightley teases Emma, she finds it “not particularly agreeable” but “she knew it would be so much less so to her father, that she would not have him really suspect such a circumstance as her not being thought perfect by every body” (Austen 11). Mr. Woodhouse praises Emma constantly, claiming such things as “whatever you say always comes to pass” and “Emma never thinks of herself, if she can do good to others” (Austen 12-13), both comments that ironically Emma proves wrong through the course of the novel. Emma is inflated by this excessive and unmerited praise. This is reinforced by her situation as mistress of Hartfield and of Highbury. When Harriet Smith meets Emma for the first time she is “delighted with the affability with which Miss Woodhouse had treated her all the evening, and actually shaken hands with her at last!” (Austen 23). As an intelligent and perceptive woman, Emma notices the elevated treatment that she receives from people such as Harriet Smith and attributes it to the qualities that her father so often praises.

Mr. Woodhouse is not entirely to blame for Emma's poor character education. In Regency society, her education would have been the responsibility of Mrs. Woodhouse. However, like most fairy-tale princesses, Emma's mother died when she was very young. With her sister recently married, Emma became mistress of Hartfield at a young age with no one to guide her. Miss Taylor, Emma's governess, is no evil step-mother and “had fallen little short of a mother in affection” (Austen 1). However, she falls far short in providing Emma's moral education. While she ought to have guided Emma, she “hardly...impose[d] any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away...and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own” (Austen 1). Thus Emma's character is formed mostly by her father, whose “abdication of all responsibility” is compounded “by the weakness of her governess, and of course by her own intelligence and strength of will” (Lauber).

As Tanner explains, “Emma is a clever but ‘spoiled’ girl and, having lacked external authority (both from her father and from her governess) when she was young, she has not internalized any authority which can direct and control her as she grows into a young woman.” Emma's father and surrogate mother have allowed her to grow into a self-centered, arrogant young woman, as captured on the first page of the novel: “The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments” (Austen 1). Mr. Woodhouse has raised a daughter who would never feel the need to ask the mirror, “Who is the fairest one of all?” She thinks that she already knows the answer.

By this account, Emma is a self-centered, conceited, and spoiled young woman with few redeeming qualities; she is the beautiful princess locked away in a tower of self-importance. Why then does Jane Austen devote an entire novel to such a character, and why do readers from every generation love her? Mr. Knightley is Emma's knight in shining armor physically, figuratively, and morally. He rescues her from the dangers of her father and the condemnation of the readers. Through his guidance Emma blossoms into a mature, caring woman. Love does not blind him to Emma's faults; he sees her potential. Mr. Knightley recognizes the stifling influence that Mr. Woodhouse exerts over Emma. He also knows that Emma's deep love and devotion to her father are among her most redeeming qualities. Mr. Knightley comments to Mrs. Weston at her party, "You might not give Emma such a complete education as your powers would seem to promise; but you were receiving a very good education from her, on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid." (Austen 33) This jesting comment is characteristic of Mr. Knightley's treatment of Emma. For every dangerous inflation from Mr. Woodhouse, Mr. Knightley lets a little air out of the Emma balloon, often with good humor and always with good sense. He is also the only one to correct her behavior. Mr. Knightley, not Mr. Woodhouse, reproaches Emma for her treatment of Miss Bates at Box Hill. Mr. Knightley, not Mr. Woodhouse, scolds Emma for leaving Jane Fairfax to the devices of Mrs. Elton. Ultimately, Mr. Knightley, not Mr. Woodhouse, shapes Emma's character.

Emma declares that she will never marry because she "could never expect to be so truly loved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's" (Austen 73). However, Emma's love for her father blinds her to his stifling influence. Emma, dangerously inflated by her father's praise and her village's admiration, cannot see that love should envelop both perfection and personal faults. Only when she believes that Mr. Knightley might marry another woman does Emma awaken to her situation. Now Emma, not Mr. Woodhouse, is both frightened and threatened by the changes that his marriage would bring, namely the removal of Mr. Knightley's company from their family party. As Tanner explains, "The real 'evil' or terror in Emma is the prospect of having no one properly to talk to... simply—and terribly—that she might be condemned for years to have no one to talk to wittily, playfully, rationally, or in any way at all that transcends pork, eggs, muffins, and gruel." Fortunately, Mr. Knightley, her moral educator and rescuer, loves her, faults and all. He frees Emma from the dangers of her father's indulgence and passivity, and characteristic of his name, whisks her away to their own Happily Ever After. The novel opens with "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich" and it is appropriate that the final words center not on the heroine, but on "the perfect happiness of the union" (Austen 396).

Works Cited

- Auerbach, Emily. Searching for Jane Austen. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.
- Austen, Jane. Emma. 1816. London: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Lauber, John. Jane Austen. New York: Ywayne Publishers, 1993.
- Leavis, Queenie D., "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings," Scrutiny 10 (June 1941): 83.
- Tanner, Tony. Jane Austen. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986.