

A Need for Tenderness

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Jane Austen's antipathy to mercenary and heartless people was almost obsessional. F. B. Pinion.

It is sometimes felt that in her ironically sympathetic creation of Emma Woodhouse 'whom no one but myself will much like' Jane Austen deserves at least some of those strictures which see her books as damaged by the socially restrictive values of an upper middle-class point of view. It has been widely remarked that Miss Austen's work suffers because of her cheerful acceptance of a class society, and, that, while it is true snobbery may be consistently ridiculed, her values and standards are, nevertheless, based on the assumption that social and economic inequality is a permanent characteristic of our imperfect world. As the twentieth century draws towards its close it seems that if this was Miss Austen's opinion it is likely to be regarded as more intellectually respectable than has been the fashion for some time. In his sympathetic and perceptive essay on *Emma* Arnold Kettle argues that although the clarity of Jane Austen's observation is matched by the precision of her social judgments – he sees her work as informed by 'the delicate and unpretentious materialism of her outlook' – there remains the important reservation that her vision is severely limited by her class background. Kettle asserts that although snobbery is held up to disdain Jane Austen's characters never question the fundamental idea that 'it is right and proper for a minority of the community to live at the expense of the majority'.¹ He sees such criticism as justified not so much because Miss Austen failed to put forward a solution, but because she did not even notice the existence of a problem.

Other critics have sometimes been less confident about defining Jane Austen's personal attitude to social distinctions and more especially the extent to which this can be measured by Emma Woodhouse's treatment of the Martin family. John Bayley has drawn attention to the agitated tone of Professor Trilling's comment which follows immediately upon Emma's pert dismissal of

Robert Martin, "A farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other way he is below it". According to Trilling 'This is carefully contrived by the author to seem as dreadful as possible; it quite staggers us, and some readers will even feel that the author goes too far in permitting Emma to make this speech'. But, as Bayley points out, the problem associated with the Martin family and Harriet Smith stem from Emma's failure to observe the common-sense demands of her own point of view – she *does* allow herself to interfere in the Martins' lives.² And we may anyway conclude that if Jane Austen were really displaying Emma's character in such a thoroughly contrived way the purpose of the exercise was to make a point about snobbery.³

Some of the difficulty which critics like Professor Trilling experience in discussing *Emma* seems to arise from a confusion between whatever may be thought to have been Miss Austen's personal opinions and the attitudes and 'voices' of her characters. I have noticed that a girl as unmercenary as Elizabeth Bennet has actually been supposed to have been speaking with some degree of seriousness when she declared that she was first aware of loving Mr Darcy when she saw his Derbyshire estate. With such misunderstandings at large it is hardly to be wondered at that *Emma* should have been the subject of widely differing critical interpretations or that Jane Austen's artistic integrity in creating the social world of her experience should have led some people to have supposed that the authenticity of the picture in some way carried implications of approval. In fact of course, as Mark Schorer has pointed out, it is most likely that Jane Austen cherished some aspects of her world while abominating others.⁴ Unfortunately, amid so much controversy about the social values of the novel there is a danger that something less dependent on social forms and customs and perhaps less ephemeral, may be very largely overlooked. This is nothing less than an underlying theme which regulates our response to the ironically presented social and economic relationships and which reiterates the absolute importance of the human need for tenderness. Indeed, at a not too serious level Jane Austen's attitude of protective affection for both Emma Woodhouse *and* Fanny Price is an example of the quality I mean. Certainly it is Emma's awareness of the ultimate importance of tenderness which gradually transforms her understanding of human relationships and effectively destroys the importance of such limited social criteria as 'elegance'. In quite different terms it may be possible to see *Emma* as a modification of the old story of Cupid and Psyche in which the heroine gradually becomes worthy of the concealed god, and as with the original, there is no impediment apart from that

created by the foolish and impatient human spirit. It is not a development which involves repudiating any particular set of social values – let alone changing society; Emma's existence will not of itself make society a different place – it will only create a small area of difference *within* society, and this is the most we are entitled to hope for from a writer of such strict moral realism.

Typically, Jane Austen introduces her theme very early in the novel by way of an ironic passage in which Mr Woodhouse repeatedly expresses his sympathy for his daughter's former governess. There is no question of Mr Woodhouse's sincerity; he clearly believes that "poor Miss Taylor" really deserves the most lively compassion in her new position as a respectably married woman. Blinkered though she frequently is even Emma is aware of the absurdity of her father's distress and of the considerable extent of Miss Taylor's good fortune. Thus Mr Woodhouse's expressions of concern are gradually revealed as nothing more than projections of the anxious solicitude he invariably feels for himself. At this early stage of the book we are presented with an example of selfishness masquerading as kindness of heart, and consequently possess a model which neatly parodies the real theme. There is a similar parade of insincere feeling when Emma attempts to persuade her friends and herself that her involvement with Harriet Smith is a matter of mutual advantage and in no sense an unequal or damaging relationship. (And here, I think, Jane Austen came up against the problem that Emma's failure to feel any genuine concern for Harriet threatened to destroy the credibility of her development into a more mature and sensitive human being. It was a problem which could be overcome in part by the device of making Harriet so silly and shallow that we are almost persuaded that she would not have noticed the inadequacy of the relationship. But this was evidently not enough and Jane Austen was careful to shorten those passages touching upon Harriet's distresses which, had they been given more space, would have required some greater response both from reader and heroine. Harriet thus remains in an auxiliary role – she is an appendage of Miss Woodhouse and does not have an independent life for which tears might have to be shed. Both Harriet Smith and the shadowy enigma, Miss Fairfax must be considered as to some extent casualties of Jane Austen's plot).

The theme is again introduced in an unusually impersonal context on the occasion when Emma and Harriet go on their errand of mercy to a sick cottager. Jane Austen carefully juxtaposes the appearance of what it is like to behave kindly and caringly with the complete absence of any equivalent emotion. It is not merely as Professor Kettle says, that Jane Austen was aware that this sort of amelioration of suffering was bound to be insufficient

and that the whole social system required modifying, but a sense that something more was needed that had to do with emotion. As usual the theme is introduced through an absence of feeling. The entire passage is something of a commentary on Simone Weil's idea that clarity of perception – a refusal to fudge reality – is found just below the level at which love operates.⁵

Emma was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse. She understood their ways, could allow for their ignorance and their temptations, had no romantic expectations of extraordinary virtue from those, for whom education had done so little; entered into their troubles with ready sympathy, and always gave her assistance with as much intelligence as goodwill. In the present instance, it was sickness and poverty together which she came to visit; and after remaining there as long as she could give comfort or advice, she quitted the cottage with such an impression of the scene as made her say to Harriet, as they walked away.

“These are sights, Harriet, to do one good. How trifling they make everything else appear! – I feel now as if I could think of nothing but these poor creatures all the rest of the day; and yet, who can say how soon it may all vanish from my mind?”

“Very true,” said Harriet. “Poor creatures! One can think of nothing else.”

“And really, I do not think the impression will soon be over,” said Emma, as she crossed the low hedge, and tottering footstep which ended the narrow, slippery path through the cottage garden, and brought them out into the lane again. “I do not think it will,” stopping to look once more at all the outward wretchedness of the place, and recall the still greater within.

“Oh! dear, no,” said her companion. They walked on. The lane made a slight bend; and when that bend was passed, Mr Elton was immediately in sight; and so near as to give Emma time to say only further.

“Ah! Harriet, here comes a very sudden trial of our stability in good thoughts. Well (smiling) I hope it may be allowed that if compassion has produced exertion and relief to the sufferers, it has done all that is truly important. If we feel for the wretched, enough to do all we can for them, the rest is empty sympathy, only distressing to ourselves.”⁶

At this stage, Emma's failure to rise above the most superficial response to suffering is almost complete. She is, as Professor Kettle

remarks, little more than a younger version of Lady Catherine De Bourgh. The possibility that she may one day rise to a position in which personal involvement and distress no longer seem empty and unnecessary is only suggested by the parenthetic (smiling) which alerts us to the fact that Emma is *herself* well aware of the specious plausibility of her justification for forgetting the wretched cottagers.

As feelings of tenderness most frequently develop when there is some intermingling of pity and affection and as affection in Miss Austen's world required some equality of social rank we shall expect to notice failures of proper feeling most readily when these occur between people of approximately similar social status. Above all it was not simply a question of wealth, and indeed, the very absence of wealth when this was associated with a suitable level of gentility made the demands of an understanding heart all the more imperative. If Miss Bates had been merely some wealthy social inferior – some relation of the Coles, perhaps, there would have been no question of Emma's stupid rudeness on Box Hill earning or deserving the weight of Mr Knightley's rebuke. Such behaviour would still have been demeaning and silly, but it would not have been an emotional failure. As it is we condemn Emma, (as she condemns herself) partly because for years she has been the recipient of many small kindnesses and much goodwill, but even more because Miss Bates' severely reduced circumstances and the charitable assistance she has been obliged to receive, render her particularly vulnerable. It is, of course, the acute shock of the self-discovery which Emma experiences on Box Hill that makes possible the expiatory suffering that finally qualifies her to marry Mr Knightley. At the end of chapter 43 we have come a long way from the young woman who visited the cottagers with such a rational intention of not distressing herself unduly.

Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! – How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness!

Time did not compose her. As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more. She had never been so depressed. Happily, it was not necessary to speak. There was only Harriet, who seemed not in spirits herself, fagged, and very willing to be silent; and Emma felt the tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home, without being at any trouble to check

them, extraordinary as they were.⁷

Emma's crisis on Box Hill is not only of pivotal significance; it also confirms the pattern of most of the other unsatisfactory relationships. At the start we saw Frank Churchill pleading his inability to visit his father's newly married wife. Had Mrs Weston been wealthy or well-connected and not simply a former governess, his failure would not have mattered so particularly. It is left to Mr Knightley to point out that his excuses will not do because the circumstances are such that his neglect must be felt as a slight by both his father and his step-mother. Frank has failed in his clear duty, and, even more important, has failed to appreciate the extent to which his behaviour will hurt his family. For all his charm Frank Churchill stands condemned for lack of heart. This early failure is in some ways a rehearsal for the more damning episode on Box Hill – here his almost complete inability to feel for others shows itself not only in his flirtation with Emma but in his intentionally humiliating reference to the folly of engagements hastily entered into in fashionable resorts. If ever a girl's vulnerability; her poverty; her ridiculous aunt; her indiscretion in entering upon a secret engagement; called for tenderness and compassion, it was Jane Fairfax's, and yet we find the man on whose behalf she has made herself vulnerable deliberately causing her as much anguish as possible. And all this at a moment when Jane may be obliged to take up Mrs Elton's offer and accept the post as governess at Smallridge.

In many ways Jane Fairfax is even more the victim of other people's inability to enter imaginatively into the feelings of their fellow humans, than is her aunt. Emma herself has perhaps some excuse for seeing in Jane not only the sensible girl she ought to have been, but in sensing some possibility of rivalry. She cannot know of Frank's secret engagement but she is certainly aware of Mr Knightley's admiration. Yet Jane suffers most deeply at the hands of her lover and Mrs Elton, neither of whom display the slightest concern for her humiliation and evident suffering. Rather as in the episode of Emma's visit to the sick cottager, it is not so much a matter of what Mrs Elton is attempting – in many ways her concern for Jane's future is only too well founded – but is rather a question of how she goes about it. Of course Mrs Elton is a caricature of Emma as Emma might have been without the decisive influence of Mr Knightley, and without the comfortable private assurance of always being 'first in consequence'. However much Mrs Elton may say in public that Miss Fairfax is to be pitied she shows by her constant insensitivity to Miss Fairfax's reticence – there is that charmingly ironic misunderstanding about slavery:

"Oh! my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean

a fling at the slave-trade, I assure you Mr Suckling was always rather a friend to abolition.”⁸

that she does not feel for her any more deeply than Emma felt for her cottagers. Happily because Mrs Elton is what she is her power to damage another human being is remarkably slight. Where feeling is not expected it is scarcely missed. The severely limited power of the Eltons is neatly indicated by their failure to distress Emma at the Crown Inn when Mr Elton – with his wife’s approval – deliberately avoids dancing with Harriet Smith who has been left without a partner. On this occasion it is Mr Knightley who as usual restores the situation and sets a pattern of correct behaviour.

To a quite remarkable extent Jane Austen made Mr Knightley the moral heart of the book and the character against whose rectitude and consideration all the others must be judged. From the start it is Mr Knightley who condemns Emma’s matrimonial scheming and unequal relationship with Harriet; it is he who sees that Mr Elton will be guided by self-interest rather than romance, and who not only speaks well of Jane Fairfax but sends his carriage for Jane and Miss Bates when they have been forgotten by the Eltons. His steady kindness is rewarded when he returns to Hartfield from London on the news of Churchill’s engagement to Jane Fairfax, but even this happy reconciliation with Emma only occurs because he had been anxious about her supposed distress and disappointment, and not because he thinks she will marry him.

All such moments of tenderness and feeling stand in contrast to the small change of human intercourse; that social periphery of jealousy and snobbery which generally attracts so much attention.

The obvious importance of Emma’s increased self-assurance following the humiliation on Box Hill has tended to blind readers to a subtle development in Emma’s relationship with her mentor. This change is nothing less than Emma adopting something of the position of reticent concern which has hitherto been Mr Knightley’s. It is to be seen in her new undemanding kindness to Miss Bates and her niece, but, more interestingly, it also plays a part in her relationship with her lover. A moment occurs when Emma and Mr Knightley are discussing what she will call him when they are married.

‘ “Mr Knightley.” – You always call me “Mr Knightley;” and from habit, it has not so very formal a sound. – And yet it is formal. I want you to call me something else, but I do not know what.’

‘ I remember once calling you “George”, in one of my amiable fits about ten years ago. I did it because I thought it would offend you; but, as you made no objection, I never did it again.’

‘And cannot you call me “George” now?’

‘Impossible! – I never can call you anything but “Mr Knightley”. I will not promise even to equal the elegant terseness of Mrs Elton by calling you Mr K . . .’⁹

What Emma does not say is that while it is true that Mrs Elton refers to her husband by this vulgar abbreviation she invariably speaks of Mr Knightley by the impudently familiar appellation, “Knightley”. This too could have been mentioned as yet another example of ‘elegant terseness’ and there is little doubt that the unreformed Emma would have enjoyed the opportunity of further lowering Mrs Elton in her lover’s eyes. We can only speculate that the reason for Emma’s discretion may lie in her realisation that the information would almost certainly have injured – however slightly – Mr Knightley’s self-esteem. Trivial though it is as an example of tenderness it has the merit of being one of those actions which by their very nature can never be brought into the light of recognition. I suggest that in this momentary discretion and reticence Jane Austen points to a scale of values which owes nothing to social class or economic arrangements and which she was to develop more fully in her portrait of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*.

- 1 *Introduction to the English Novel*, Arnold Kettle. Vol I Emma. pp 86-98.
- 2 *The Irresponsibility of Jane Austen*, John Bayley. From Southam’s *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, pp 1-19.
- 3 Even if this is what Professor Trilling understands, there seems to be some error of judgment in speaking of Emma’s behaviour as ‘contrived’. Few of Jane Austen’s heroines are so organically inseparable from the development of the plot. Miss Dudley has observed in an unpublished essay:
Jane Austen took her heroine, for the first time, as her dominant idea rather than in conjunction with her dominant idea. . . .
- 4 *The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse*, Mark Schorer,. From Ian Watt’s *Jane Austen*, pp 98-111.
- 5 *Waiting on God*, Simone Weil, p 84. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1951.
- 6 *Penguin English Library*, 1966. p 111. Extensively quoted for a different purpose by Arnold Kettle.
- 7 *Ibid.* p 369.
- 8 *Ibid.* p. 300.
- 9 *Ibid.* p 445.