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Path into Maturity

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Power, Authority, and Egotism: Emma Woodhouse's Transformation in the Path into Maturity

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Abstract: Jane Austen's novel "Emma" still inspires and challenges readers in the twenty-first century. The article engages in a critical analysis of the several maps of meaning the eponymous character draws in her circles of intimacy and of social acquaintances, underpinned by questions of identity and representation. It analyses how Emma represents herself and relates with the Other(s) from a position of power, authority, and egotism—identity traits of the narrative text, which is a metaphor of her life, a Landscape of the Self. During a long and painful path, in the fictionality of a possible world, from equivoque to equivoque, these identity traits are progressively transformed into true feelings of friendship and self-awareness. On the one hand, one finds a powerful young lady mastering the family and the social circles, and, on the other, an emotionally fragile young woman in need of orientation. Tracing her path, Emma constructs possibilities for her life, closely followed by the dutiful and loving help of a masculine character, whose enlightened vision transforms her stubborn, immature, and proud nature and is a cornerstone of her growth into maturity.

Keywords: Emma, Power, Authority, Egotism, Landscape of the Self, Maturity

Introduction

The three-decker novel *Emma* is described by Ronald Blythe, editor for the Introduction to the 1966 edition by Penguin, as “the climax of Jane Austen’s genius and the Parthenon of fiction” (Austen [1816] 1966, 7). Said otherwise, the novel is the symbol of purity and perfection, as well as “the fullest exploration of the nation’s moral health and social wellbeing” (Keymer 2020, 108). Considered by many (Woolf [1925] 1986; Wright 1953; Williams 1984; Keymer 2020) to be responsible for establishing the novel as a major genre within English Literature, Jane Austen remains in the twenty-first century a challenge to any critic, to the extent that literature of time past has either a life in the present or it has no life at all. Austen’s work “has the permanent quality of literature,” Woolf wrote ([1925] 1986, 19).

Underpinned by the concept of Landscapes of the Self, the article analyses the representation of contexts of experience and maps of meaning in the construction of identity in the relation to the Other(s), since the exertion of power and authority defines Emma’s relationships. To read novels as Landscapes of the Self is to find a fictional world of lived experiences which are shaped, moulded and transformed by representation, becoming “a map of possibilities of the self, where the author...moves and acknowledges conditions of possibility or plausibility for his individual and social existence and identity” (Birrento, Gonçalves, Saianda 2019, 8). In *Emma*, throughout the difficult path of acknowledging otherness versus egotism, the reader follows the development of a young woman into maturity.

Moreover, the article envisages a new critical approach to the novel to the extent that it discusses *Emma*’s fictional world as the creation of a multi-person possible world, where the protagonist finds a “potent source of change, interaction” (Doležel 1998, 32). Emma understands that her closed family circle must be enlarged to wider social experiences, full of ambiguities, mistakes, emotions, but which constitute a source of change for her in the interaction she must learn to entail with the Other(s).

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As a contemporary of the Romantics, Austen's novels are representative of the worldview of the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, and of their judgemental values, reason, and clarity of perception. Despite having lived during the period when there was a change in the aesthetic and artistic sensibility, Jane Austen was never affected by it, keeping faithful to her world, which was "outstandingly face to face...an actual community very precisely selective" (Williams 1984, 24). Austen only represented in her novels the social classes she knew, the classes she met face to face, and which belonged to her social rank. *Emma* is the product of the novelist's critical analysis of "England's social fabric and its principles of stratification, gentility and prosperity" (Keymer 2020, 118).

In the orderly, organized, and selective world of Austen's novels, characters live in social, emotional, economic, and ethical harmony. Austen's England is a place where wealth and bloodline define one's social mobility and marriage opportunities, whereas common sense, balance, and order overcome too much sensitivity of the Romantics. The Austenian universe tends to ignore historical events of the period to focus on the history of the noble families of the British rural context. This context is the backbone of the narrative structures, as well as the core representation of the personal relationships and the behaviors, with a strong sense and exploration of adequacy to the social norms. In *Emma*, Jane Austen does invite us, moderns, to enjoy the slower pace and the nuances of rural society, creating a character that "has been practising deceptions on herself" (Lewis [1954] 1986, 27), in a "grammar of conduct" (Woolf [1925] 1986, 33); but Austen also represents the protagonist's inner and outer circles of existence and experience, drawing maps of meaning or Landscapes of the Self, which constitute Emma's metaphor of life.

Emma is a construct of the imagination (Ryan 2019) and represents the world of possibilities of a young lady, as well as the ways she behaves in it, allowing her and the readers to know who she is. The latter follow her path into maturity through many ambiguities and positions of power that derive from a society where hierarchy and money are two pillars for human relationships. Power "brings about a rearrangement of the agential constellation, transforming it into an asymmetrical hierarchy" (Doležel 1998, 103), because it structures the conditions of interaction, perceived under these circumstances. Moreover, Emma's sense of authority reveals that she is unable to build a relationship of equality with other women. Her obsession with arranging marriages blinds her to other relational possibilities, including the possibility of friendship where one is neither patron nor dependent. Establishing the "connection between worldness and possibility" (Ryan 2019, 62), the novel represents the path of the eponymous protagonist from immaturity to rational and heartfelt maturity which reflects a coherent and harmonious development and reveals a character who is a collection of semantic features (Ryan 2019) in an expandable fictional world.

Emma

Jane Austen was the first critic of Emma Woodhouse, having acknowledged that, with Emma, she was creating a protagonist that only herself would like very much (Leigh 1882). Emma's identity is carefully constructed during the narrative process; her lack of self-identity and self-knowledge can be traced through her relationship with her well-to-do, valetudinarian, inactive, and aged father, with Harriet Smith, with Jane Fairfax, and finally with Mr. Knightley. When Mrs. Weston asks in a conversation with Mr. Knightley at the beginning of the novel: "How can Emma imagine she has any thing to learn herself?" (Austen [1816] 1966, 67), the truth is that Emma has a lot to learn while she simultaneously navigates the map of her own life and the relation to the Other(s), in a process of understanding herself and her own feelings.

Written in a free indirect speech, the third person narrator exposes the habits, reflections, and thoughts of the main character. In an innovative way in the nineteenth-century, Jane Austen combines the interior and the exterior dimension of the diegesis almost erasing the narratorial