

the events.

Style

The heart of Jane Austen's literary genius is in her ability to take something small and insignificant and make it fascinating and amusing.

Her novels focus on people and their interactions. She deals with domestic issues rather than worldly ones. In themselves these are simple and often dull but, in her hands, they become both compelling and fundamental to our understanding of the overall picture.

With confidence and skill, she leads the reader through the maze of human interactions depicted in *Emma*. The reader is artfully guided by characters (Emma, Mr. Knightley, Mrs. Weston), and by the smooth narrative pace of the story. As the story of Mr. Elton and Harriet comes to its peak, the author introduces the stories of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax to divert and maintain our interest. As that second storyline moves to its climax, Jane Austen allows us to get closer to the main narrative which deals with Emma and Mr. Knightley. It is a neatly controlled pacing of the action.

Aside from her simple presentation and her pacing technique, Jane Austen's great talent is for irony and humor. *Emma*, with its serious issues of marriage and morality, is nonetheless a romantic comedy. Emma's escapades on behalf of Harriet are often hilarious in their outcome because of the misunderstandings that form their basis. For outright humor, it would be difficult to find a better source than Mr. Woodhouse, Miss Bates and Mrs. Elton.

Aside from this we must consider Jane Austen's use of subtle irony in order to appreciate the full range of humor in the novel. The presentation of "charming" Augusta Elton in the story is one of the most notable examples of extended irony. She is portrayed as being unmistakably similar to Emma in upbringing.

ing, attitude and accomplishments. Both young women are proud of their social positions, both are snobs with elitist outlooks and both are underachievers in their literary and musical pursuits. The irony exists in Emma's blindness to these parallels. She is repelled by what she sees in Augusta Elton but she fails to recognize that this woman is an exaggerated mirror image of herself.

Similarly, the entire basis of Emma and Frank's supposed attachment to each other rests on the different levels of meaning implicit in every gesture and word connected to them. We suspect what is going on, but Emma's prolonged ignorance of the truth sets her up for the startling revelation of Frank and Jane's secret engagement. There is additional irony in that Emma, who so casually uses other people, has been used by Frank.

On a smaller but not lesser scale are the frequent and subtle uses of irony throughout the story. Harriet is too good for Robert Martin, an "excellent young man" by Mr. Knightley's standards, but she is good enough for the foolish and self-serving Mr. Elton. Or, consider the wonderful absurdity of Mrs. Elton longing to arrive at Donwell Abbey riding on a donkey.

With her absolute command of the reader's attention, Jane Austen is an artist of incomparable skill. She creates vivid characters through whom her complex stories unfold. She masterfully orchestrates our reactions and attitudes, and provides a wealth of detail, humor and insight into the human condition as she perceived it.