

EMMA AS A COMEDY OF MANNERS/NOVEL OF
SELF EDUCATION

Maria Edgeworth is a novelist of manners. Her work 'Castle Rackrent' gives a vivid picture of the decayed Irish gentry, done with sufficient particularizing detail to make it something more than animated social history and sufficient humor and sense of character to enlist the sympathetic participation of the reader. It was her rendering of the Irish scene that inspired Scott to try to do the same for Scotland. That is, Scott began partly under her influence as a novelist of manners of his own country. But no novelist of manners was so great as Jane Austen. As David Daiches puts it well— "The greatest of all the novelists of manners of this or any other period and one who raised the whole genre to a new level of art, was Jane Austen." She shares neither with Fielding, his exhibitionist critical apparatus nor with Richardson his announced moral purpose. With her quietly penetrating vision of

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man as a social animal, her ironic awareness of the tensions between spontaneity and convention; between the claims of personal morality and those of social and economic propriety, she does more than essaying 'Emma' in an established social mode. Her life, lived as it was amid English country society of neither the lowest nor the highest stratum, provided her with the opportunity of learning the world of social pretension and ambition. This introduced her into the world of balls and visits and speculations about marrying and giving in marriage, of hopes and fears of genteel people of moderate means. That is she was familiar with a world which, through her delicate and highly finished art, turned into a microcosm of life in its social aspect.

Like 'Pride and Prejudice', 'Emma' shows a remarkable insight into the relation between social convention and individual temperament. In outline it is the story of a rich and clever girl whose overconfidence

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in her own understanding of people and well meaning desire to manipulate the lives of her social inferiors as well as some of her equals involve her in a number of delusions. The destruction of delusions gives her some salutary shocks and helps her to achieve a greater degree of self knowledge than she possessed before. A beautiful ~~and~~ but inexperienced girl sets herself up as a match maker to rehabilitate Harriet, a girl of humble position and modest education, to a position which she deserves by virtue of her natural gifts. The plot is simply a series of comic reversals of her design which, however, serves the psychological purpose of self-realization and self-knowledge on her part. First she fixes upon Elton and is gratified to think that her plan is progressing well. But the pen lies in the fact that the young Vicar is assiduous in executing her errand out of love and not for Harriet Smith but for her own self, the revelation of which gives her the twist shock.

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