

Then comes her own contact with Frank Churchill who is already engaged to Jane but keeps it concealed from all. The result is that Emma flirts and appears to be falling in love with one who is attached to somebody else. All this is very amusing and leads to the second shock when Emma realizes that the young man has had no inclination towards her. No harm, however, is done because she herself is not really interested in him as a possible candidate for her hand. But she is now ready to make the second attempt to provide for Harriet's future by promoting a match between her and Frank Churchill. She hints at it to the girl herself without mentioning the name of party and for sometime an amusing drama of misunderstanding goes on between them because Emma refers to Churchill but Harriet takes it as a reference to Knightley, who has all the while stood as a silent lover, mentor and guide of Emma. Harriet confides to Emma

that she will never marry because
 the man of her loyal devotion
 is far above her expectation.
 To this Emma replies, "I am not
 at all surprised at you, Harriet.
 The service he rendered you was
 enough to warm your heart." The
 irony here arises from the fact
 that the 'He' of Harriet is not
 the same person as the 'He' of
 Emma. Then follow two startling
 revelations which make Emma a
 sadder but wiser lady. The first
 is the betrothal of Frank
 Churchill to Jane Fairfax and the
 second, a more shocking discovery,
 that Harriet's 'superior person' is
 none else than Mr. Knightley. The result
 is a sudden flash of realization
 that she had all the while been
 in love with Mr. Knightley without
 knowing it and the self-delusion
 has proved disastrous for Harriet,
 for her own self and for all
 concerned.

In this way 'Emma' is a
 comedy in the serious Meredithian
 sense, as it prepares an ordeal
 of shocks and serious experiences

Which the heroine, at last, must undergo for realization and emotional maturity before she is assured of her felicity. She must earn her happiness by her suffering and the illumination which results from it. Jane Austen does not glance at the tragic and seamy side of life but hers is not the facile optimism of a playful comedian.