

A Study of Jane Austen

— Austen's Feminism in *Emma* —

Kim Sun-hee

Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. The General Background of *Emma*
- III. Austen's Feminism in *Emma*
- IV. Conclusion

I. Introduction

Jane Austen, the first English major woman writer, has been thought to be a difficult critical author on account of the slightness of her subject-matter and her restricted attitudes towards it. However, her greatness is found in the analysis to correspond with the degree and consistency of her innovation to judge the accepted standards of her days. Austen demonstrates an acute intelligence about morals which she understood well, sharing the atmosphere of stability and security of the characteristics of the eighteenth-centuries.

Therefore, Austen has won her praise for her limitations like many women writers. The Victorian critic George Henry Lewes held her up for emulation because of the vast worlds she omitted. Over a hundred years later, we find Stuart M. Tave praising Austen in double-edged terms for the many things she does not do. Ian Watt relates that "the enduring problems of Jane Austen criticism: the slightness of the matter and the authority of the manner can be resolved if we change our historical perspective on the Austen novels and consider them in the context of eighteenth-century feminist ideas and of the Feminist controversy of the turn of the eighteenth century."¹

In this view, we can see "that Austen's subject-matter is the central subject-matter of rational, or enlightenment, feminism and that her view-point on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft."² The sources of that peculiar intensity which

1) Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Harvester Press Ltd., Sussex, 1983), p. x.

2) Ibid.

Austen alone can impart is well understood; "Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there."³⁾ Austen is the most difficult writer to catch in the act of greatness for she has a deep interest in some general, even theoretical questions about human nature and human conduct. We can see this from her wish her sex to be known. 'By a Lady' from the title of *Sense and Sensibility* was, for her, the best way of declaring a female viewpoint in her days. She, in her feminine life, felt that moral order of conventional faith was lacking something essential. She needed her imagination to reconcile her intelligence to the world, asserting feminine independence. So, she focuses very exclusively on women, on their social and moral relations to themselves and their fellows.

It is well known that Austen's work was transforming the idea of the English novel. She shares a new attitude to her art, an attitude which includes a commitment to deriving meaning and value from everyday life during the historical transition. Recently, in the mid-twentieth-century, criticism has recognized and elucidated this Austen's feminist point of view. The essential convictions of Enlightenment feminism is embodied in *Emma*, which is mostly known as a novel of education and a comedy of moral life. This study is to show Jane Austen as an artistic innovator and to relate the sparkle of her confident intelligence as a feminist.

II. The General Background of *Emma*

The intellectual origins of the contemporary women's movement lie in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and The Feminist Controversy has its height from 1970s. Historically, this tradition owes to the rise of Protestantism and the secular extension in post-Reformation Europe of the idea of spiritual equality and freedom central to the doctrines of the Protestant church. Its interest continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inspiring neumerous essays, pamphlets, and tracks, including the audacious feminist Mary Woolstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), who argued that women might study for business and the profession. Woolstonecraft challenged the idea that women exist only to please men and proposed that women should receive the same treatment as men in education, work opportunities, and politics, and that the same moral standards should be applied to both sexes.

Sense and Sensibility appeared just in 1811 and there is no doubt that Jane Austen's feminist mind was formed earlier. Like Mary Woolstonecraft, Austen disagreed with the prevailing attitude of her time. Women could rarely have been held in low esteem than they were at the end of the eighteenth century. There was no equality in the sexes, and men were the lawgiver for the

3) Robert Alan Donavan, "The Mind of Jane Austen" in *Jane Austen Today*, ed. Joel Weisheimer (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1975), p. 120.

better economy of the world. As adults, women found their opportunities for self-assertion severely restricted. According to Hannah More, "to women, moral excellence is the grand object of education; and of moral excellence, domestic life is to a woman the appropriate share."⁴ More claims that women do not so much generalize their ideals as men, nor do their minds seize a great subject with so large a grasp. A woman's life must be centered on the home, so women were expected to be subservient to men.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that at this time meekness was considered the major feminine virtue, and the modest reserve was one of the chief beauties in a female character. But, Mary Woolstonecraft had the opposite ideas. She urged that women should be trained for real professions; they might become physicians instead of home nurses, and that women would be as useful to others, as their limited means allow, respectable and happy. As we can catch the instances of this idea in Miss Bates in *Emma*, Jane Austen has the assumption that women are inherently as intelligent and rational as men. This belief in female intelligence that woman can be an instructor like men is shown well in Austen's pedagogical relationship in her novels. In this way, it is to be thought that happy marriage, for Austen, was the only way of life in which middle upper class women could normally hope to find themselves satisfied, esteemed, and secure.

Jane Austen's attitude to women certainly reveals the minds of a keen individual intelligence, and she might be committed to the status quo. However, she does look for a change in the woman area of activity when the society changes. She proposes that the individual should carry out the single most important social function demonstrating one's ability to serve the needs of others.

The rationality of women, the improvement of the mind, is eventually so important to Jane Austen that she grants rather little importance to accomplishments in considering how girls would be educated. Almost all of her heroines are deficient in the superficial virtues. The heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse neglect their piano practice, and hence become moderate performers; none of them is called upon to improve in these areas. Other wise, Austen "insists on her heroines possessing or acquiring candour of heart, balance of judgement, sensitivity to truthfulness of feeling."⁵

Emma is concerned with the growth of person's consciousness, "the philosophical mind."⁶ The choice of subject to show the necessity of rational self-control distinguishes Austen from predecessors in English literature, but Austen called Emma a character "whom no one but myself will much like."⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear that the joy and the pleasure of *Emma* depend upon caring about Emma Woodhouse. Austen shows that there are real dangers in the situation of a highly

4) David Monaghan, "Jane Austen and the Position of Women" in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (Macmillan Press Ltd., New Jersey, 1981), p. 106.

5) Christopher Gillie, *A Preface of Jane Austen* (Longman Group, Essex, 1974), p. 95.

6) Susan Morgan, *In The Meantime* (University of Chicago, Chicago, 1980), p. 44.

7) Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979), p. 157.

intelligent and energetic young woman, wholly protected from the need to make her way in the world and with nothing much to do in life, still placing her heroine in comparable circumstances against which she does not rebel. It must be needed to remember some important facts about *Emma*. The book was published in 1816, after *Lyrical Ballads* after the revolution in France. At the age of thirty-nine, Austen wrote *Emma*, sharing a historical concern about perception and judgement. *Emma* is about "the inviolability of the self, a morality grounded on a sympathetic and imaginative perception of selves of others, an awareness of the limits of such perception, and a claim for the value rather than just the right of facts to dominate fictions."⁸⁾

In other words, Austen tends to place her main emphasis on the part played by women in preserving manners and morals because her novel is primarily concerned with young, single woman rather than married life. Austen is presenting the ideal behavior required of women by society which had realistic limits. Austen, idealizing some more than human perfection, stresses a union of feminine independence of personal success. *Emma* comes to recognize the most civilized interpersonal relations by involvement into the society.

III. Austen's Feminism in *Emma*

Emma, "a controversial novel like *Mansfield Park*"⁹⁾ is about the genuiness of Emma's reformation and the felicity of her marriage to Mr. Knightley. There is also another new theme in this novel which Fanny Burney had not tacked before. It was "the problem of women's breeding and education to earn her own living, which was the growing theme throughout the century."¹⁰⁾ Self-recognition and correction of oneself are the frequent subjects in Austen's novels, which we can not find clearly in any other cases.

Emma Woodhouse, at twenty-one, may be a less idealized character, but she is the complete picture of grown-up health and loveliness, and has a strong power of calling forth warm affection. Besides an energy and confidence, she is the distinguished heroine with the external supports of beauty, money, and a comfortable home to express her sense of superiority.

However, Austen dramatizes the ordeal of consciousness incident to a sensitive personality surrounded by a society. In the opening of the novel, Emma's personality unfolds like a fan before us; Emma is the favored child, the cleverest member of the family, the mistress of Hartfield, and the first lady of Highbury. The following sentences are the beginning of the novel which gives the interesting equation, contrasted with the relatively weak and powerless individuals in the other

8) Susan Morgan, op. cit., p. 43.

9) Bernard J. Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1978), p. 64.

10) Eva Figs, *Sex and Subterfuge* (Macmillan Press, London, 1982), p. 53.

novels:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little do distress or vex her.¹¹⁾

A young lady, who is particularly the absolute monarch of her condition and has egotism for the forgivable follies of youth, is shown. But, she lacks real self-confidence, which could come only from testing herself against reality and knowing that she had deserved whatever she receives in the way of praise and respect.

Emma has a fresh naturalness. She is a far more complex heroine than any her predecessors. Austen's focus of attention is on Emma's mental life to carry out a clear perception of objective reality. Hence, "problems of self-knowledge and social behavior are unified in *Emma*; feeling and conduct are inseparable. Emma's realization of her responsibility is inseparable from her recognition of the true nature of her ability."¹²⁾ It is the inevitable feminine features in *Emma* which are described in a rational lucidity.

The author gives her work "a further dimension, the value of freedom of choice."¹³⁾ Emma has a social position and has been allowed a considerable degree of personal freedom from an early age, and, furthermore, has enough wit and beauty to scoff at matrimony as a goal for herself:

Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! The proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be sensible and pleasant as anybody else.¹⁴⁾

We ought to recognize Emma's genius and her superiority. Through Emma's self-mockery, competence and self-importance, incipient feminist humor, and brilliant perception of various ways of life, Austen satirizes Emma's dramatic irony of her disdain for marriage and love. We can not distance ourselves from Emma's vanity, the foibles of best human nature in this passages.

Individuality and distinction as a woman are emphasized by the author. Women in Highbury world are badly constrained, as the impoverished Miss Bates; Jane Fairfax, who nearly falls into the governess; the illegitimate Harriet; and even Mrs. Weston married to a man beneath her in intelligence, all is shown. In this society, Emma is the closest thing to be an emancipated woman. But she also is cramped and confined, compared to the men. Directly or indirectly Austen makes Emma push against the limits that her womanhood imposes. Emma is trying to distinguish herself from the mediocrity and trivialization that threaten women's lives.

11) Jane Austen, *Emma* (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1977), p. 37.

12) Karl Kroeber, *Styles in Fictional Structure* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1971), p. 77.

13) Eva Figs, *Sex and Subterfuge* (Mamillan Press, London, 1982), p. 107.

14) Jane Austen, *Emma* (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1977), p. 109.

Emma's realistic estimate of herself is manifested by her repeated self-accusation and by her recognition of Mr. Knightley's merit and her submission to his authority through marriage. Emma's misdeeds are the result of her staying at home in an environment which makes it difficult for her to grow up; she is arrogant, self-important, and controlling, and fails to develop her potentialities. Her description of Mrs. Elton fits Emma herself very well:

Mrs. Elton was a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior.¹⁵⁾

That is a good instance of Austen's habitual irony which criticizes the folly and blindness of social habit.

The remedy of this pretension is through Emma's education which shows the moral growth through suffering. "Her moral growth is closely associated with an improvement in the respect she accords to her, accepting her social responsibility as a woman."¹⁶⁾ It means "from pride to humility, from self-aggrandizement to self-castigation, self-delusion to self-knowledge,"¹⁷⁾ which is fully described by Donwell Abbey and Box Hill episodes. These episodes mark the beginning of Emma's tender feelings for Knightley, that lead her to desire marriage. Thereupon, she has the feminine personality which was strongly approved by the society of her time, and she has the responsibility towards her own sex.

The important change in Emma is in her attitude toward herself. Almost every time Emma's error-in judgement, perception or behavior—is corrected by Mr. Knightley. Emma's self-recognition continues through several chapters:

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! . . . Time did not compose her. As she reflected more, she seems but to feel it more. She never had been so depressed . . . 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.¹⁸⁾

And it is continued:

"O God! that I had never seen her!"

The rest of the day, the following night, were hardly enough for her thoughts. She was bewildered amidst the confusion of all that had rushed on her within the last few hours. Every moment had brought a fresh surprise; and every surprise must be matter of humiliation to her. How to understand it all! How to understand the deceptions she had been thus blind of her own head and heart! She sat still, she walked about, she tried her own room, she tried the shrubbery-in every place, every

15) Ibid., p. 275.

16) Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Harvester Press Ltd., Sussex, 1983), p. 127.

17) Bernard J. Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1978), p. 70.

18) Jane Austen, *Emma* (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1977), p. 368.

posture, she perceived that she had acted most mortifying degree; that she had been imposing on herself in a degree yet more mortifying; that she was wretched, and should probably find this day but the beginning of wretchedness.

To understand, thoroughly understand her own heart, was the first endeavour.¹⁹⁾

Emma discovers that she is mistaken. The inevitable conflicts reflect the inside views of her mental life. She can see and understand other people in relation to her own concerns though the process of mental change is slow.

The recognition of dependence, of need for another person is greatly connected with the force of Emma's realization of love. It is significant that Emma achieves knowledge of her heart and knowledge of her conduct. Emma, who had imagination, offering a freedom of mind, learns a sense of justice for the first time. As Trilling explained, Emma is one of those rare heroines with a moral life of her own while "women in fiction only rarely have the peculiar reality of the moral life that self-love bestows."²⁰⁾ Emma has the charm of self-love.

It is Emma's power that will always make her love herself. The author was perfectly aware of the elements of self-love, which makes Emma that wonderful remark to Mr. Knightley: "I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other; and therefore, you must give me a plan, direct answer"²¹⁾ in the end of the story. Indeed, "Emma's love of herself is part of what makes her creative."²²⁾ After that, we inevitably are attracted to Emma because of her energy and intelligence. "We understand self-love to be part of the moral life of all men. The extraordinary thing about Emma is that she has a moral life as a man has a moral life."²³⁾ The process as a movement from self-love to love of others is also well discussed by Walter Jackson Bate:

Self-love is an effect rather than a cause, and arises when the individual has a clearer and more vivid idea, through direct experience, of his own "identity" than of the identities.²⁴⁾

Emma is shocked into self-knowledge after learning that Harriet has her own ideas for Mr Knightley: "It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley marry no one but herself."²⁵⁾ At the same time, her first realization of love is appropriately attended by the first realization of her need for human society.

Consequently, Emma Woodhouse grows up. For her, growing up means the learning the limits

19) Ibid., p. 401.

20) Lionel Trilling, "Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen" in *Emma*, ed. David Lodge (Aurora Publishers Inc., London, 1970), p. 154.

21) Jane Austen, op. cit., p. 455.

22) Susan Morgan, *In the Meantime* (University of Chicago, Chicago, 1980), p. 42.

23) Lionel Trilling, "Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen" in *Emma*, ed. David Lodge (Aurora Publishers Inc., London, 1970), p. 154.

24) Susan Morgan, op. cit., p. 50.

25) Jane Austen, *Emma* (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1977), p. 398.

of self. She learns "that people have an internal life of their own and that the recognition of this personal existence is the necessary requisite for morality and for love."²⁶⁾ She comes to realize that individuals have an inner life apart from the other people's wishes for them, an inner life that cannot be experienced by someone else, but self does not encompass the entire world. First of all, she can understand that social consciousness is requiring the assertion of self, of equality. Emma represents, at the end, "a combination of energy and spirits with property and moral awareness which is more attractive than the sober rectitude of other characters."²⁷⁾

Austen stresses the independence of individual through Emma's mental growth, which is carried out by means of marriage on the importance of women. Marriage has been the traditional point of fusion between personal and social life. For Austen, the proper marriage is one in which the two parties operate on a basis of mutual respect. The symbol of this ideal marriage in the description of the way in which Admiral and Mrs. Croft in *Persuasion* handle their carriage is well drawn:

But by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself they happily passed the danger; and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand they neither fell into a rut, or ran foul of a drug-cart; and Anne, with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no had representation of the general guidance of their affairs, found herself safely deposited by them at the cottage.²⁸⁾

Like this, Austen asserts the union of equal relation, later again in *Persuasion*. "Marriage is a great improver."²⁹⁾ as Austen wrote Cassandra. She observes in *Emma* that "matrimony is the origin of change."³⁰⁾

The author believes that love is "the ruling principle of the world."³¹⁾ She was committed to the ideal of intelligent love, which implies the giving and receiving of knowledge about right conduct.

Therefore, as we have seen the ideal life asserting one's independence, marriage in *Emma* signifies "the validation, not the resolution, of the different dialectics."³²⁾ Every characters will improve after marriage and Emma and Knightley continue to retain their separate indentities. Of course, we anticipate their cooperation and compromise after their marriage. "The recognition of the life of the individual as functioning whole"³³⁾ is emphasized here.

In Miss Woodhouse's case "the perfect marriage comes as yet another glittering prize in a

26) Susan Morgan, op. cit., 27.

27) Bernard J. Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1978), p. 67.

28) Jane Austen, *Persuasion* ed R.W. Chapman (Norton Company, New York, 1958), p. 92.

29) Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979), p. 231.

30) Ann Banfield, "The Influence of Place: Jane Austen and The Novel of Social Consciousness" in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (Macmillan Press Ltd., New Jersey, 1981), p. 42.

31) Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1978), 166.

32) Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen's Novel: Social Change and Literary Form* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1979), p. 125.

33) *Ibid.*, p. 125.

continuous career of self-absorption, destructive attitude and acts."³⁴) Emma could reaffirm her glory through a grand marriage even though her snobbery asserts her queenship; at first she felt marriage had little to do with her. Emma had renounced not only her sexual and maternal feelings, but also the actual living of her own life; she became onlooker, and lived through protegee's and other's marriage. The most important feelings and activities for a woman of her age and culture are inadmissible to her.

Austen combines the intensity of Emma's conflict with precision, the emotional involvement with objective judgement. Austen understands the feeling about the problems of women in her society, and examines with a scrupulous yet passionate and critical precision the problems of her world. Thus, Emma recognizes that her own position depends upon other's existence like Austen.

Therefore, it is through consciousness that the situations are revealed. Emma is not the heroine in the conventional sense. Austen shows that reason and warm affection comprehended women as coinheritors and improvers through the heroine in *Emma*. Furthermore, touching "the problems of dependence and independence,"³⁵) she satirizes the tyranny of dependence of Mr. Woodhouse toward her daughter;

Mr. Woodhouse was fond of society in his own way. He liked very much to have his friends come and see him; and from various united causes, from his long residence at Hartfield, and his good nature, from his fortune, his house, and his daughter, he could command the visits of his own little circle, in a great measure as he liked.³⁶)

The author suggests "a potential discrepancy between the superficial reality of Emma's situation and another reality beneath it, using the colorless word 'seemed' frequently."³⁷)

As mentioned above, Austen focuses on feelings of Emma stressing human happiness in marriage. "The conventional happy ending of *Emma* symbolizes a profound truth; people depends on a balance between one need for pleasures and our need to recognize the claims and necessities of others."³⁸) *Emma* is "a novel of human interdependence."³⁹) It offers the marriage as the hope of intimacy and potential remedy for the incompleteness of personality in an individualistic age. Thus, the union of happy marriage promises happy future of Emma, creating the identity of inner independence. "Austen acknowledges an almost modern consciousness of human isolation; *Emma* is toward openness, knowledge and intimacy."⁴⁰) Austen values personal success, and for Emma, success means using her gifts to find value in love.

34) P. J. M. Scott, *Jane Austen a Reassessment* (Vision and Barnes & Noble, London, 1982).

35) Karl Kroeber, *Styles in Fictional Structure* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1971), p. 19.

36) Jane Austen, *Emma* (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1977), p. 36.

37) Karl Kroeber, op. cit., p. 19.

38) Ibid., p. 22.

39) Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1979), p. 125.

40) Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactical Novel* (Macmillan Press, London, 1983), p. 139.

IV. Conclusion

The moral of *Emma* is that Emma should value the world more. What she offers us is the conviction that what she thinks about is interesting and valuable. What she offers is a confidence that borders on sublimity in the power of her own mind. Austen has a strong perfectionistic element in Emma's personality. Thus, Emma achieves her great significance relative to her potential self, relative to her paternal and matrilal family, relative to her society and to the human community of which we are members.

Emma comes to realize that her first endeavour must be thoroughly to understand her own heart. Maturity involves an ability to understand which cannot be limited to rational knowledge. So, in the fullest sense, Austen understood love and made sure her best men and women come to do so. In this manner, the intense and simultaneous committment of feeling and intelligence is also emphasized. The heroine eventually becomes useful to society. To sum up, the greatness of *Emma's* conception is that through Emma, Austen explored not only what we are obliged to learn but also what we have a right to hope for in the best blessings of existence. When Emma becomes humble and unselfish, and is capable of doing what she should do, fortune will turn in her favor. Virtue is rewarded to Emma fulfilling the ability. For this reason, "Emma is a masterpiece of feminine understanding."⁴¹⁾

We can say that *Emma* is about the powers of the individual mind, the power of sympathy and imagination, and about the powers that can find their proper objects in the world outside the world. Austen recognized no value higher than the knowledge of oneself. On the moral plane, at least, Emma is level with Mr. Knightley. She succeeds in getting what she wants. She may be one of the great heroines of nineteenth century fiction, e.g., Becky Sharp, Jane Eyre, and Isabel Archer. Jane Austen suggests that happiness depends on having a lively, candid perception of things and an imagination that will help to achieve connection and harmony between the self and the world. It must be true that Jane Austen was in agreement with the rational feminist point of view.

41) Ronald Blythe, "Introduction" in *Emma* (Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1977), p. 14.

國 文 抄 錄

19세기 초기 여성작가인 제인 오스틴은 그녀가 다루는 制限된 素材란 限界性속에서도 豊富하고 深奧한 藝術世界를 보여 주는 作家이다.

敎養小説이라는 作品의 特性이 말해주듯이 未婚의 제인 오스틴이 다루는 世界는 男女의 愛情을 中心으로 한 실제 生活相이다. 때문에 女性으로서의 社會的 經驗과 思索을 통한 제인 오스틴의 作品들은 오늘날 讀者들에게 生생한 社會的 經驗을 전달해주고 있다.

하지만, 오스틴은 人間性에 대한 問題 특히 自身을 비롯한 女性에 대한 問題에 많은 關心을 가졌다. 個人主義精神을 중시 여기는 浪漫主義時代의 變化期속에서 오스틴은 그 당시 女權伸張家인 마리 울스톤크래프트처럼 女性自身の 社會的 自我實現化를 作品속에서 주장하고 있다. 즉 오스틴은 女性도 男性처럼 教育의 均等化, 職業選擇의 均等化를 통해서 精神啓發, 自我實現 및 自立精神을 이룩하여 女性 스스로의 社會的 存在價置를 느껴야 한다고 강조하고 있다.

오스틴은 이와같은 女性의 社會的 身分의 重要性에 대한 關心을 어느 다른 作品에서 보다도 「엠마」에서 충분히 보여주고 있다. 전통적이고 보수적인 英國社會라는 어려운 여건속에서도 革新的 思想을 가지고 오스틴은 당시 社會 現象에 대하여 날카로운 풍자적 정신을 고수하고 있으며, 主人公 엠마를 비롯한 주위 女性들의 結婚生活에서 이뤄지는 自我實現의 과정을 통하여 그 당시 社會현상인 女權伸張을 作品속에서 잘 구현하고 있다.

이처럼 오스틴은 革新家로서의 면모를 보여주는 작가이다. 未婚女性으로서 당시 社會에 대한 관심은 자연스러운 현상이기도 하겠지만, 理想的인 사랑 및 結婚에서 보여주는 人間社會, 특히 女性에 대한 知的인 洞察力은 매우 훌륭하다고 할 수 있으며, 本 論文에서는 「엠마」속에서 오스틴이 強調하는 女性의 社會的 役割의 重要성과 그 당시의 女權伸張의 特色을 살펴보았다. 伸張의 特色을 살펴보았다.