

An Interpretation of Jane Austen's *Emma* by Lacan's Theory of Mirror Stage

ZHANG Yechun^{[a],*}

^[a]Lecturer, School of foreign languages, Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by A Study of Jane Austen's Novels (2015B087).

Received 12 June 2017; accepted 5 August 2017

Published online 26 August 2017

Abstract

Emma is honored as the most mature work by Jane Austen. It centers on Emma Woodhouse, the heroine, and reveals the complicated love relationships among Frank Churchill and Harriet Smith, Mr. Elton and Jane Fairfax, and Mr. Knightley and Harriet Smith. This thesis intends to probe into the inner world of Emma and uncover her intricate feeling of match-making for others to self love seeking from the perspective of Lacan's Mirror Stage and Three-Order Theory. From the theory, a number of crises among Emma and her father, Miss Taylor, and her other friends arise, which all contribute to her loss of complete ego. The split Emma, like a new-born infant, returns to the front of the mirror and begins to see her split ego in it. The Imaginary is the first realm of Lacan's three Orders. The illusions from Harriet's obedience, Frank's deliberate deceiving, and the subtle relationship between Harriet and Mr. Knightley all lead Emma to irresistible self-seeking. Emma seeks out her ego under the Law in the Symbolic Order. In the constraint of Phallus, Emma eventually realizes her true emotion to Mr. Knightley and abandons the thought of match-making for Harriet. She breaks through the obstacles of herself in the Symbolic at last. After undergoing this self recognition, Emma reaches the Real Order, the last realm of ego seeking. Everything before all helps her sublimation in the Real.

Key words: Emma; Mirror stage theory; The imaginary; The symbolic; The real; Lacan's theory of mirror stage

Zhang, Y. C. (2017). An Interpretation of Jane Austen's *Emma* by Lacan's Theory of Mirror Stage. *Canadian Social Science*, 13(8), 47-52. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/9782>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9782>

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen (1775-1817) is a superior female English novelist in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Among her 6 masterpieces, Emma is generally considered as the most mature one, from language to plot, and from character description to structure arrangement. And it is considered by readers as the most enigmatic and perplexing novel of Austen. It represents the mature flowering of her singular genius.

Emma can be regarded as a comedy with complicated plots. Emma Woodhouse, a rather spoiled, headstrong, and self-satisfied young lady, inclines to overrate her match-making competence and she is eager to meddle in other people's lives. She insists to hold that it is she herself that helps Miss Taylor to get the satisfying marriage with Mr. Weston and she determines to make more matches for the people around her who she believes to be in need of a marriage. And soon she will get acquainted with Harriet Smith and takes this homeless girl as her protegee and attempts to get her an appropriate husband in order to "improve" her. Emma misleads the simple-minded Harriet to reject the courtship of Robert Martin, a young farmer who is in deep love with her and induces her to believe in the possibility of marriage with Mr. Elton, the vicar, who turns out to be in love with Emma herself. Astonished by Mr. Elton's proposal, Emma feels extremely sorry for Harriet and begins to realize her mistakes. But she does not stop seeking a befitting mate for Harriet so as to take Frank Churchill as the next target. To her great surprise, Harriet confesses to Emma that she falls in love with Mr. Knightley. Till then, Emma eventually discovers

that she herself is in deep love with Mr. Knightley though she always claims that she would remain single all her life. With the death news of Mrs Churchill, the secret engagement of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax is ultimately exposed. Therefore, each pair ends up with a fair marriage.

This thesis is to apply the basic concepts of the theory of Mirror Stage and Three Orders to analyze the crises and difficulties Emma Woodhouse encounters on her way of seeking self-identity.

1. CRISIS IN EMMA'S LIFE

In the novel, Emma as the heroine encounters plenty of crises or conflicts with others in their daily social contacts. In the deep bottom of her heart, she feels desperate for the failures of match-making and getting along with neighbors. She herself feels confused and frustrated about her identity. From all these she feels lost and senses her splitting Ego.

1.1 Crisis Between Emma and Mr. Knightley

Among all the characters, Mr. Knightley is the only one who can find and dare to point out Emma's mistakes and has the courage to criticize her when he perceives the inappropriateness of Emma's words and deeds despite of the occasions. In Mr. Knightley's vision, Emma's life can be summarized as a transversion of "Mistaking—Introspection—Re-mistaking". When receiving Mr. Knightley's reprimand and scold, Emma never admits her misbehavior verbally and sometimes even tends to contend with him. Therefore, the conflicts among the two should be given the first priority.

The first main argumentation appears in Chapter 8 on the marriage proposal of Mr. Martin to Harriet Smith. Having heard the news of Mr. Martin's proposal to Harriet, Mr. Knightley is quite certain of the affirmative answer and rushes to inform Emma of the "good news", whereas he happens to know that the marriage offer has already been declined. Mr. Knightley feels so angry that he makes a detailed inquiry of the whole matter and the two quarrel even more. For quite a long time, Mr. Knightley refuses to visit Hartfield for he is so ashamed of Emma's conduct and though realizing her misbehavior, Emma refuses to make a direct apology to Mr. Knightley.

The second one is in Chapter 18 on the delay of Frank Churchill in congratulating the remarriage of his father and in showing due respect to his stepmother. The argument centers on the reason for his delay. Mr. Knightley insists that as an adult Frank should have his own ideas and plans rather than completely submits to his aunt. While Emma argues that it is Frank's aunt's account that delays his appearance in Highbury. From what happens in the latter part, Mr. Knightley's assessment of Frank is more precise. As Emma has taken Mr. Knightley

as "Other" unconsciously, she has no choice but to contend against him in order to get rid of him from her consciousness. Therefore, Emma is willing to run counter to her original idea so as to get the sense of existing.

And the third main conflict occurs in Chapter 43 on Emma's ridicule of Miss Bates. And this is the only time that Emma acknowledges her mistake without delay for Mr. Knightley has made clear of Miss Bates' pitiful situation. It cannot be denied that Emma herself does share many similarities with Miss Bates, like family background, life situation, social contacts, etc. For this reason, Emma is the last person who may laugh at Miss Bates for they might end the same way.

1.2 Crisis Between Emma and Mr. Elton

Another major figure who holds constant crises with Emma is Mr. Elton. Emma praises herself as having an insight into judging human feelings and claims to be responsible for the success of the marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Therefore, after Miss Taylor transforming into Mrs. Weston, Emma begins to seek another chum and Harriet Smith becomes the chosen one. Soon afterwards, she sets about obtaining Harriet an appropriate mate. And the first comes to her mind is the parish vicar Mr. Elton, who is one of the most eminent and outstanding young men with superior family in the locality. Knowing the feelings of Mr. Martin and Harriet to each other.

Emma more or less affects the decision of eliminating Martin from the candidates. Emma takes it for granted that Mr. Elton will be fascinated by her beauty and completely misunderstands his emotional tendency. Superficially, Mr. Elton seems to have an interest in Harriet, which all turns out to be a means to get close to Emma herself. Eventually, on the way back home from a party, the enigma is disclosed that what happened previously all lay the foundation for his adoration and proposal to Emma herself rather than to Harriet.

Thus far, Emma suffers the first frustration, which turns out to be a major one, in her life. This case causes sadness for not only Harriet but also Mr. Elton, and brings about embarrassment to Mr. Elton and Emma simultaneously. Fortunately, Mr. Elton departs from Highbury on the excuse of traveling, which allows to alleviate the tense relationship.

1.3 Crisis Between Emma and Frank Churchill

The crisis between Emma and Frank Churchill dates back to his initial turn-up in Highbury. Everyone at Hartfield is expecting to meet him, while he fails to keep the appointment repeatedly with the same excuse of the illness of his aunt. Emma's prejudice against him is inevitable. What is worse, in order to get his hair cut, Frank even spends a whole day to London and fro. This behavior stirs up gossips among neighborhood, which he himself does not care too much.

If the arrogance and self-conceitedness of Emma generated from the pursuit and flattery of relatives and friends is taken as unconscious, it is Frank Churchill who deliberately misleads her into “love” by taking advantage of her self-approbation and over-subjectivity so as to conceal his secret relationship with Jane Fairfax.

To sum up, all these crises in Emma’s life lead her to mental break-down and split her into pieces. She has no other choices but to return to the pre-mirror stage and she stands helplessly in front of the mirror in trying to find an image to identify with. However, it results in the fragmented split selves there. Emma struggles to seek self-identification by isolating herself from others around and shifting her own feelings to others.

2. THE SPLIT EMMA IN THE MIRROR

As Lacan presumes that human beings are born prematurely. A newly borne infant is nothing but an undivided part of its mother. It cannot tell the differences between itself and others and things around it. It is the mother who makes it possible for it to survive. Unfortunately, the mother of Emma Woodhouse passed away merely when she was born, leaving her to live with the widowed father who proved to be an indulgent, self-caring man. To put it in another way, Emma was born lost.

In the pre-mirror stage, for relatively a long time the infant cannot control its actions or take itself as a unified whole. To be more exact, it only sees itself as fragmented pieces. And the infant is living in a state of chaos, in which only what is in its sight is existence, and what is out of its sight is nothing at all, just as the case of Emma Woodhouse, the female protagonist in *Emma*. Emma’s chaotic mental situation resembles to what has been revealed in Lacan’s theory of pre-mirror stage.

In the beginning chapter, it is depicted that “her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses” (Austen, 2006), and an excellent governess Miss Taylor was there to replace her. That is to say, entering into the mirror stage, which is one of the most striking period in human life, it is Miss Taylor rather than the mother who plays the crucial role in the formation of Emma’s Subjectivity. With the spoiling and indulgence of the father and governess, Emma as a lonely individual experiences psychological breakdown in many aspects of her life. As Lacan emphasized that the mirror stage was not just a particular moment in an infant’s life, but showed the permanent construction of subjectivity. Though the mirror stage identification takes place during the age of 6-18 months, it would be in effect throughout human lives, just as the condition of Emma.

Born wealthily with high social status in Highbury, she enjoys others’ due respect from an early age. Few people dare to violate her aspiration, which contributes

to the formation of her arrogant, self-conceited, and self-satisfying personality. It means that she cannot see herself clearly and live in a great confusion, in which she considers everything she does be right and proper. As for the marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, she regards it as her masterwork and declares to make more matches for others who “need” a mate. Owning a father who only shows solitude to himself and neglects what she has done does no good to herself, Emma prays to make one more match for “poor Mr. Elton”.

Mr. Elton’s marriage offer serves as a mirror to Emma, owing to the fact that it overturns Emma’s outlook of her excelling capability of match-making. She refuses to believe what she convinced to be the love message of Mr. Elton to Harriet, like the portrait, love charade to “Miss X” is all targeting to Emma herself instead of her little girlfriend. This incident greatly shocks Emma. For a long time, Emma does not know how to confront Harriet. In his great work *Jane Austen*, Warren Conish takes this episode as of no significance at all. However, it is not really so. This episode demonstrates Emma’s arrogance and self-conceit obviously and distinctly. She is keen on match-making, whose failure greatly despairs her. From this affair, Emma seems to get lost and return to the front of the mirror in order to reestablish her self-identification.

Mr. Knightley is “one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them” (Pinch, 2003). Therefore, he is taken as the psychological mentor to Emma and he himself can be regarded as a mirror which can reflect whatever Emma does, whether stand or fall. For the three major crises between the two, Mr. Knightley holds an irreplaceable position in the formation of Emma’s Subjectivity. And in the reflection by him, Emma sometimes feels ambivalent and irresolute in dealing with matters and her mind separates into contradictory parts.

Emma believes that Frank Churchill is in affection to Harriet. However, since the death news of Mrs. Churchill reaches Highbury, Frank reveals the secret engagement to Jane Fairfax, which defeats Emma’s plan once again. For this, Emma has to re-consider what she has done and has been doing. Harriet might have been married to Mr. Martin, which was impeded by Emma. Emma feels it terribly to stake on her friend’s felicity with ease. When getting to know that Harriet becomes in love with Mr. Knightley rather than Frank Churchill, Emma falls into fluster again owing to the fact that she herself wants to be Mrs. Knightley.

Facing such an amount of dissatisfaction, Emma’s mentality trembles on the edge of cracking up. For self-rescuing, she diverts her attention by keeping her busy doing match-making. The marriages or love relations in the novel all symbolize the fragmentation of Emma’s disintegrated Ego.

3. EMMA'S SELF-IDENTIFICATION

3.1 Emma in the Imaginary Order

According to Lacan's view, the ego of human is established on illusion, which dominates the cognition of general knowledge. Though the infant has been born, it has not formed its ego till the mirror stage. The self recognition built in the mirror stage and self-awareness set up on human relationships are based on the "other". They are changing unremittently in the spiral rising sequence as "identification—disillusion—identification". Identification is a vital process in the Imaginary, due to that the Ego is constituted through identifying with the image, which is sometimes called *resemblant other*, in the mirror.

Passing through the mirror stage, Emma Woodhouse bears her fragmented images into the Imaginary Order. The spoiling of her father, the indulgence of Miss Taylor, together with the pursuit of the friends and relatives compose different "mirrors", in which Emma sees an ideally perfect self or ego and an omnibearing achiever. Therefore, she insists that whatever she does or thinks is entirely proper. And she is continually "striving" for this ideal ego in order to get the recognition from others. She attempts to assist many others by exploiting her own perfectness, with match-making as the only way.

According to Lacan, the infant, Emma, through the mirror stage enters into the Imaginary Order which is a realm of deception and illusion. In order to reunify her Ego and recover her authoritative in Highbury, she begins to get involved in all kinds of occasions, and matters and keeps herself busy with various "commitments". Here come several examples of her pursuing her Ideal Ego through the illusions she encounters.

Firstly, Harriet is taken by Emma as her protegee for no concrete reason at all. Emma presumes it as her obligation to get her a proper husband. Emma starts her plan to arrange the meeting for Harriet and Mr. Elton, and tries her best to create opportunities for the two to stay together longer. On passing by the blessed abode of Mr. Elton, Harriet is curious to have a sight, which Emma mistakenly classes "as a proof of love" (Barbara, 1981). When a love charade is found on the table, Emma takes it for granted as a mark of Mr. Elton's love to Harriet. When Harriet is standing there for Emma to portrait, Mr. Elton is so eager to get close to the picture and cannot help praising either the picture or the painter. And after finishing, he volunteers to get it framed in London. To Emma, all these are taken as evidence that Elton is in pursuit of her little girlfriend. This can be concluded as the first major illusion she encounters, which proves to have a tremendous influence on her.

Secondly, Frank Churchill is the second character who causes illusion to Emma. On different occasions, Frank shows his interests in Emma and flirts with her in public, all of which mislead Emma to believe that he is in love

with her and consequently she herself begins to focus her eyes on him. Eventually, Emma is suddenly enlightened when the engagement of Frank and Jane is revealed. What he has done is all to conceal their secret relationship. In no time, Emma receives a short note from Mrs. Weston, enclosed a long letter from Frank Churchill to Mrs. Weston. After finishing reading the letter, Emma almost forgives him.

Thirdly, when Harriet reveals that she is in love with Mr. Knightley rather than Frank Churchill, Emma comes to realize what she has been endeavoring all turn out to be in vain. "Till now that she was threatened with its loss, Emma had never known how much of her happiness depended on being first with Mr. Knightley, first in interest and affection." (Evans, 2001) Emma begins to feel uptight, for she has never been so concerned about that who will be the Mrs Knightley. And she once states that Mr. Knightley should never get a wife, on account of that her nephew should be the inheritor of Knightley. And if he really needs a wife, Emma herself should be no other choice.

Summing up, all these illusions are imagined by Emma. She chooses to believe in that she can understand other's intentions thoroughly, however, all of which cause herself disillusionment. In other words, it is nothing but her own wishful think that dominates the whole event of her pursuit of her Imaginary Ego.

3.2 Emma in the Symbolic Order

After the unserviceable striving in the relationship between Harriet and Mr. Elton, Emma's life and Ego are all disordered so that she attempts hard to bring them back to be normal and change her chaotic current situation. Thankfully, with the departure of Mr. Elton and the appearance of Frank Churchill, she seems to regain the faith of getting Harriet a suitable mate. When first meeting Frank, Emma finds that he is in complete rightness. From that moment on, Frank becomes the nucleus of social intercourse in Highbury for quite a time.

However, to a certain extent, Emma mingles herself with Harriet, for she cannot clearly distinguish that whether it is she herself who is interested in getting along with Frank Churchill or she is wholeheartedly in helping Harriet to get close to him. When Frank flirts with her, Emma does not feel the inappropriateness, instead, she even enjoys it. As previously mentioned, Emma is clear of her love to Frank, however, in order to cling to her declaration, she chooses to abandon. Just at the moment of Mrs. Weston reveals the attachment of Frank, "Emma thought first of herself, and then of Harriet" (Gillie, 2004), which clearly manifests her emotions to Frank and her mix-up of Harriet and herself.

At the requirement of Mr. Elton, Emma begins her portraying of Harriet. She cannot distinguish whether he is interested in her artistic skills, or in the beautiful appearance of her little friend. During the portraying,

Mr. Elton does not know what suitably to do and keeps a watchful eye on Emma's each movement. Emma takes it as a mark of his eagerness for appreciating Harriet's beauty. When finished, he offers to frame it in London, which deepens Emma's belief of his intention. But it is not clear to Emma indeed that whether it is a showing of her artistry or of Harriet's beauty.

What is more, it is revealed that Emma is in deep love with Mr. Knightley in the ending, however, before that she is attempting to match him to Harriet. During the ball at the Weston's, she happens to find that Harriet is the only young lady who does not own a dancing partner. It is certain that Mr. Elton will be the last person to dance with her. When Mr. Knightley friendly invites Harriet to dance, Emma is adequately satisfied. Another episode is on the journey to Box Hill, Mr. Knightley and Harriet lead the way, which arouses the gratification in Emma. It is not unclear that Emma is assuming herself to be Harriet and enjoying the caress and gentleness from Mr. Knightley.

That is to say Harriet is chosen by Emma as her representative, and whose livelihood just coincides with that of Emma. She involves Harriet into the social network of her own, which, according to Lacan, is the social, cultural and linguistic environment. Harriet is actually the other Emma who yearns for love and affection, corresponding to the real Emma who declares to be single throughout her life. It is Emma who wants to dance with Mr. Knightley and aspires to go steady with him. She could not see the division between Harriet and herself. Harriet is Emma, yet Harriet is not Emma.

After realizing what she has been "endeavoring" in the Imaginary all proves to be pointless and meaningless, Emma feels it necessary to survey the people around her and reconsider all the affairs happened. Turning around, she comes to be aware that Mr. Knightley is a mirror to her, for every decision she has made and every affair she has interfered with are all reacted by him more or less.

Emma's Ego is split and breaks into pieces, whereas she persists in finding a unified whole Ego for herself. Emma sends Harriet into an area where Emma herself could not approach as a result of her chaotic inner world. She strives to keep Harriet busy with the gentlemen she arranges for her and wishes that Harriet could get a pleased marriage as Miss Taylor did. During this process, what Emma identifies with is prior to the identification with an image, for it is a symbolic identification with signifying elements.

3.3 Emma in the Real Order

According to Dylan Evans, "when something cannot be integrated in the Symbolic Order, as in psychosis, it may return in the Real in the form of dream or hallucination" (Hart, 1996). Throughout the whole novel, dream only occurs in Chapter 41, in which she has dreamed all her particular friends in Highbury. In this dream, everyone acts oddly, which reflects the dissimulation of their daily

life. Therefore, it is hallucination that manifests Emma's chaotic inner world.

In brief, according to Evans, Emma seems to be living in her own world of hallucination. As the old saying goes, "every coin has two sides". What she perceives or experiences can either be comprehended as how she comprehends or be interpreted to the contrary.

In the first place, she takes it as her contribution to the marriage of Weston couple. She enjoys the pleasure of match-making and is eager to get a marriage partner for Mr. Elton, who she believes is in need of a girl. However, she eliminates herself from the candidates so as to search among people around her. Therefore, it directs to Harriet, which causes the following plot of the novel. Suppose she perceives from another point of view, she herself can possibly be the Mrs. Elton. Just about her hallucination that whatever Mr. Elton does or says, including the compliment, the love charade, the portrait, are all targeting at her little girlfriend. It is this mis-recognition that makes her believe what she imagines is sound and logical, which causes her final embarrassment.

Secondly, it is her hallucination that brings about her behavior in dealing with Frank Churchill, whose extraction, appearance and character are all outstanding. Whereas Harriet is just the natural daughter of someone, who boards at Mrs. Goddard's. Nevertheless, Emma takes it for granted that Frank should be fascinated by her and takes delight in making them go steady together. Even though she herself generates favorable impression on Frank, she tries to persuade herself not to continue and abandon her own love. It is this misunderstanding that causes her to be at a loss when getting to know the engagement of Frank and Jane.

Thirdly, no one except Emma herself knows what position Mr. Knightley holds in her mind. When reading attentively, it is obvious that Mr. Knightley comes to her mind whenever she does or says something inappropriate. And Mr. Knightley is the one she wants to get the forgiveness from. When Mr. Knightley shows his love to her and demands of her to call him "George" once more, an unknown strength spurs her to reject this lure. However, as time elapses, she senses the love intention of Harriet to Mr. Knightley, which is a torment for Emma herself. She realizes that it is time for her to take action for her own love.

To summarize, the whole story centers on Emma, who never withdraws from the stage. If not directly depicts her matters, what happens or discusses are all connected to her. The social contacts are under her control, which means the stage or retreat all depends on her. The significance of each person lies in his or her value to Emma. When one's value is out of use, he or she should get out of the center of Emma's mind, which applies to either Mr. Elton or Frank Churchill. When it comes to Mr. Knightley, Emma is suddenly enlightened that she is living in her own hallucinations from the very beginning.

What she has done is catastrophizing rather than reserving for a rainy day. Emma eventually regains her courage to pursue her own felicity of being the wife of Mr. Knightley, and integrates her split and fragmented personalities.

CONCLUSION

The main point of *Emma* is how Emma Woodhouse, the leading heroine of the novel, regains her Ego, from the match-making for people around her instigated all by herself, till she comes into an integrity in marrying Mr. Knightley. This thesis attempts to disclose the whole process of Emma's self-searching from the point of Lacan's theory of Mirror Image and Three Orders.

Emma, who cultivates the disposition of being arrogant and self-conceited, suffers a lot from the contacts with her friends and relatives and loses her identity. She has to identify with her "images" in the mirror again. According to Lacan, she has entered into the Imaginary Order. She struggles hard to identify with images, however, what she obtains is nothing but illusion and frustration ultimately. Ever since the failures of her invalid endeavors in the Imaginary Order, Emma begins to reconsider what she has been doing and survey the people around her, especially Mr. Knightley, who can be taken for her supervisor and psychological mentor. In the quarrels and arguments with Mr. Knightley, Emma's self-identity sublimates. In order

to terminate her psychological chaos, Emma submits to the Law of the Father, which means she has to abandon plenty of things so as to register into the Symbolic Order. The Real Order, on the basis of Lacan's description, is a realm of impossible, which is unable to be imagined or symbolized. It emerges as dreams and hallucinations. Therefore, Emma's hallucinations also play an irreplaceable role in her journey to self-search.

REFERENCES

- Austen, J. (2006). *Emma*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Barbara, H. (1981). *York notes on Emma*. London: Longman York Press.
- Evans, D. (2001). *An introductory dictionary of lacanian psychoanalysis*. East Sussex Brunner-Routledge.
- Gillie, C. (2004). *A preface to Jane Austen*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Hart, J. (1996). *Jane Austen's Emma*. Research and Education Association.
- Hou, Y. H. (2012). *A mirror-phase approach to the ballad of the sad café*. Ocean University of China.
- Ma, R. (2008). *The Emma's self-awareness on Emma*. Northwest Normal University.
- Pinch, A. (2003). *Jane Austen's Emma*. London: Oxford University Press.