

THE CLASS-CONTESTATION IN JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA*

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Abstract

This study discusses a novel entitled Emma written by Jane Austen. Emma portrays the lives of different classes in Victorian society through its characters. This classification of people is due to some factors such as economics, ideology, taste, hegemony and language. Each character in Emma is the representation of the classes exists in the novel. The problem related to the topic of this research is the class-formation of Victorian Society depicted in Emma. In order to answer the problems, a Marxist theory by Jameson is employed. This theory is applicable in Emma, since the characters are engaged to each other not only based on the economic as a means of production, but also on the ideology, social and cultural aspects. Based on the analysis, the class formation in Emma is not only based on the economics of each character, but also based on the ideology, taste and hegemony, and language. They, altogether, form classes and influence the characters in maintaining their class status. People who possess huge economic base are the representation of the dominant class, whereas the others represent the laboring class. Because of their economic base, Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley could have comfortable lives. Therefore, they are the representation of the dominant class. On the contrary, Miss Bates and Robert Martin have hard lives and they are the representation of the laboring class. Each member of the class tries to climb their status, unexceptionally Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley. They act differently in order to maintain their class status.

Key words: *class-formation, dominant class, economic based, laboring class*

1. INTRODUCTION

In our everyday lives, many of us use the language of class to refer to a social hierarchy and knowing your place within it. Scott (1999: 1) states that class is a matter of breeding and of social background. It is reflected in our attitudes and our lifestyles, our accents, and our ways of dressing. Class distinctions are tied to a world of tradition and subordination that no longer exists and the language of class is incompatible with contemporary attitudes and values.

The conflict of social classes establishes the reason upon which ideological conflicts arise (Paris, 1978). Literature and art belong to the ideological sphere, but possess a relationship to ideology which is often less direct even than is found in the case of religion. Legal and philosophical system (Brooker, 1997: 89).

Mckernan says in *The Saying of Jane Austen* (1993: 7) that Jane Austen writes about a world long gone and regretted – a golden age of leisured gentlemen and ladies, comfortable, elegant, redolent of a vanished simplicity and taste. Moreover, *Emma* portrays the lives of different classes in Victorian society through its characters (Landland, 1984: 15). There are upper class, middle class and lower class people who could attend the same balls without being really interfered by their different social classes. However, there is still a feeling of superior towards others as represented by the characters of Emma when she deals with Miss Bates and Robert Martin.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter describes the methodology employed in this study and consists of three parts. The first part is the subject matter that describes the novel *Emma* as the object of the study. Marxism approach is applied in analyzing the topic. Then, steps that are fetched for making the analysis complete are discussed in the second part. In the third part, the writer presents the data analysis. Finally, the last part gives the information about the sources such as books, journals, and websites, which support this research with their theories. Those sources are employed as the basic references of this study.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

E.P. Thomson in *The Making of the English Working Class* analyses the English working class as a group of people with shared material conditions coming to a positive self-consciousness of their social position. This feature of social class is commonly termed class-consciousness in Marxism. It is seen as the process of a “class in itself” moving in the direction of a “class for itself,” a collective agent that changes history rather than simply being a victim of the historical process.

The English working class is made in confrontation with both the economic exploitation that is inherent in capitalism as well as a counter-revolutionary repression that united the landed and commercial classes against French-type Radicalism. The English governing class has a genius for co-opting successive strata of the propertied classes – mercantile in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and commercial and industrial by 1832 – in the nick of time to isolate the working class and spare the country revolution. The result of counter-revolution is a working class that is very conscious of its own identity but lacked the drive for political power.

The working class or the laboring class – according to Marxists and Jameson – in *Emma* is best represented by Miss Bates and Robert Martin. The previous discussions have proved and showed their struggle as the member of the laboring class. It is also said that the laboring class live hard lives in Victorian society since Victorian society provide opportunities only for the dominant. The dominant in *Emma* is best represented by Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley who act differently in maintaining and pursuing their class status.

Borrowing E.P. Thomson’s theory that the English dominant class has a genius for co-opting successive strata of the propertied classes in the nick of time to isolate the working class and spare the country revolution and it resulted in the consciousness of the laboring class for its own identity, it can be said that there are also some conflicts raise in *Emma* because of the treatment of the dominant class. Moreover, conflicts are not only between the dominant and laboring, but conflicts also existed within the dominant and laboring.

Conflicts in *Emma* are also inspired by the author’s life. Austen is said to be a member of the dominant class and lived a nice and quite easy life as a member of the dominant. Austen herself sees the treatment the dominant gives to the laboring has isolated. Austen, an author who usually writes stories about noble, dominant family, has included the laboring as the characters in her story. This class suicide is also portrayed in *Emma* through the relationship among Mr. Knightley, Miss Bates and Robert Martin.

a. Conflicts between the Dominant and Laboring Class

The class structure is basic in *Emma*, as it is in all Austen’s novels. The responsibilities and behavior of each class are generally known and accepted, and this is such a privilege for the dominant. In return for their many privileges, the dominant class has a responsibility toward the poor and the unfortunate. Emma Woodhouse not only fulfills her

social duties with charitable visits to the poor family, but also takes effective measures to alleviate their distresses out of a genuine kindness:

[...] Emma is very compassionate: and the distresses of the poor are as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse. She understood their ways, can allow for their ignorance and their temptations, has no romantic expectations of extraordinary virtue from those for whom education has done so little, entered into their troubles with ready sympathy, and always gave her assistance with as much intelligence as goodwill (p. 86).

Emma Woodhouse reveals to the reader her sound moral nature and good judgment. They contrast both with Harriet's inadequate response and with her own scheming, fancy-driven behavior upon encountering Mr. Elton. They also contrast with Miss Bates' ignorance and with her indifferent feeling toward Robert Martin.

The relationships between Emma Woodhouse and Miss Bates are little bit different compared to the relationships between Emma Woodhouse and Robert Martin. Though the nature of their conflicts is about their economic base and ideology, the conflicts between Emma Woodhouse and Miss Bates are also influenced by Emma's jealousy toward Miss Bates' niece, Jane Fairfax.

On the other hand, Austen has plotted George Knightley as a perfect or infallible man to embody her social ideal. George Knightley – another member of the dominant class – does not show any conflicts with Robert Martin or Miss Bates. He can fairly treat them as they are members of laboring class who needed supports and company.

1) The Conflicts between Emma Woodhouse and Robert Martin

Seen from the economic base as the foundation of class formation, the conflicts between Emma Woodhouse and Robert Martin emerge as a result of Robert Martin's poverty. Emma characters are told to be unlikable for she is snobbish, vain, manipulative, power-hungry, self-deluded, often indifferent to the feelings of others, and at least one occasion scathingly cruel. Emma clearly shows how she does not like Robert Martin despite the fact that Robert Martin made many attempts to prove that he is worthy.

Emma's attitude toward Robert Martin is influenced by her self-deluded toward Harriet for she thinks that she can arrange a marriage for Harriet and someone else who is superior to Robert Martin. Emma is excruciatingly vain when she tells Harriet that Harriet is superior to Robert Martin so that it is unworthy for Harriet to marry Robert Martin, whereas she has not met Robert Martin, yet. Further, Emma, as she said that she wanted to see Harriet "permanently well connected" (p. 28), only wants to fulfill her fancy and egotism rather than social responsibility and reason. Emma wants something to happen in Harriet's life as she wishes, not as Harriet wishes. In addition, Emma is as manipulative as she says to Harriet that Harriet lives a very hard life and will have un-educated children if she marries to Robert Martin.

"You understand the force of influence well, Harriet; but I would have you so firmly established in good society, as to be independent even of Hartfield and Miss Woodhouse. I want to see you permanently well connected – and to that end it will be advisable to have as few odd acquaintance as may be; and, therefore, I say that if you should still be in this country when Mr. Martin marries, I wish you may not be drawn in, by your intimacy with the sisters, to be acquainted with the wife, who will probably be some mere farmer's daughter, without education." (p. 28)

Although Emma meets Robert Martin for the first time on her way to Randalls, she can already judge Robert Martin's personalities and manner only from his physical appearance. Emma's snobbery leads her to act like a teenage that is by having a "quick eye sufficiently acquainted with Robert Martin" (p. 29). Harriet, who then comes running happily to Emma, asks Emma's opinion toward Robert Martin. Harriet expects Emma to tell something good about Robert Martin. On the other hand, surprisingly, Emma frankly tells her that Robert Martin is remarkably plain, despite the fact that Robert Martin's appearance is neat. Emma drives Harriet to have the same opinion. Harriet can only share the same opinion though actually she does not absolutely agree.

"[...] Well, Miss Woodhouse, is he like what you expected? What do you think of him? Do you think him so very plain?"

"He is very plain, undoubtedly – remarkably plain: - but that is nothing, compared with his entire want of gentility. I has no right to expect much, and I does not clownish, so totally without air. I has imagined him, I confess, a degree or two nearer gentility."

"To be sure," said Harriet, in a mortified voice, "he is not so genteel as real gentlemen." (p. 29)

Emma in her snobbery states that her relationship with Harriet is the only reason why Harriet can be so superior. The relationship brings Harriet into a company of real gentlemen. This means that Harriet can only marry with real gentlemen in the company who are well educated and well bred. Emma vividly insists Harriet to consider Robert Martin as a very inferior creature. Emma is so hypocrite since she does not tell Harriet her first impression toward Robert Martin's appearance as his appearance is neat and he is like a sensible man. Emma tells Harriet that Robert Martin possesses awkward look, uncouth voice, and abrupt manner.

"I think, Harriet, since your acquaintance with us, you have been repeatedly in the company of some, such very real gentlemen, that you must yourself be struck with the difference in Mr. Martin. At Hartfield you have has very good specimens of well educated, well bred men. I should be surprised if, after seeing them, you can be in company with Mr. Martin again without perceiving him to be a very inferior creature – and rather wondering at yourself for having ever thought him at all agreeable before. Do not you begin to feel that now? Are not you struck? I am sure you must have been struck by his awkward look and abrupt manner – and the uncouthness of a voice, which I heard to be wholly un-modulated as I stood here." (p. 30)

Emma is not only objected to Robert Martin's look, manner and voice, but also compares him with other men in Hartfield such as George Knightley, Mr. Weston and Mr. Elton. Emma says that there is a big difference between Mr. George Knightley and Robert Martin as they are un-comparable. Mr. George Knightley is said to be so highly superior, one in a hundred, whereas Robert Martin is one of a hundred.

"Certainly, he is not like Mr. Knightley. He has not such a fine air and way of walking like Mr. Knightley. I see the difference plain enough. But Mr. knightly is so very fine a man!"

"Mr. Knightley's air is so remarkably good, that it is not fair to compare Mr. Martin with him. You might not see one in a hundred, with gentleman so plainly written as in Mr. Knightley. [...]" (p. 30)

Emma does not only compare Robert Martin with Mr. Knightley, but she also compares him with Mr. Weston and Mr. Elton. She notes that Robert Martin is far different. She also emphasizes how Robert Martin looks like when he is as old as Mr. Weston. She blatantly says that Robert Martin will be completely uncouth, and rude in manners. She points that Robert Martin only thinks about how to get profit and to avoid loss. It is important for Emma to let Harriet know that a man such as Robert Martin will never change himself into a better gentleman.

“[...]What you say to Mr. Weston and Mr. Elton? Compare Mr. Martin with either of them. Compare their manner of carrying themselves; of walking; of speaking; of being silent. You must see the difference.”

“Which makes his good manners the more valuable. The older a person grows, Harriet, the more important it is that their manners should not be bad – the more glaring and disgusting any loudness, or coarseness, or awkwardness becomes. What is passable in youth, is detestable in later age. Mr. Martin is now awkward and abrupt; what will he be at Mr. Weston’s time of life?”

“But there may be pretty good guessing. He will be a completely gross, vulgar farmer – totally inattentive to appearance, and thinking of nothing but profit and loss.” (p.30 – 31)

Certainly imagination or fancy, combined with snobbery, cause Emma to discourage Harriet from accepting Mr. Martin’s proposal. Emma holds to her belief that Harriet is personally and socially superior to Mr. Martin, despite compelling evidence to the contrary – Mr. Martin’s gentlemanly letter of proposal. Emma is full of distrustful for she finds out that the proposal is above her expectation.

2) The Conflicts between Emma Woodhouse and Miss Bates

The conflicts between Emma Woodhouse and Miss Bates are mainly because of Miss Bates’ poverty and manner, and of her jealousy toward Jane Fairfax. Throughout, Emma was told that she had indifferent feeling toward Miss Bates.

Emma did not like the way Miss Bates spoke or commented on things. She considered Miss Bates as a foolish who laughed at herself. Emma could never understand why people could stand with Miss Bates in the party. Emma would not get closed to Miss Bates if she did not something urgently to do with Miss Bates.

Emma noted that Miss Bates was actually not equal with who attended Cole’s party. Emma could not accept any good treatment given to Miss Bates. Though Emma herself sometimes visited Miss Bates, she could not pretend that she liked Miss Bates. For Emma, she would not want to get acquainted with Miss Bates if she did not have any reason to do so.

b. Conflicts within the Dominant

Conflicts within the members of dominant class are portrayed through the relationships between Emma Woodhouse and Mr. George Knightley.

Some social mobility is possible, as illustrated by the Coles.

This is the occurrence: - The Coles has been settled some years in Highbury, and are very good sort of people – friendly, liberal, and unpretending; but, on the other hand, they are of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel. On their first coming into the country, they has lived in proportion to their income, quietly, keeping little company, and that little un-expensively; but the last year or two has brought them a considerable increase of means – the house in town has yielded greater profits, and fortune in general has smiled on them. With their wealth, their views increased; their want of larger house, their

inclination for more company. They added to their house, to their number of servants, to their expenses of every sort; and by this time are, in fortune and style of living, second only to the family at Hartfield. [...] (p. 210).

By increasing their income, the Coles change their life style to imitate the classes above them; they employ more servants, enlarge their house, and give dinner parties to which they invite the regular and best families. Only Emma regards their social movement as presumptuous; the Westons and Mr. Knightley are willing to dine with the Coles and to accept their social aspirations.

The Coles display proper attitudes and are neither pretentious nor self-promoting; Mrs. Coles confesses that no one in her family can play their new grand pianoforte. Moreover, the Coles shows delicacy and consideration in sending to London for a folding-screen "which they hoped might keep Mr. Woodhouse from any draught of air and therefore induce him the more readily to give them the honor of his company" (p. 191). Contrast their behavior and attitudes with the ill-bred impertinence and pretentious bragging of Mrs. Elton, whose father, like Mr. Cole, made his money in trade.

In a small community where there are only a few genteel families, there may also be more tolerance at some mixing of the classes than in London or a more populous town.

4. CONCLUSION

As the member of dominant class, Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley possess very huge amount of money. Miss Taylor who is in the class between the dominant and laboring earns enough money as a governess. Robert Martin and Miss Bates are the members of laboring class. They do not have the means of production.

Each character portrays their self-reliance about their being member of certain class. Emma tends to do the same thing that is make use of her wealth through the course of the story, whereas Knightley acts like a perfect man who is rich, kind, well judging, reasonable, and certainly handsome. Furthermore, there is a change in Miss Taylor since she marries Mr. Weston and she turns herself into Mrs. Weston. She is not a governess anymore. She has step onto the ladder of higher rank because her marriage. Then, Miss Bates with her unique way, talking too much, keeps maintaining her status. She tends to make friends with members of dominant class. Little bit different, Robert Martin reads books and journal though he is a member of the laboring class. He considers that reading will improve his knowledge.

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