

Play the “Imagine This” Game

In my forthcoming book, I will make the case that Jane Austen covertly invented an entirely new kind of novel, deploying a technique unrecognized for 200 years—what I call her “shadow stories”. After years of literary sleuthing, I’ve amassed a vast matrix of evidence showing she wrote all her novels to be read as *anamorphic* — i.e., amenable to *two* separate, but equally valid, interpretations of the text--*two* parallel fictional universes. One is an *overt* story that we all see; the other is subliminally discernible in the *shadows* of the text. The overt stories are essentially comic, with serious elements. The shadow stories are a mixture of Gothic romanticism and black comedy, all in the service of a strong but covert feminist critique of the “horrid” treatment of women by men given too much power by law and custom.

Emma’s shadow story, Austen’s most complex and perfect one, will be the subject of my talk. In the spirit of serious fun, and as a warm up for my presentation, I invite you to play a little game of “Mission Imaginable”. Emma is our favorite imaginator, as she spins improbable webs of fancy. It’s time to unleash your inner Emma! I promise you that your participation in this game will make my presentation much more enjoyable and meaningful for you. I also promise you will find this warm up a great deal of fun.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is as follows. Below are six statements regarding *Emma*, each guaranteed to elicit incredulous laughter from any red-blooded Janeite. Nonetheless, you must keep your countenance, and, as devil’s advocate, argue *in favor of* all these absurd propositions! Draw upon your knowledge of *Emma* to make your case, regardless of how strongly you *disbelieve* what you are arguing. Reconcile, to the best of your ability, these six statements with the words of the novel’s text. In particular, you must identify Mr. X, Mr. Y and Miss Z, and support those identifications with textual evidence, even if taken out of apparent context. This task will feel to some of you like pure madness, because, as you will read, below, I am asking you to defend some wild and crazy stuff. But be strong!

Six Statements to be Defended (Mssrs. X and Y, and Miss Z, are all actual major characters in *Emma*)

- #1: Jane and Frank were *never* engaged....but they did have sex in Weymouth nine months earlier.
- #2: Right before her tryst with Frank, Jane had sex with Mr. X, a married man *other than* Mr. Dixon.
- #3: Frank never wanted to marry either Jane *or* Miss Z, the *other* single woman he jilted in London on Valentine’s Day. From Day One, Frank has wanted to marry....Emma (for her money, of course).
- #4: Harriet had sex with both Robert Martin and Mr. Elton, but only for sport, as she suckers Emma with a “dumb blonde” act. From Day One, Harriet has been using Emma to get close to...Mr. Knightley.
- #5: From Day One, Mr. Knightley has wanted to marry...Emma (like Frank, *for her money*).
- #6: Mr. Y, the “abominable puppy” who gives Miss Hawkins an acrostic at Christmas is the same person as the “friend” who later gives Mr. Elton the charade which he in turns gives to Emma..

Now it’s your turn. Read and reread these six statements, keep a copy of *Emma* in hand or viewable online, and use your little gray cells like Hercule Poirot. Here are two tips: Since Emma is the focal consciousness for almost all the narration, speculate about who would have to be lying to Emma, and possibly to other characters as well, about particular matters, in order for all six statements to be true. Don’t take what anyone (except Emma) says at face value. And insofar as it’s relevant, assume that the supposed facts contained in the above six statements not only are entirely unknown to Emma, but they also *remain* unknown to her even after the novel has ended, because *they have been concealed from her*. Although these statements seem crazy, if you let them sink in, you’ll find that they can be made to intermesh, and not to contradict each other. Devote as much time to this exercise as you care to, but whatever you do, sleep on the task at least one night, preferably reading those statements right before sleeping, then think about them after you awaken. Be like Frank Churchill, or Shakespeare’s Bottom, and dream about Highbury---but a topsy-turvy Highbury. Who knows what you’ll see when you awake!

This flyer will self-destruct in 15 seconds....And may the metaphors be with you! --Arnie Perlstein