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# Reality and imagination: the authorial decisions of May Welland Archer and Emma Woodhouse

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**REALITY AND IMAGINATION:  
THE AUTHORIAL DECISIONS OF MAY WELLAND ARCHER  
AND EMMA WOODHOUSE**

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A Thesis

Presented to

Eastern Washington University

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Masters of Arts

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By

Melinda R. Vetter

Summer 2013

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## MASTER'S THESIS

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## Abstract

The ideal woman of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the “Angel in the House”—a woman who was sweet, shy, and modest. She lived to please the men in her life. She was also the child-woman who was sheltered from the knowledge of the world because it would be too painful and heavy for her fragile shoulders to endure. Edith Wharton, in *The Age of Innocence*, and Jane Austen, in *Emma* challenge this ideal picture by creating their respective heroines, May and Emma, to be the exact opposite of it. Though May constantly acts like the ideal woman mentioned earlier, she is actually a very shrewd, intuitive, and perceptive woman. She understands the role she is supposed to play so she dons the mask of the Victorian ideal woman and hides her true personality in order to write and innocently manipulate Newland Archer’s every move without him ever knowing. Although Wharton’s May successfully controls the entire novel, Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse does not try to hide her knowledge and relies more on her imagination than reality, so when she attempts to manipulate and write other peoples’ stories, she fails miserably. However, in the end, Emma experiences the kind of genuine relationship with Mr. Knightley that May’s mask never allows May to have with Newland.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Even though Jane Austen and Edith Wharton lived and wrote years apart, their respective Regency and Victorian values actually mirror each other, so they actually portrayed similar worlds in their novels. Like most authors, Austen and Wharton wrote about what they knew, and they both knew the essence of a patriarchal world because they each grew up in one. Austen, in *Emma*, and Wharton, in *The Age of Innocence*, both depict a patriarchal society defined by convention, duty, and propriety—displaying socially acceptable behavior. Penelope Joan Fritzer, in *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*, notes that Austen’s novels illuminate “the lives of a fairly affluent segment of English society, and in chronicling these daily lives, she inevitably gives a picture of her age and of the way people of her time and class behaved” (1). Such a statement could be said of Wharton as well, considering that she too wrote about the world she grew up in and about the people around her, mostly her parents’ generation.

So, Austen and Wharton both wrote from personal experience and explored the behaviors of their similar societies, which is why their novels are known as “quintessential novels of manners” (Fritzer 1). A novel of manners re-creates a social world, describing in detail the customs, behaviors, values, and expectations of a certain social group at a specific time and place (“Novel of Manners” 357). Austen’s *Emma* and Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* depicts the values and expectations of Emma’s late eighteenth, early nineteenth century upper class social circle and May’s Old Victorian New York society—expectations of etiquette and a moral code that echoed each other. Though some people claimed *The Age of Innocence* was simply a “costume piece” that did not belong among the novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wharton asserts that she wanted the

novel to be an historical look at “a simple and grave story of two people trying to live up to the something that was still ‘felt in the blood’ at the time” (Lewis 433). By the phrase “felt in the blood,” Wharton undoubtedly refers to Newland Archer’s and May Welland’s awareness of the old code of honor that dominated both Regency England and Victorian New York. Newland, himself, refers to this code of honor as “the inscrutable totem terrors” of the Old New York society (Wharton 6)—what is acceptable and what is not. Honor and duty—a faithful and moral obligation to one’s family and friends—were the “totems”—the pillars—of both Austen and Wharton’s worlds. So, even though Austen and Wharton wrote at different times, their novels depict similar duty-bound worlds.

Perhaps the greatest similarity between Austen and Wharton is the fact that they both critique the ideal perception of womanhood that spanned the Regency era and the late-nineteenth-century, Victorian American society. The patriarchal societies forced the women of those days into stereotypical and confined roles that both Austen and Wharton challenge and contradict by making their main characters into “authors” who “write” other peoples’ stories using different methods. On the one hand, Wharton’s May chooses to wear a mask of the ideal perfect woman to conceal her true deceptive nature so that she can “write”—impose, ordain, and manipulate the course of her and Newland’s story. Austen, on the other hand, contradicts it by openly portraying Emma as the exact opposite of the ideal woman—outspoken and independent, who, as a result, is unable to “write,” let alone, control the course of her friends’ stories.

“The Passing of Grandison,” a short story by Charles Waddell Chestnutt set in antebellum South, helps put Wharton’s and Austen’s portrayal of the supposed ideal woman of the day into perspective. Chestnutt writes about Grandison, a slave who passes

as trustworthy and content in order to escape his confinement. In fact, Colonel Owens allows his son Dick to take Grandison to New York with him because Grandison is “abolitionist-proof” (89). Much like Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Grandison plays the role of the contented slave because even when given countless opportunities to run away in New York, he faithfully remains “at his post” as the “model servant” (91) Colonel Owens believes him to be. However, unlike Uncle Tom, Grandison is only pretending to be this model slave. By wearing the mask of a contented slave, Grandison lures the colonel into a false sense of security where he will let down his guard and allow Grandison the opportunity to escape for good. Such a calculated move becomes apparent in the final lines of the story when the colonel wakes up one morning to find not only Grandison gone but his entire family as well. The derisive and mocking wave of his hand (97) in the final lines of the story proves that Grandison’s model slave persona was just the mask he wore.

It is this kind of persona that May adopts and Emma does not. Because May realistically understands the role she is supposed to play in her duty-bound society and hides that calculating perceptiveness behind a mask of an ideal woman, she is able to innocently and shrewdly control Newland’s every move and script a realistic version—a true portrayal of his actions—his story. May molds the plot to match the people involved. Emma, on the other hand, does not wear May’s ideal mask. So, instead of “writing” from a realistic standpoint, based on real feelings and desires like May does, Emma imagines her own version of other people’s stories and curves their will to match her own. However, in the end, Emma does realize the one thing May cannot—how to experience a real and honest relationship. No matter how effective the mask is for May’s “writing”

technique, by wearing a mask, May never gives Newland the opportunity to know who she really is. She literally sacrifices experiencing a genuine relationship just to keep up the pretenses of being the ideal woman in order to manipulate Newland's story. On the other hand, Emma, through a series of failed "scripting" attempts, finally understands the error of trying to "write" other people's stories, and this realization allows her and Mr. Knightley to experience the kind of open and genuine relationship that May's mask never allows May to have with Newland.

## Chapter 2: The Ideal Woman

Before one can understand May's perceptive instincts and Emma's lack of them, one must first comprehend the nature of the disguise through which May operates and Emma does not. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "women in the upper classes were expected to follow strict rules of decorum that governed their conversation in social situations and their relations with men" (Swisher 13). Etiquette, as the patriarchal society emphasized, ruled women's lives. It was all about looking and acting right. Being respectable, modest, and polite—following the rules the men set before them. The major source of these rules was conduct books, the most popular reading material among young women of a certain social class, particularly the middle and upper classes, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* defines conduct books as "improving reading" that taught women how to act, think, and feel in different social situations (198). These rule-books were used in conjunction with finishing school curricula to help young women discover and learn the roles they were supposed to play in their society—Angels in the House, child-women, and caged birds.

### Angels in the House

The main role the conduct books outline is that of the "Angel in the House," which exemplifies the paragon of virtue that women of that time were supposed to be. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the many definitions and uses of angels, and the one that comes closest to the ideal defines angel as "a person who resembles an angel either in attributes or actions." It further defines an angel as "a lovely, bright, innocent, or gracious being." Using this definition of an angel, women of that time were seen as

beautiful, graceful, and pure objects to be gazed upon with awe. M. Jeanne Peterson, in “No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women,” even argues that the Angel in the House personified domesticity, unworldliness, innocence, and “helplessness in matters outside the domestic sphere” (677). Women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were meant to stand on the sidelines of their patriarchal societies and live solely within the home. Furthermore, in *Women and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Nina Auerbach argues that this angelic ideal of womanhood became “shorthand for the selfless paragon all women were exhorted to be, enveloped in family life and seeking no identity beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother” (69). The ideal woman was supposed to be the model of a virtuous life, and she was supposed to represent family duty or obligation at its best by playing the dutiful daughter, the devoted wife, and the loving mother—roles embedded in her mind throughout her childhood.

Coventry Patmore, a nineteenth-century English poet, reinforces this domestic feminine ideal with his poem collection *The Angel in the House*. One poem in particular, “The Rose of the World,” portrays an angelic figure moving within the domestic sphere: “Her disposition is devout, / Her countenance angelical; / . . . / Pure dignity, composure, ease / Declare affections nobly fix'd, / And impulse sprung from due degrees / Of sense and spirit sweetly mix'd. / Her modesty, her chiefest grace” (ll. 11-25). The ideal woman is the perfect mixture of sweetness and modesty, and she is full of devout loyalty to her family and friends. Even though this angelic picture of womanhood was coined during the Victorian era, the setting for Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, the concept was very much present during Austen’s time as well. In fact, Thomas Brown, in *A Legacy for the Ladies, or, Characters of the Women of the Age*, published in 1705, paints such an

angelic picture of womanhood: “Modesty gives us the best of lessons; it requires that all the Actions of Women be accompanied with Decency” (qtd. in Fritzer 81). Modesty and decency governed women’s behavior in both Austen and Wharton’s times. Moreover, men admired women for this angelic, humble countenance, as seen in James Bland’s 1733 conduct book, *An Essay in Praise of Women*: “View her humble and familiar Carriage! Observe how prudent, modest, and mannerly her Behavior is” (qtd. in Fritzer 81). Patmore’s, Brown’s, and Bland’s words reflect the purity, grace, and angelic disposition women of both the Victorian and Regency eras were said to possess, and they also illuminate women’s ability to remain pure, humble, and modest in the face of praise.

However, at the same time, this picture is based on how men see the women in their lives. For the most part, men wrote the conduct books women followed, so it was the men who created this angelic picture of ideal womanhood—a picture that is more of an exaggeration than reality. For instance, in “The Wife’s Tragedy,” another poem in his *Angel of the House* collection, Patmore posits that a woman’s sole purpose was to make her husband happy: “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf / Of his condoled necessities / She casts her best, she flings herself” (ll. 1-4). By using “fling” to describe a woman’s unwavering devotion to her husband, Patmore illuminates the exaggerated male perspective. The men believed that the women, above all else, lived to please their husbands, so they transformed them into these overzealous creatures who threw themselves into fulfilling whatever their husbands desired. This ideal might have been an exaggeration, but it was still the reality of eighteenth and nineteenth-century women who were confined to this domestic world of looking after the family

estate, while the men were able to move freely about the outside world whenever they wanted.

Even Jane Austen and Edith Wharton conformed, or were supposed to conform, to this domestic, angelic role. For instance, during the Victorian era, Austen's family, according to Fay Weldon, in "England in Austen's Time," diligently sought to posthumously label Austen an angel—a gentle lady. Austen's family chose not to publish her early epistolary novel *Lady Susan* because its "wicked adventuress" was not a suitable heroine for a lady to invent. By not publishing such an "unedifying and foolish" piece of writing, they sought to keep Austen in the "respectable, ladylike, and unalarming" angelic role that dominated her time and the ages to follow (35). In "Dear Aunt Jane: Putting her Down and Touching Her Up," Emily Auerbach further notes that Austen's family even altered her letters, making her sound like a sweet spinster who cared for everybody and did not have a negative, uncaring bone in her body. Her nephew Austen-Leigh even admits that "he wanted posterity to regard his aunt as feminine and angelic . . . a humble paragon of propriety" (17), which is something that Wharton's own mother wanted for Wharton as well. Marilyn French, in her introduction to Wharton's *Old New York* novella series, observes that Wharton's "mother tried to induce in her a strong need to conform, to adhere to the standards of her society" (viii). Both Austen's nephew and Wharton's mother, then, desired nothing more than to mold Austen and Wharton into the stereotypical images of ideal womanhood.

However, Auerbach brings out an interesting point regarding the confined "Angel of the House." She claims that all the biblical angels were depicted as masculine and free to move wherever they wanted, which makes the ideal of a feminine angel a glaring

contradiction because “in contrast to her swooping ancestors . . . the [angels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are] defined by [their] boundaries” (71-72). Angels, in the usual denotation of the word, have the freedom to move about their worlds unhindered by rules and regulations, but the ideal “Angels in the House” is not free to move at all. They are stuck within the domestic sphere, defined by what they cannot do. They could only be what the patriarchal society dictated. Their worlds were not as boundless as the “angel” connotation would suggest, which reveals how deeply the women of the day invested, or were forced to invest, in the patriarchal society around them.

### **Child-Women and Caged Birds**

In addition to being labeled “Angels in the House,” ideal women were also described as child-women and caged birds. Judith Flanders, in *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England*, defines the “child-woman” as a woman who possesses the desirable traits of ignorance and innocence. Knowledge of the world and its evil nature was thought to be too painful and burdensome for a woman’s fragile mind to endure (95), so the patriarchal societies of both Regency England and nineteenth-century America strove to keep the woman forever childlike for that very reason. The metaphor of the “caged bird” (247-248) reinforces this idea of the “child-woman” in a more understandable way. Just as a bird is confined in a barred cage in order to keep it from escaping and encountering predators on the outside, the women of the day were confined within the domestic sphere—sheltered and protected from the evil realities of the outside world. However, while most of the conduct books of the day advocated for women to be these child-women and caged-birds and be kept ignorant of the realities of

the world, one woman, known only as A Lady of Distinction, shares the opposite opinion in her own conduct book, *Regency Etiquette: A Mirror of Graces*. While most men wrote conduct books urging women to be locked away from knowing how the world really works, she argues how wrong it is to keep the reality of the world a secret:

Let girls, advancing to womanhood, be told the true state of the world with which they are to mingle. Let them know its real opinions on the subjects connected to themselves as women, companions, friends, relatives. Hide not from them what society thinks and expects on all these matters. (14)

She believes woman should be told exactly what kind of world they are entering. They should know that the world is not always happy and content—it is full of evil too.

However, at the same time, one could interpret this passage as advising people to tell women the reality of their domestic world—the reality of the roles they are supposed to play in their society. She says nothing about telling women about what really goes on outside their accepted roles in society. So, in a way, this is still reflecting the child-woman, caged-bird scenario of the Victorian era because all she really advises is that the patriarchal society should not hide the true nature of the life women are supposed to lead—of the kinds of women they are supposed to emulate.

Martha Vicinus, in “The Perfect Victorian Lady,” offers a real-world example of this caged-bird metaphor by saying that “a young girl was brought up to be perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant” (ix). She was kept in this little bubble, isolated from the real world and everything that happens in it. French notes that Wharton’s upbringing also involved this child-woman, caged bird ideal: “money was *never* discussed; strong emotions were *never* expressed or discussed; passionate engagement was *always* vulgar,

and [intimacy] was *never* to be thought about” (viii). Women were always left out of financial discussions, advised against displaying passionate emotions, and remained ignorant of the realities of married life. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton further confirms that her “little-girl life” was a “safe,” “guarded,” and “compact” one (781). Her world was secure, secluded, closely-knit, and almost claustrophobic because she was locked in a society that did not allow her room to spread her wings and fly, much like the caged bird metaphor of her time. Even though this kind of secure world is very confining, to Deborah Gorham, in *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, it is a “majestic childishness” (6)—an angelic confinement. Remaining oblivious to the real world and being safely locked away in their houses or schools allows women to stay pure and innocent. If they were to become an active part of the patriarchal society, they would become hardened by the harsh realities of a sinful and evil world, so childish innocence, then, is the patriarchal society’s gift to women. The men of the society believed they were doing women a favor by creating this childish angelic role, but all they were really doing was protecting their authority. If women really understood the world beyond their domestic ones, they would find a way to undermine the patriarchal society’s rules and forge their own existence outside the gift of childish innocence.

### **Artistic Skill-Based Education**

In addition to being forced to conform to the ideals of the Angel in the House, child-woman, and caged bird, young ladies were also sent to finishing schools to learn how to become respectable women of society. Kirsten Olsen, in the education section of *All Things Austen: An Encyclopedia of Austen’s World*, calls the training girls get in these schools “polite education” (230). By “polite,” as defined in the *OED*, Olsen refers to the

“refined” and “elegant” skill-based education that these girls received. In *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton even argues that “good manners” comprised a major portion of her and other girls’ education (820) because being graceful and understanding the fundamentals of etiquette formed the foundation of their future lives. Mrs. Sarah Ellis, in *Daughters of England*, similarly argues that a polite, accomplishment-centered education enables young girls “to know how to do every thing which can properly come within a woman’s sphere of duty” (32). Since “woman’s sphere of duty” lies in and around the home, among the essential skills for women to learn was needlework: sewing, stitching, and embroidery. Mrs. Ellis calls these needlework lessons classes in “the cleverness of the hand” (32) because girls learned how to use their hands wisely and effectively by participating in an appropriate pastime that of making samplers using plain stitches or decorative embroidered ones. Both Austen and Wharton worked on these domestically refined arts even though they lived in different worlds (Swisher 13; Wharton 792).

These schools also taught young girls how to paint and draw, how to speak foreign languages such as French or Italian, and how to play a musical instrument, the most popular being the piano or the harp. As the Lady of Distinction argues, excelling at the piano or the harp showed off more than simple talent—it displayed the “elegant flow” of woman’s graceful figure and “the sweetly-tempered expression of [her] intelligent countenance” as well (194). Playing these instruments enhanced the picture of these women as angels, which, in turn, fuels even more the male exaggerated perception that sweet, angelic women actually existed. Wharton confirms that during the 1800s “little girls were taught . . . music, drawing and ‘the languages’ (792), which, coincidentally mirrors Clarice Swisher’s comments about Austen’s childhood as well (13). Parents often

paid a significant amount of money to have a private music teacher for their children, and Austen's parents were no different, considering they "hired George William Chard, the assistant organist of Winchester Cathedral, to teach her" (Olsen 451). Music, then, was a very vital part of young girls' lives. However, learning to play was not enough because once they became proficient enough on their musical instruments, they were "expected to display their talents" for an audience of their family and friends (Olsen 451). As this evidence attests, arts education, in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was very important because it helped young women discover appropriate modes of expressing emotions during their times.

But, at the same time, according to Peterson, the arts education also fueled, even more, the stereotypical role the Angel in the House was supposed to play (678). Music, for example, as Mrs. Ellis states, requires "a willing spirit, and a feeling mind, to make it tell upon the sympathies and affections of our nature" (61). The skills such as playing the piano, writing and reciting poetry, and drawing or painting that these young women learned at the finishing schools served one purpose—to enhance their angelic status. French elaborates this patriarchal view of female education by stating that Wharton's family adopted the theory that "education should not 'fatigue' the brain" (vii). Women do not need to think too much; they do not need to strain their brains or their minds about things beyond matters concerning artistry and domestic affairs. Those skills were for dainty and graceful fingers and shy, emotional hearts. By participating in those pastimes, young women throughout both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were illuminating, as well as giving themselves over to, the roles they were born and bred to play—the passive, acquiescent, and fragile angels in the house.

## Housekeeping Lessons

Though the arts were a valuable part of their education, the most important lessons they learned at finishing schools dealt with housekeeping or, in most cases, house management. Richard Allestree, in his 1727 conduct book entitled *The Ladies Calling*, asserts that “the art of Economy and household managery . . . is the most proper feminine business” (qtd. in Fritzer). Managing a household was one, if not the only, acceptable occupation for women of that time period. And, even though most of the women in Austen’s class and Wharton’s class gave servants the housekeeping responsibilities like cooking, dusting, sweeping, mopping, and doing laundry, they were still required to know something about each of these menial tasks because they had to oversee the servants’ work. Young girls learned the art of housekeeping and house management at school, but, perhaps observing their own mothers oversee these tasks provided a better demonstration. As Peterson notes, long before they even attended finishing schools, young girls learned how to manage a household at their mothers’ feet: “She made morning calls with mama and did occasional charitable work” (678). Mothers provided their daughters with hands-on experience in the world, and under their mothers’ watchful eyes, they could visualize the “angel-wife” (Peterson 678) existence they were supposed to lead. Therefore, the house-management classes and mothers’ lessons served a purpose much like the arts classes; they prepared young girls for their future participation as the next generation of angels in the patriarchal society of their day—a life that revolved around social engagements and domestic responsibilities.

Olsen takes this preparatory class idea down a different path by arguing that “the quality of women’s housework . . . was the principal standard by which her worldly

usefulness was judged. If she failed as a housekeeper, she failed as a woman” (363). A woman’s value, then, is intrinsically linked to good housekeeping or house management skills because her life revolved around the home, so to fail at one automatically means she fails at the other one as well. However, as John Essex, in *The Young Ladies Conduct* published in 1722, says, if a woman does learn the art of keeping house, the toilsome affairs that accompany housewifery “will be the surest Preservative of [her] Virtue, [her] Honor and Character in all the Ages” (qtd. in Fritzer 17). Taking care of the daily household duties will help maintain the woman’s virtuous character. Performing such tedious tasks as dusting and sweeping or even overseeing those tasks in a large estate will make them stronger, more selfless, and more angelic because she lovingly labors over these tasks for her family’s sake. So, in a sense, housewifery is the glue that holds the “Angel in the House” ideal together because without finishing schools teaching young ladies the art of managing an estate or keeping house in that estate, women of all ages would never be worthy of the title in the first place.

### **Contentedly Inferior**

But however useful these classes were, they only served one purpose—to transform girls into genteel women of society and teach them to value the men’s opinions above their own. Mrs. Ellis elaborates: “The first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men,” in both mental and physical capacities (6). Through it all, they were taught that men were always the stronger gender; they were more intelligent and more physically inclined, while women were the dainty, fragile, and emotionally crafted gender, though at times perhaps too emotional. Even the Lady of Distinction argues that a “man’s approving . . . reason would keep [women] aright” (14). Since men were the

stronger gender, women were supposed to submit to them at every turn because the man's sound intelligence would keep women from straying too far from their domestic place in society. Women were even supposed to hide their knowledge and never speak their opinions, especially if they wanted to get married. Austen even says as much, though with a hint of irony, in *Northanger Abbey*: "Where people wish to [marry], they should always be ignorant. To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman, especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can" (104). Though Austen is most likely rebuking her society for making women wear the mask of ignorance, she also reveals the reality of an eighteenth and nineteenth century woman's situation. For women to be knowledgeable during this time was not a good thing because it turned men away, which was advice John Gregory placed in his 1774 conduct book, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*: "Wit is the most dangerous talent you can possess. It must be guarded with great discretion and good nature, otherwise it will create you many enemies" (qtd. in Bryne 23). Like Austen's ironic statement earlier, women were supposed to hide their knowledge, and in essence, hide their true identities in order to find a man willing to marry them. As the conduct books warned them, if women spoke their minds and let their tongues run away with them, they would be putting themselves at risk of never finding a husband at all because revealing their knowledge would repel men rather than intrigue them.

In 1776, James Fordyce, in *The Character and Conduct of the Female Sex and the Advantages Derived by Young Men from the Society of Virtuous Women*, also advises

women to refrain from arguing and present a persona of innocence and helplessness in order to gain male attention:

Ah, my female friends . . . did you but know, how deeply the male heart is enchanted with those women . . . who seldom dispute, and never wrangle; who listen with attention to the opinions of others, and deliver their own with diffidence, more desirous of receiving than of giving conviction, more ambitious to please than to conquer. (qtd. in Byrne 23-24)

Women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were supposed to act starry-eyed, hang on the man's every word, never argue, and be more willing to please than to contradict. Wharton's nineteenth century American society featured similar advice because "women were educated to become ornaments, mindless and self-regarding, not persons but products" (French vi). Women were simply supposed to be decorations and sit like manufactured porcelain angels on a pedestal with no opinions of their own. But, if by some chance, the opportunity arose to express their own opinions, they were supposed to do so hesitantly and shyly because they were not supposed to speak with strong convictions. However useful such advice was for women of that time, it also held negative lessons—lessons in the art of deception. Women were not allowed to be genuine; they were born and bred to be deceptive creatures who were told to hide who they really were in order to maintain the façade of an angelic ornament—someone who would willingly sit on the sidelines of society while the men experienced the freedom that women were not allowed to have.

The lives of eighteenth and nineteenth women were stifling ones because the Angels in the House, child-women and caged birds personas did not benefit them at all.

They were stuck in a world that did not allow them opportunities to express themselves openly and honestly. Their patriarchal societies locked them in cages as if they were animals needing to be tamed. The men wanted to maintain the status quo, so they created the ideal of a perfect woman and placed women on pedestals as if they were the center pieces of a valuable art collection. Women became objects others observed and praised instead of people actively participating in the world around them. Such was the life of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century woman, groomed from birth to agree with the man on every occasion and hide who they were at all costs, so that the idyllic Angel in the House, child-woman, and caged bird would continue to live on as the representation of the virtuous life all women were supposed to lead. However, as the following chapters reveal, two women find a way to penetrate this stifling persona. May penetrates it by pretending to be the image of perfection and Emma penetrates it by ignoring it completely.

### Chapter 3: May Welland Archer—A Realist “Author”

Although *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1920, during the modern literary era, Edith Wharton sets this novel in the Old New York society of the nineteenth century. Instead of writing about the modern world, she goes back in time and places her characters in 1870s New York and gives them the mindset that defined the Victorian era—a time dominated by conventions, routine, duty, and honor—faithful and moral obligations to one’s family and friends. Gregory Walton, in “Old New York,” points out that Wharton depicts an old society consumed with morals, emotions, and wealth with such startling detail that one feels a part of it. Walton further observes that this world features “an inflexible social pattern” (133) in which every day is the same routine and contains the same issues to confront. And, above all, duty ruled everything in this Old New York society—duty to family and duty to one’s society. Against this backdrop of a Victorian-like New York, Wharton tells the story of Newland Archer, May Welland, and Ellen Olenska. And, even though the story unfolds through Newland’s eyes, it is May Welland who plays the most important, and yet, seemingly invisible role in the outcome of it.

Though she continually acts like the innocent and helpless ideal woman the nineteenth century adored, May is actually the complete opposite. Evelyn E. Fracasso, in “The Transparent Eyes of May Welland in Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*,” argues that by looking at May’s eyes and the thoughts and feelings behind them, readers can see that she is actually stronger and more perceptive than those of her social circle ever realized (43). When May first appears, Wharton’s description of her as a girl dressed in white, with pink cheeks, and downcast eyes (Wharton 5-6) leads us to believe that May is the ideal

demure girl of her time. However, behind the ideal façade, as her eyes constantly reveal, she is a shrewd, intuitive, conniving, and perceptive woman, and with her powers as an actress, May becomes the author, director, and the engineering force behind all of Newland's decisions throughout the novel.

### **Newland's Perception of May**

As the previous chapter illuminates, the ideal of womanhood during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was one of innocence and childishness, and it is this ideal role that Newland Archer believes defines May perfectly. In fact, Newland is attracted to May for this ideal picture in the first place. When May first enters the story, Newland notes that "slightly withdrawn behind [her grandmother and her mother] sat a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers" (7). By this observation alone, Newland associates May with the shyness, whiteness, and purity of the ideal woman of the day, and it is this first observation that fuels his perception of May throughout the entire novel. Based on May's appearance alone, he assumes what she thinks and feels. For instance, when "Madame Nilsson's *M'ama!*" echoed through the opera house, he notices how "a warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow in the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia. She dropped her eyes to the immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee" (7). Again, Newland notes qualities of the innocently pure nineteenth-century American woman, particularly the warm pink cheeks, her downcast eyes, the delicate lilies in her hands, and her white-gloved finger tips. But, even more telling in this passage is Newland's assumption that May drops her eyes and blushes in embarrassment because the singer, Madame Nilsson, sings in Italian

the popular mantra “he loves me, he loves me not.” He assumes May is thinking about him, so the singer’s open declaration of the passion that young, innocent girls were bred to never know anything about makes May uncomfortable. Furthermore, this passage also notes that Newland “drew a breath of satisfied vanity and his eyes returned to the stage” (7). Newland’s prideful sigh reveals the mindset of the patriarchal society of his time—a mindset where the men dominated women and viewed them as property. To Newland, May’s ignorance and embarrassment at the love scene before her stems from the fact that she is also ignorant of the intimacy a husband and wife will share. He exudes pride at May’s embarrassed and longing gaze because he is the one who will have the opportunity to enlighten her regarding the passion inherent in married life.

His pride extends even further to his self-appointed role as May’s tutor, or “soul’s custodian” (Wharton 37) as Newland calls it. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, custodian originally meant guardian or keeper, someone who had custody of something of value like property, possessions, and, in Newland’s case, a woman. By labeling himself the “custodian” of May’s soul, Newland sees himself as her protector—her teacher. May’s innocent soul rests within Newland’s hands, and he trembles at the possibilities of teaching this young creature, with “serious eyes and gay innocent mouth . . . who knew nothing and expected everything” (37), the ways of the world. Though he notes the seriousness of her eyes, he passes over it without a second glance and focuses more on her “gay innocent mouth” because that feature, more so than the eyes, enhances his belief that he must teach her how to exist in the real world. His manly pride will not allow his future wife “to be a simpleton,” so, “he meant her (thanks to his enlightening companionship) to develop a social tact” (8). Newland thinks highly of himself and his

ability to cultivate and protect May's soul. Since, he believes that women should have a chance to learn and grown intellectually, he sees marrying May as the opportunity to push her in that direction. He believes himself to be the quintessential 1870s fiancé and husband—someone who places women on this pedestal as the Angel in the House, the child-woman, and the sweet, innocent flower that must be watered and fed daily in order to fully bloom. He plans to guide her every step and help her form her own opinions to share with him. In a sense, he wants to make May into his intellectual equal, but not really, considering all he wants is someone to boost his own ego—his own mind. His love for May, as Walton asserts, is built on his “utter ignorance” of her personality (133). He only sees May as someone who has no idea about the world, when, in fact, as later evidence attests, she knows perfectly well the reality of her society and how to use it to get what she wants.

Because he has high hopes for his future with May, when she does not blossom under his tutelage like he had hoped, he assumes that May's world has made it impossible for her to grow at all. As time passes he realizes that “May was still, in look and tone, the simple girl of yesterday, eager to compare notes with him as to the incidents of the wedding, and discussing them as impartially as a bridesmaid talking it all over with an usher” (154). After all this time, she has not progressed past her original uncultivated state. She still clings to the conventions of the past, of her youth, and because she has not gained an intellectual mindset, he finds her innocence stifling where he once found it endearing. She is a disappointment to him, but perhaps, even more so, she injures his manly pride because he had such high regard for his teaching skills and his pupil does not show any signs of improvement, of understanding. As he later notes, “There was no use

trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free” (160). He sees no reason why he should continue educating May if she really has no concept of what she is missing.

To Newland, May’s world is one of convention and constant routine, one that never changes—a dull and boring existence—and it is this world that has crafted the woman she has become and perhaps, in Newland’s mind, has brainwashed her so much that she has no motivation to learn how to change in the first place. His irritation and disappointment with May reaches an all-time-high when he looks at her and realizes that he will always know what she is thinking; her thoughts would never “surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion . . . she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother” (240). She will never excite him or be his intellectual equal because she cannot think for herself. Her world has trained her to become just like her mother—another carbon copy of the ideal woman of her nineteenth-century American world—innocent, naïve, and duty-conscious. Nothing about May, her thoughts especially, will ever be insightful for him as he had hoped because all May can talk about is the social babble that her nineteenth-century finishing school education has instilled in her. William E. Cain, in “Edith Wharton and the Second Story,” writes that because May acts as if she does not know anything, Newland believes her to be “created by her class and culture to be polished and refined, without depth or mystery” (95). She exudes no excitement or knowledge and he finds her boring, far from the woman he wanted her to be. In the last chapter, when Newland looks back over their life together, he notes that she never did change even when the world changed around her: she was “so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces

and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change” (Wharton 282).

Although Newland married her hoping he could mold her into his equal, change her, guard and cultivate her, in his eyes, she remained the innocent child-woman of her time.

### **Newland’s Perception of Ellen Olenska**

Before one can understand the inaccuracy of Newland’s perception of May, one must first view Ellen Olenska, the woman he constantly compared May to, through Newland’s eyes as well. Much like May, Ellen also first enters the story at the opera where Newland describes her as “a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds. [This] ‘Josephine look’ was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp” (10). According to Laura Dluzynski Quinn, in the explanatory notes in *The Age of Innocence*, the Josephine look, inspired by Josephine, the empress of France from 1804-1809, was a “negligee-style dress” characterized by a long heavy train, a filmy underdress, and a low neckline (301). With the sheer material and the low, revealing necklines, these dresses were a drastic contrast from the regular form-fitting styles of the day, so “such a dress would have caught people’s attention in 1870s New York, during a time when most women were wearing uncomfortable bustles and corsets (301-302). Though at first Ellen’s appearance shocks and troubles Newland, it eventually sets the stage for his growing fascination with her. To him, she represents the exotic and adventurous side of life; she had the “mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience” (95). She exists outside the confines of

May's monotonous and conventional world. She can offer him the freedom that he desires—in fact, she begins to represent the freedom his happiness rests upon.

He is drawn to her because she is not afraid to defy the status quo—as seen in her non-traditional dress at the opera, her snubbing of one conversation partner for another at a party (53), and daring to call the van der Luyden's stately home "gloomy" (61).

Ekaterini Kottaras, in "Metaphors of Deception: Incomplete Speech Acts in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*," even argues that Newland "admires her because her language does not conform to the metaphoric rules of his society" (13). She does not use the Old New York societal code; she speaks the truth instead of veiling her meaning in ambiguity. When he looks at Ellen he encounters a strength that he feels May does not possess. He thinks May's eyes scream powerlessness, while Ellen's eyes are "full of conscious power" (52). Ellen conveys a confidence that May's seemingly innocent desire to please her conventional world does not allow her to possess. He assumes that May needs him to protect her, but, in Ellen, he finds a girl who "knew how to take care of herself" (99). Her strong-willed independence draws him to her because he does not have to improve her; he can be open and free around her. Perhaps her own desire "to be free" and "to wipe out all the past" and start over as someone else (90) solidifies Newland's attraction for her because he too wants to be free and experience a more exciting world than the one of duty that May represents. Ellen offers him a "glimpse of a real life" (198)—a life unhindered by daily duty and constant routine. In Ellen, he finds everything that May is not. To him, May represents "the daily box of lilies-of-the-valley" that he sends her every morning, whereas Ellen resembles the vibrant, rich, strong, and "fiery beauty" of a "sun-golden" bouquet of yellow roses (67). Because she is not afraid to

speak her mind, she is the vivacious intellectual equal he believes May, in her innocence, will never be.

### **May's Mask—A Manipulation Tool**

However, the irony of his attraction to Ellen lies in the fact that everything he loves about her exists in May as well; he just never sees it. For starters, May's world is "driven by social performance" (Kottaras 10), or as Margaret Jay Jessee, in "Trying It On: Narration and Masking in *The Age of Innocence*, says, it is a world where "trying on" deception is a natural pastime (39). The Old New York Society, as Ellen observes, forces its people "to pretend" (65), to perform accepted behaviors, "to try it on"—to wear a mask, which is exactly what May does. Her society is the driving force behind her desire to engage in deception. She never would have discovered such a mask had her society not informed of it. Furthermore, Gwendolyn Morgan, in "The Unsung Heroine: A Study of May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*," notes that May's actions, though appearing to mirror the ideal woman, actually "indicate a sharpness of perception and a keen analytical ability" (34) that go unnoticed by Newland. May sees things that Newland believes she cannot; she knows and understands far more about her world than Newland assumes.

She participates in the social performance of the Old New York society by wearing a disguise. She pretends to be the ideal woman, but, underneath, she schemes, plots, and directs the course of the novel from the very beginning. She "writes" both her and Newland's story from inside the action instead of outside it. This mask, then, represents far more than a simple disguise; it is the tool she uses to place herself in the center of her own drama. She does not create the characters; she creates the circumstances for the situations Newland finds himself in and governs the choices he

makes. Like most authors, May “writes” about what she knows, so she scripts their story based on an actual understanding of how a non-fictional story—a story based on real-life people and situations is supposed to unfold.

### **May at the Opera**

May, the social performer and script writer first emerges in the novel’s opening scene at the opera. When Newland encounters Ellen, with her provocative dress, sitting with May and her mother in the Wellands’ opera box, “he hated to think of May Welland’s being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste” (Wharton 14), so he felt “impelled” to announce his engagement to May (15). As Jessee argues, Ellen’s dark exoticness “poses a threat” to May’s fair, white innocence (38), so it is the possibility of Ellen tarnishing May’s purity that inspires Newland’s announcement. However, even though Newland believes he spontaneously acts out of concern for May, it is May who actually orchestrates his action. Cain argues that May and her mother invite Ellen to join them at the opera knowing that Newland would try to save May from Ellen’s corruption: “They produced the conditions that would generate his impulse, and, as a result, they . . . secure Newland as May's husband” (99). She instigates Newland’s announcement; she becomes the writer of his story by inserting the character of Ellen into the plot, maybe she even told Ellen to wear that provocative, exotic dress in order to scare Newland into action, solidifying her role as director and actor in his story.

Though May shrewdly hides the role she plays in her engagement, her eyes give her away: “As he entered the box his eyes met Miss Welland’s and he saw that she had instantly understood his motive . . . Her eyes said: ‘You see why Mamma brought me’” (Wharton 15-16). Newland believes May’s eyes are telling him that she is grateful for his

concern and understands his actions, but his sense of heroism blinds him to the reality of her feelings. He assumes her gratitude and understanding; however, if he had looked more closely, he would have seen beyond her mask: “she signals to him that her mother brought her to the opera with Ellen because her mother knew, as May did as well, that Newland would support them” (Cain 99). Her eyes tell two stories—one story of timidity that Newland responds to and the real story of a perceptive woman that Newland misses entirely. Her eyes cleverly hide the fact that she planned this whole scenario down to the last line. As a result, her social performance begins off camera, so to speak, because as Newland puts it, “It was only that afternoon that May Welland had let him guess that she ‘cared’ (8). The “let him guess” line illuminates May’s perceptive nature because of the time-frame of her announcement. She let him guess literally hours before the opera, the starting point of her charade, so he will come knowing the extent of her affection, see Ellen, and then proceed to do exactly what May wants him to—announce their engagement—and thereby advancing the plot she carefully created for him.

May’s mask appears once again when she forces Newland to explain their engagement to her mother and to Ellen himself: “Miss Welland’s face grew rosy as the dawn and she looked at him with radiant eyes. ‘If you can persuade Mamma,’ she said, ‘but why should we change what is already settled?’ He made no answer but that which his eyes returned, and she added, still more confidently smiling: ‘Tell my cousin yourself: I give you leave’ (16). Two points of interest emerge in these few brief lines. First of all, her face became rosy and her eyes exuded radiance. Both traits mirror the ideal woman, but at the same time hint at her dedication to her role as that woman. The radiance shining from her eyes should be the first clue that she is controlling the situation from the

start, but, unfortunately, Newland interprets her rosy face and glowing eyes as her happiness over her engagement. While she may be happy that she is engaged, she is even happier about the fact that Newland took the bait; he fell for her clever ruse—bringing Ellen to the opera certainly paid off in her favor. Second of all, the confident smile she gives Newland right before she coyly tells him to speak with Ellen himself further reflects her happiness over her mission's success. With Newland's anxious desire to tell the so-called corrupter of May's innocence of his selfless offering of marriage, May knows the extent of the effect her plan to bring Ellen to the opera had on Newland's sense of duty. She smiles because now she has Newland right where she wants him—next to her—and Newland, with his nineteenth-century view of May, does not even have a clue that he has been played.

### **May at the Engagement Party**

At the engagement party, Newland continues to assume that May is the sweet, innocent girl her mask presents—an assumption that May's pale face and the lilies-of-the-valley clutched in her hands reinforce because, as Fracasso observes, they are “the epitome of helpless femininity” (44). She puts this front on for Newland, and she plays the pure, innocent maiden so exceptionally well that he fails to see the existence of the performance at all. For example, he misinterprets her actions at the party because he sees only the mask and not the girl behind it. When Newland enters the party, he sees May on the threshold of the dance floor, “her eyes burning with a candid excitement. A group of young men and girls were gathered about her, and there was much handclasping, laughing, and pleasantries, on which Mrs. Welland, standing slightly apart, shed the beam of a qualified approval” (21). While Newland interprets this scene as May telling her

friends about her engagement, it is so much more. First of all, her burning eyes aglow with candid happiness can be read once again as excitement for her engagement and her heart and eyes are burning with passion for Newland, or she is excited for the myriads of possibilities she can trick Newland with now that she has him in her grasp. It might very well be both options, but it is the latter choice that most mirrors her passion for her disguise, her authorial status, and her dedication to her role as the ideal nineteenth-century American woman. Second of all, the group of people who are clasping their hands and laughing could be excitedly reacting to May's good fortune, but they could also be laughing at Newland's expense. Her friends might possibly know May's true nature, and they are laughing at Newland's stupidity—his inability to see that May is creating the story unfolding in front of him.

Finally, May's mother stands by watching this whole scene unfold, which to Newland announces her approval of the marriage, but, it is more likely that she too is beaming over how well the whole scheme unfolded according to May's pre-arranged plan. She smiles her approval of May's mask and her plan to trap Newland in their world. Newland completely misses the real nature of the conversation in the midst of the crowd surrounding May because he foolishly believes May's mask is real. Even when May turns towards Newland, as if she knew he would be watching her interactions—and she certainly did—he sees what he wants to in her eyes not what is actually reflected there (21). In May's eyes, he finds the reassurance for which he craves, but her move to look directly at Newland during her conversation with her friends portrays another tale entirely—her calculated perceptiveness. It is almost as if she is in his head and knows what he is thinking at any given moment. She knows Newland's every move before he

even attempts one because she has scripted them to happen this way, and as later instances will show, such an observation proves to be true.

Newland further misinterprets May's eyes in his failure to once again see the knowledge behind them. During their first dance as a newly engaged couple, "Her lips trembled into a smile, but the eyes remained distant and serious, as if bent on some ineffable vision" (22). Although ineffable implies the vision in her eyes is unknowable and cannot be seen, Newland thinks he knows her well enough to see that ineffable vision anyway. He transfers his own thoughts into May's eyes and assumes that her serious look is a reflection of her "whiteness, radiance, [and] goodness" (22) and her dreams of their lives together, but it actually reflects the great depth and complexity of the woman behind the mask Newland sees. The serious tint to May's eyes points toward a knowledge that runs far deeper than Newland believes. As Wharton's comment of "ineffable vision" suggests, May's eyes reflect an understanding that goes beyond the ideal woman of the day. The vision she pictures is not their marriage, but the path she's crafting for Newland to walk. As later events will attest, she knows exactly where Newland's story is going and the role of script writer and puppet master she will play in it.

### **May on an Earlier Wedding Date**

May's position as a script writer and puppet master emerges again when Newland pushes her for an earlier wedding date. In this scene, it is evident that her writing and acting skills are getting better and better because from the second Newland opens his mouth, she anticipates his every move—his every word. She acts coy and innocent when Newland imagines their marriage, but as soon as she hears the request, she turns into the woman behind the ideal mask and blatantly asks him if he is losing interest in her or

starting to care for someone else more (121). Wharton describes how May's eyes reflected "despairing clearness" and then two seconds later, they "deepened inscrutably" (121). The juxtaposition of clearness and mysteriousness heightens and illuminates her nineteenth-century mask even further, or perhaps, even more so, it shows Newland's complete lack of understanding regarding the truth behind May's eyes. He thinks he sees understanding there, and he very well could have, but the suddenness of the change suggests that May realizes that she is showing too much and needs to scale back the emotion in her eyes. After standing defenseless in front of Newland for a second, she replaces her mask and conceals her knowledge once more. Though she gives him the opportunity to see her true self, almost as if daring him to see beyond her façade, he misses the signs and continues to live in the sweet oblivion that May has crafted for him.

Her pointed questions imply that she knows more than she lets on, but Newland constantly misinterprets them and labels them as representations of the childish insecurity that defined nineteenth-century American women. He does not see her true colors even when May subtly alludes to them: "you mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices—one has one's own feelings and ideas" (122). May gives him every opportunity to see beyond her mask. Perhaps she realizes that Newland really wants a more genuine woman rather than a stereotypical carbon copy of the ideal woman of the day so she is trying to show him that she is not that ideal woman. Or, even more likely, she is testing Newland's intelligence to see if he is smart enough to see beyond her mask, but, time after time he fails her tests completely. He ignores her subtle hints, choosing, instead, to once again assume that May is engaging in mindless chatter to cover her embarrassment or uncertainty regarding his request. The lines that

follow her subtle hint suggest that May is tired of Newland's blindness and stupidity and decides to up her game by addressing his feelings: "And of course, long before you told me that you cared for me, I'd known that there was some one else you were interested in" (122). May could be referring to Mrs. Rushworth, Newland's former lover, but she is actually addressing Newland's relationship with Ellen. Such an observation becomes even more possible the second May, with a faint smile on her face, once again picks up her "pen" and steps on her stage, and coxes Newland further down her pre-ordained path by challenging him to stop stalling and admit what she already knows to be true. She wants him to admit that he does have feelings for another woman and that his pleas for a much closer wedding date have more to do with fearing his growing attraction to Ellen and less to do with his undying love for May.

May further points to her knowledge of his true feelings with her comments about love and divorce: "if you feel yourself in any way pledged . . . to the person we've spoken of . . . and if there is any way . . . in which you can fulfill your pledge . . . even by her getting a divorce . . . Newland, don't give her up because of me" (123). May's references are again ambiguous; however, knowing May's hidden knowledge, one must assume, Ellen stands at the center of her comments, but, since Mrs. Rushworth is also married, Newland never even has a clue that May is talking about someone else entirely. May speaks in code for this very reason; much like her line about loving someone else, she never mentions any names, giving Newland the impression that even saying Mrs. Rushworth's name is too painful for this shy, lovesick girl to endure. However, May has no such fear at all; she only lets him think that that fear exists in order to draw him further into her carefully planned storyline. She wants him to deny his love for anyone

but her; she wants him to seal his fate by making her the only lover in his life. However, Newland does not even imagine such a master plan exists and continues to do exactly what May wants him to—push her to marry him sooner, asserting that her questions concern an old story, not a new one. In fact, “May realizes that if she implies she is worried about Mrs. Rushworth as her rival, Newland will deny it, and that from there he will press his case for an earlier wedding. He does: Ellen does not come up, and that was May’s tactful intention” (Cain 101). So, although she knows full well that Newland wants to get married sooner only because his attraction to Ellen scares him, she lets him believe that she fears Mrs. Rushworth’s presence in his life instead. Like the mask and her placement of Ellen at the opera, Mrs. Rushworth is just a reference—an instrument to further the plot of her created story by getting Newland to do exactly what she wants him to. She knows that the information is old, but she still uses it to her advantage because she wants Newland to ignore his longing for Ellen and beg her to marry him right away.

Because he sees May in the mask of ideal womanhood, he is quick to reassure her that he loves her and that nothing stands in their way of getting married now. Her response to his exclamation shows her acting skills gaining prominence: “She flushed with joy and lifted her face to his; as he bent to it he saw that her eyes were full of happy tears” (Wharton 123). May’s tearfully happy eyes symbolize her victory over Newland in this instance. By playing the sensitively emotional ideal woman, she gets Newland exactly where she wants him—completely devoted to her. It is almost as if May’s social performance hypnotizes Newland because in voicing his undying love for her, he unknowingly plays the part May fashioned for him all along. In a sense, May hands Newland the key that he uses to lock himself in her world (Cain 101). Newland seals his

own fate by believing in the ideal picture that May's mask expresses. However, for a second, Newland does acknowledge a "transparent" glimpse of "womanly eminence" in May's eyes, but he brushes it aside just as quickly and chooses to interpret the transparency as "helpless and timorous girlhood" (Wharton 123) instead. Even though "transparent" connotes something that is sheer or easily understood, he does not see through the look in her eyes—he assumes he understands it. He believes he can see her innocence and ignorance reflected in her eyes, but Fracasso argues that May's transparent eyes actually represent her "deep-seated strength and 'tenacity of purpose'" (45). May's eyes depict a woman who Newland does not and cannot see—a woman with as much as strength and determination as Ellen possesses.

By not saying 'yes,' she leads Newland to believe their wedding day is still months away, even though her next strategic move is already in the works for an earlier one. May's acceptance of Newland's proposal seems to come out of nowhere, but, if her happy tears at the end of this scene are any indication, her seemingly sudden response is actually a calculated one. Gary H. Lindberg, in "The Mind in Chains: Public Plots and Personal Fables," asserts that this move represents "the boldest maneuver of family and community to keep [Newland] in line by sealing his union with society in the most solemn of rituals" (80). Her entire family, with her at the helm, plots against Newland. Her supposed rejection and later acceptance of his proposal shows how she will go to great lengths to maintain her hold on him. Just "as the engagement was hastened to avert a crisis over Ellen's appearance in New York, the wedding is moved up to avert a crisis in [Newland]'s relationship to her" (Lindberg 80). May orchestrates both the engagement

and the new wedding date in order to keep Newland within her grasp. At every turn, she is in control because she hides her calculating perceptiveness behind an angelic mask.

The way she chooses to tell Newland the news of an earlier wedding date through Ellen further enhances the depth of her knowledge and her control. She sends Ellen a letter exclaiming, “Granny’s telegram successful. Papa and Mamma agree marriage after Easter. Am telegraphing Newland. Am too happy for words and love you dearly. Your grateful May” (Wharton 143). Even though she does send Newland word, by telling Ellen first, May reveals the depth of her perception and her understanding about Newland’s feelings and his whereabouts. As his script writer and his puppet master, she uses her knowledge to completely blindside him and further trap him in her conventional world. Surely she chose that exact moment to send the letter because she knew Newland would be present. Such a calculated move reinforces the idea that she knew all along that Ellen was the true recipient of Newland’s affections, not Mrs. Rushworth. Unfortunately, Newland “does not pause to consider what this might indicate about May's power of perception—and her guidance and management of him” (Cain 102). In this moment, Newland switches places with May; he becomes the caged bird and she becomes the one who confines that bird. However, Newland remains oblivious to the reality that May holds the strings to his life, has locked him in a cage, and is controlling and scripting his every move.

### **May at the Farwell Dinner Party**

Not only does May control her engagement and her wedding day, but she also instigates Ellen’s departure through a farewell dinner party. May’s acting skills start to become even more apparent when she decides to throw this party: “I mean to do it,

Newland . . . Here are the invitations all written. Mother helped me—she agrees that we ought to.’ She paused, embarrassed and yet smiling” (Wharton 270). Two observations come to mind in this passage. The first is May’s determination to throw a party that her mother agrees is a good idea as well. Their agreement implies that they are double-teaming Newland—working together to keep Newland from escaping their world. The second, and perhaps, more telling observation, is the idea that she acts embarrassed and yet smiles at the same time. Her smiling embarrassment in this instance demonstrates that she knows this dinner will effectively sever Newland and Ellen’s relationship. She smiles because she knows exactly what is going on, and she smiles because she knows how good an actress she is turning out to be.

During the dinner, Newland feels imprisoned “in the centre of an armed camp,” almost as if he is trapped inside the family vault (272-273). He sees a tribe—May’s family—rallying around her in order to keep him in line. Jesse even labels this dinner party “May’s most elaborate” and cunning “display of . . . “trying it on” (46)—of deception because she gets her entire family to follow her lead and join her in the charade. In Old New York Society, “there were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these in the Old . . . code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe” (Wharton 271). Her family tries on the disguises of people who will miss Ellen when she leaves, when in reality, they are happy to see her go. With her departure comes the assurance that she will no longer distract Newland from his permanent role as May’s husband. Even though Newland senses the presence of a “masquerade” (Jesse 47) and feels the power of a united front, he really has no idea that May stands at the center of it.

Richard H. Lawson argues that May's power stems from her knowledge of the role she is supposed to play in her society. She has been trained in the art of what it means to be a Victorian woman, which makes her the "tribal member par excellence"—the best member of her tribe, her family, and her world (22). Attesting to her power as an actress and director, May makes things happen because she was trained to do whatever it took to get what she wanted, and what she wanted was Ellen to be as far away from her husband as possible. Morgan argues that although May traps Newland in her conventional world, she intervenes in Newland's affair and gets rid of Ellen not because she wants to punish him but because she truly loves him and wants to preserve his honor and his place in society (38). May becomes the unacknowledged heroine of the novel because like other great heroines in literary history, she saves Newland from destroying his life. She protects him from the life that Ellen leads; she saves him from being a social outcast, and she saves herself from being demoted to a nobody like Janey who always seems to stand on the sidelines of society, never being noticed because she does not have enough power and prestige. May sacrifices her own desire for love to protect Newland's reputation and her own. She would rather keep him from ruining his life and hers and risk never fully having his heart than not to have him at all. So, this farewell dinner party seems to come out of nowhere, but it is just another one of May's purposeful authorial inventions. May's comment, "it *did* go off beautifully, didn't it?" (Wharton 277) further attests to the real reason she threw party in the first place—to keep Newland tied to her side forever because she does not want to lose her social status—her power.

Judith Fryer, in "Purity and Power in *The Age of Innocence*," develops May's writing and acting skills even more in her claims that although Newland views May's

world as a powerless place characterized by “inescapable duty,” such a duty-bound world encompasses “a shrewdness” (110) that enables her to control the outcome of a situation. Her world may have been boring and predictable, but it was certainly not powerless, considering the extent May goes through to make Ellen disappear from their lives. Such an observation is especially evident in May’s actions to protect her world during Ellen’s farewell dinner party: “May’s triumphant dinner . . . is a statement of where the boundaries of the community are and of an intention to protect and delineate those boundaries as a means of protecting the community” (Fryer 114). In hosting this dinner party for Ellen, not only does May demonstrate the fruits of her education, but she also illustrates a woman who will do anything to protect her carefully constructed world. She may appear to be the symbolic representation of a static and fixed nineteenth-century woman, but if “the glitter of victory” shining in her eyes during the party (Wharton 276) is any indication, she was more author, actor, and director than mere observer in this novel.

### **May’s Pregnancy Announcement**

In addition to planning Ellen’s departure, May makes another authorial decision by revealing her pregnancy at the exact moment Newland contemplates leaving her for good. When Newland voices his desire to run away from his life, she quietly shatters his dreams:

“I’m afraid you can’t dear . . .” she said with an unsteady voice. “Not unless you’ll take me with you.” And then, as he was silent, she went on, in tones so clear and evenly pitched that each separate syllable tapped like a hammer on his brain: “That is, if the doctors will let me go . . . but I’m

afraid they won't. For you see, Newland, I've been sure since this morning of something I've been so longing and hoping for—" (278)

Wharton again illuminates two very interesting points in this passage. First of all, May's voice illuminates her exceptional acting skills. When she starts to tell him the bad news, her voice shakes, but when she drives the final nail into his metaphorical coffin, her voice is strong and clear—confident. She clearly knows what her announcement means to Newland and how it will affect him. She knows that by revealing her pregnancy she is more fully trapping him in the world of the Old New York society around them. As Cynthia Griffen Wolff asserts, "Newland is restrained from leaving . . . by the deep-rooted conviction that his own moral duty must ultimately be defined by family obligations" (124). A weaker man might have left a pregnant wife, but the conventions of his time—the honor and duty, the faithful and moral obligations, instilled in him by his Old New York society—overpowered any desire for adventure, which is what May knew would happen all along. Because May understood the inner workings of her society, she knew that Newland's sense of honor would not allow him to leave her in her condition.

Also, Morgan elaborates that May uses her "pregnancy to save her marriage" (35); she fights for her life the only way she knows how—the way her culture taught her—by using any means necessary—even pregnancy to make him stay. Lindberg even labels May's announcement as "a social gambit" (81)—an instrument, a tool that complements her manipulative writing strategy quite well. Even though this pregnancy is real, it is still part of her master plan—her strategy. She could have faked this pregnancy, but she wanted her story to be authentic—true—in order to match the non-fictional genre she chose for Newland's life, and this pregnancy could not have happened at a better

time, almost as if she planned it that way, and she probably did. If Newland was so infatuated with Ellen and wanted to leave May for her than he should have been stronger to resist being with May, but May's pull, her power was too strong which leads one to acknowledge that Newland has once again switched places with May. He has become the weak, sentimental woman who could not fight against the bars of the cage society placed around her, while May has taken the man's place on the outside of that cage and become more powerful than woman were allowed to be. Through the well-timed pregnancy announcement May more fully manipulates and crafts Newland's story by using the weapon she has at her disposal—her pregnancy—to keep her world intact.

This passage also illuminates a glaring contradiction in May's announcement: the actual time she discovered her pregnancy. She says she has only known for sure since "this morning," but two seconds later, with "blood flushing up her forehead" she admits that she told Ellen she was pregnant two weeks before even though she was not a hundred percent sure about it (Wharton 278). By telling Ellen long before she was certain, May illuminates her shrewd perception even more because looking back, this conversation serves as the catalyst for Ellen's departure: "We talked things over yesterday . . . I think she understands *everything*" (265, emphasis mine). By "everything" May undoubtedly means her pregnancy and how this turn of events will effectively sever Ellen and Newland's relationship. Lying to Ellen is pure genius because just as she knew how Newland's honor would override all else, she knew that Ellen's own sense of duty and her love for both Newland and May would force her to take herself out of the equation because she would not want to be the reason May's child did not have a father. Emily J. Orlando postulates that, with this scene, Wharton completely deconstructs Newland's

“fixed reading of [May] as ‘artless’ and ‘guileless’” (71). After such a calculatingly shrewd announcement, May is clearly far craftier than Newland’s eyes perceive, but he still sees her as the sentimental ideal woman. As Jessee argues, “May Welland . . . is not only more knowing and less innocent than Newland suspects, but one who represents a femininity much like Tseelon’s construction: ‘disguising behind false decoration, using her beauty and finery as a vehicle to dazzle men to their destruction’” (43). May wisely hides behind the mask of the ideal woman of the 1870s; she plays the fainting, breathless, anxious child-woman while cunningly deceiving Newland, pulling him into her world, and effectively blocking every escape route. Finally, the last image that Wharton leaves readers with regarding this scene is the fact that May’s “blue eyes [were] wet with victory” (278). Sitting on the floor by Newland’s feet and watching him realize that his life is over, May knows without a doubt that she has won. Her social performance and her manipulative writing technique have finally paid off. She used the tools at her disposal—the tricks of the trade instilled in her since birth to effectively create the climax of Newland’s story—the day he lost forever the one thing he craved—freedom.

### **May’s Influence after her Death**

May’s ability to script and manipulate Newland’s actions does not stop here at her pregnancy; on the contrary, her power, with their son Dallas’ help, even extends from beyond the grave. While on a trip to Paris, Dallas casually admits to Newland that the day before May died she told him of Newland’s sacrifice: “she said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you’d given up the thing you most wanted” (288). The way Dallas says “thing” instead woman to describe Ellen or the dream of freedom Newland sacrificed suggests that these words are not his

but May's. They mirror her nineteenth-century American upbringing, considering she speaks in code and conceals the fact that although she says "thing" she undoubtedly refers to Ellen. It is almost as if May told Dallas exactly what to say to his father because surely, instead of using May's code, Dallas would have changed the words and made them more direct. Also, Dallas insinuates that May claims that "she asked" Newland to give up his dream, when in reality, she forced him to. May knew that Newland's loyalty—his sensible, duty-bound, and honorable nineteenth-century upbringing—would not allow him to leave a pregnant wife which is why May waits to tell him until the moment he tries to assert his independence. May does not ask, she tells, which makes Dallas' comment seem all the more rehearsed and not impromptu. She wanted Dallas to say the words she scripted for him, so even as she took her final breaths, her mask was firmly in place, and her authorial mind was still hard at work thinking of ways to control Newland even after she was no longer there to direct him herself.

Dallas simply becomes another one of May's pawns in her scheme to keep Newland from moving on, for as Cain argues, "this report discloses to Newland that he had hidden nothing from his wife. She knew his feelings and dreams; to her, he was an open book" (105)—one she had written herself. May was not the dense and innocent woman that Newland believed her to be, since as her words prove, she knew far more about him than Newland ever thought. For Newland, this realization "seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, someone had guessed and pitied . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably" (Wharton 289). All those times that Newland believed he was trapped alone in May's duty-bound world, and all those times that Newland wallowed in self-pity over his lost opportunities, May had

known about his struggles and sympathized, or so Newland thinks. In his mind, Dallas's reiteration of May's words suggests the depth of her compassion for him and her pity for all he had given up for her. He thought her concern, her words, released him of his prison, but in reality, those words confined him in that prison even more. Her words do not release the iron band around his heart but tighten it because they are simply another aspect of May's authorial control because much like May's well-timed pregnancy announcement earlier in the novel, Dallas' comment comes at the exact moment that Newland contemplates moving on with his life and reuniting with Ellen. And, although Newland claims that he refuses to see Ellen again because he would rather live with his "youthful memory of her" (291), it is actually May's influence—the knowledge that she knew what Newland sacrificed—that really stops the reunion, and that was what May wanted all along—for him to be bound to her even though she was no longer alive.

The fact that Dallas waits until they are in Paris, the very same city in which May knows Ellen resides, to tell his father what May had said on her deathbed attests to how far May will go to manipulate Newland, even if it means someone else finishing the job. With her last breath, she teaches Dallas the art of authorial manipulation and not only tells him what to say but where to say it. If Dallas had never mentioned those carefully rehearsed lines, perhaps Newland would have acted on his desire to see Ellen again, but those words about May's knowledge move Newland to the point where he feels honor-bound to May and becomes totally incapable of acting on his feelings for Ellen. Like so many other times in the novel, May has orchestrated the outcome of Newland's life again because even when nothing is holding him back from Ellen and he can finally chase his dreams, he remains fixed in May's duty-bound world. And, perhaps had Newland, after

his decision to remain faithful to his dead wife, been able to see May, her blue eyes would undoubtedly have been shining with victory, because even in death, she found a way to control him—her authorial disguise continues to live on.

#### Chapter 4: Emma Woodhouse—An Imaginist at Heart

May's ideal mask lies at the heart of her success since from the very beginning of the novel, she pretends to be the ideal woman so she can manipulate and write Newland's story from inside Newland's world. Emma, on the other hand, does not wear that ideal mask; she is not May—she is not the ideal angelic and perfect woman of the day. From the very beginning of *Emma*, she is openly portrayed as “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition” (Austen 3). Though handsomeness and a happy disposition do represent the ideal woman, cleverness and independent wealth do not. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “clever,” in Austen's time, meant “possessing skill or talent; able to use hand or brain readily and effectively.” Clever in those days connoted a sense of being skillful with one's hand, like painting, playing the piano, or sewing, but in Emma's case, clever means intelligent, witty—using her “brain” effectively. However, as the child-woman ideal suggests, knowing things was out of the question. For women, as conduct books advised, speaking their minds ruined their chances of finding husbands because men did not want opinionated wives. For instance, men, like Newland, before he meets Ellen of course, would rather women simply echo their thoughts instead.

In the minds of a patriarchal society, women, in the hands of an accomplishment-based education, were supposed to be cleverly skilled in piano or painting, but Emma is not—far from it in fact. Linda Bree, in *Emma: Word Games and Secret Histories*,” argues that Emma's “good intentions as a girl were reflected in impressive “to do” lists rather than in carrying out the program of activities described; she has abilities in art and music, but has never practiced enough to fulfill her potential” (135). Emma does not reflect the

cleverness of Austen's day; she is far more intelligently clever than she should have been—a fact that even Mr. Knightley recalls: “At ten years old she had the misfortune of being able to answer questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen” (32). Emma possesses an understanding of intellectual topics that women of her day did not normally have which, in Mr. Knightley's opinion, is a misfortune because it fuels Emma's ego and constantly gets her into trouble. Although Emma resembles May since they are both intellectually clever, Emma's cleverness stems from her imagination rather than a realistic understanding of the situation that May's cleverness suggests.

### **Emma's Faults**

By portraying her as the opposite of the stereotypical perfect woman of the day, Austen makes fun of the common practice of her time to create a perfect, faultless heroine. For example, in “The Plan of the Novel,” Austen blatantly states that the “faultless character . . . perfectly good, with much tenderness and sentiment . . . very highly accomplished, understanding . . . everything that the most accomplished young women learn, but particularly excelling in music—her favourite pursuit” would not be found in *Emma* (535, 536). She openly admits that Emma would not mirror the perfect heroine that appears in so many other novels of her day; instead, Emma would exist outside of that caged-bird scenario so that Austen could more fully critique her society's belief that such a woman existed in the first place. Furthermore, Emily Auerbach, in “An Imaginist like Herself,” writes that Emma becomes “a portrait of an intelligent, strong, artistic woman in a society offering women no encouragement to use gifts of this kind. Austen adds pathos to her tale by showing just how static, dull, and confining life can be for such a woman—or for anyone forced to conform to the mind-numbing habits of

others” (214). Austen is critiquing eighteenth-century British society by portraying the main character as someone who does not portray the ideal perfect woman. Like May, Emma is not the ideal woman of the day because she possesses a mind of her own—one that does not concern itself with following the accepted social behavior of her day. But, unlike May, Emma does not hide that mind behind a fake persona. She is real—genuine—right from the start, so unlike many of the perfect heroines around her, Emma possesses shortcomings and faults that fuel her choices and actions throughout the novel.

First of all, she is the youngest daughter of an affectionate and overly indulgent father (Austen 3) who basically lets her do whatever she wants. Even her governess, Miss Taylor, who should have had a firm hand in Emma’s upbringing, was more of a friend than an authority figure in Emma’s life. Jane Nardin, in “Egotism and Propriety in *Emma*,” argues that Emma’s spoiled nature is a direct “consequence of her father’s lack of critical ability—he is totally unable to correct and direct her as a parent ought” (110). Her father does not punish her for anything; she is a perfect angel—at least by her father’s standards. As Austen comments, “The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (Austen 3). Because both her father and Miss Taylor let her walk all over them, she acquired a selfish and egotistical attitude that leads her to believe that she can actually control everyone around her too. Bree notes that “she prefers to take as a friend Harriet Smith, whom she can patronize and manipulate, rather than Jane Fairfax, her intellectual equal” (135). Emma would rather have a friend she can manipulate rather than one she can complement which makes her the least humble of all of Austen’s heroines, because, as Auerbach observes, *Emma* “centers on a woman who centers on

herself’ (202). Emma stands at the center of her own universe. She plays by her own rules and believes she deserves to be the center of everyone’s attention because, as Nardin asserts, she is constantly being praised by everyone around her (109)—everyone that is, except Mr. Knightley. Of all the characters in the novel, Mr. Knightley is the most “sensible,” because he “was one of the few who could see faults in Emma . . . and the only one who ever told her of them (Austen 8). Mr. Knightley did not see Emma through rose-colored glasses like her father or Miss Taylor; he knew she was not as perfect as she herself claimed to be. He even says so himself, “Emma knows I never flatter her” (8). Mr. Knightley recognizes, more so than Mr. Woodhouse, Emma’s shortcomings; he would rather tell her the truth than allow her to go on believing she is the most wonderful person in the world.

### **Emma and Jane Fairfax’s Failed Friendship**

Emma’s dislike for Jane Fairfax stands as one of the many shortcomings for which Mr. Knightley rebukes her. The way Austen describes Jane leads readers to believe that she is far better suited for the heroine role than Emma:

Jane Fairfax was very elegant . . . and she had herself the highest value for elegance. Her height was pretty, just such as almost every body would think tall, and nobody could think very tall; her figure particularly graceful . . . her face—her features . . . [had a] very pleasing beauty . . . the skin . . . had a clearness and delicacy which really needed no fuller bloom. (151)

Austen depicts Jane in the light of a heroine; she is elegant, graceful, beautiful, and delicate. Emma’s only heroine quality is being labeled as handsome which is not really that positive because it means striking good looks rather than beauty in the pretty sense.

In “Figure and Ground: The Receding Heroine in Jane Austen’s *Emma*,” Barbara Z. Thaden argues that “it is possible that Emma originated in Austen’s mind with the heroine being not Emma Woodhouse, but Jane Fairfax, the character who bears Austen’s name and who is much more like all her author’s other heroines” (47). Jane Fairfax, more so than Emma, mirrors Austen’s other heroines; she is more like Elizabeth, Fanny, Elinor, Catherine, and Anne than Emma could ever hope to be. However, even though Jane appears to be the most likely heroine, Emma is, which illuminates once again, Austen’s critique of the ideal woman. She places a faulty character at the center of *Emma* because she wants to portray an authentic version of the women of her time. Women of the day were not always angelically sweet and modest; they were more like Emma instead.

Even though Jane and Emma seem to switch places when it comes to being labeled a heroine, the whole point of Jane’s presence in the novel is to show how a friendship should have blossomed between them. Both Jane and Emma come from the same social situation and have many things in common. They are both a part of high society, and they are both accomplished young ladies, so their friendship would make complete sense. Even Isabella Knightley, Emma’s own sister, supports such a friendship. She acknowledges that Jane’s sweet amiableness, her accomplishments, and her age would make her “such a delightful companion for Emma” (Austen 93). Everyone around her thinks Emma and Jane would make the best of friends, but as Ruth Perry says, in “Interrupted Friendships in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, this “never-quite managed friendship of Emma and Jane Fairfax, the two superior young ladies whose association we wait for, whose conversation promises the most delightful equality of tastes and interests” is the novel’s “great unfinished business” (189). Readers wait in anticipation of their friendship

to emerge but it never happens because Emma is too pre-occupied with her own agenda, or the more likely reason—she is consumed with envy over Jane’s accomplishments. In Jane’s presence she feels inferior because, as Mr. Knightley observes, “[Emma] saw in [Jane] the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself” (Austen 150). Everything about Jane, her accomplishments, her appearance, her personality, is exactly what Emma wants to be praised for, but she is not. Jane’s accomplishments irritate Emma to no end, especially when Mrs. and Miss Bates go on and on about them: “One is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax. Every letter from her is read forty times over . . . and if she does but send her aunt the pattern of a stomacher, or knit a pair of garters for her grandmother, one hears of nothing else for a month. I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death” (77-78). Emma is tired of hearing about Jane’s name because it reminds her of everything she is not. In fact, “Emma resents Jane’s superior discipline and accomplishment because it spoils her self-idealization” (Perry 192). Next to Jane, Emma’s beliefs in her own importance do not measure up, especially when it came to displaying her talent at the piano: “Emma was obliged to play; and the thanks and praise which necessarily followed appeared to her an affectation of candour, and air of greatness, meaning only to show off in higher style [Jane’s] own very superior performance (Austen 152). Being beside Jane destroys Emma’s belief in the greatness of her own talents because she notices that Jane is actually the better pianist. If Emma would simply spend less time obsessing about Jane’s overly praised talents and concentrate more on becoming proficient on the piano or the other acceptable female pastimes of her day, she, too, could be at Jane’s accomplishment level.

Emma and Jane's relationship never has the chance to grow into something because her father and Miss Taylor never rebuke her. She lives with a false view of her own abilities, and her jealousy does not allow her to accept Jane into her life. Emma views Jane much the way opposing teams in sports or other activities view each other—with envy and a competitive spirit. However, Emma's jealousy, her envy, is not the only stumbling block to this desired friendship because, as later instances show, Jane, much like May, wears a mask hiding her true feelings so she never opens up to Emma as much as she could because a secret stands in the way of their friendship. Furthermore, Jane's presence in the novel might seem irrelevant because nothing ever comes of this friendship, but perhaps that is why Austen places her in Emma's path—to pave the way for Emma's worst fault—her inability to see, let alone accept, reality.

### **Emma the Matchmaking “Author”**

Besides Emma's inability to accept her own shortcomings in light of Jane's superior talents and accomplishments, her worst fault, and the most widely addressed one in the novel, is her obsession with match-making. To her, match-making is “the greatest amusement in the world” (9). She finds great joy in bringing people together—a joy that Austen herself had. In a letter Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra in October 1808, Austen comments that “I have got a Husband for each of the Miss Maitlands” (Le Faye 140). Both Emma and her creator enjoy meddling in the lives of others, but Austen's meddling is more talk than action considering she never writes about going through with her suggestions. However, unlike Austen's, Emma's meddling is active because she does go through with it. In “The Match-Maker: *Emma*,” Tony Tanner argues that “Emma thinks of match-making as a diversion: in fact it is her occupation” (180). Like most

women in her social class, Emma had a lot of time on her hands because she did not need to work, and she does not participate in the accepted female pastimes of the day like needlework, and when she does participate in those pastimes like playing the piano, she never practices enough to be very good. Wendy Moffat, in “Identifying with Emma: Some Problems for the Feminist Reader” comments that “Living in Hartfield, a mansion of her own, and free from the social and economic constraints which press other Austen heroines into dependence on men (sympathetic and otherwise) or pathetic, isolated poverty, Emma seems to be the character most equipped to contemplate and to act upon the fullness of her feminine identity” (46). Emma is very secure in her skin, contentedly independent, and possesses more freedom than Austen’s other heroines because she is the most financially secure and does not need to marry well to have a good future. In fact, Emma herself says, “I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry . . . I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believed few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield” (Austen 76). Unlike most girls of the time period, she does not need money because she is already the mistress of her father’s estate, so there is no reason to find a rich husband. So, marriage is a personal choice rather than a necessity; unlike May, she will not lose out on an identity if she does not get married. And, because marriage is a choice, she sees it as “a game she can play with other people” (Tanner 180). Eugene Goodheart, in “*Emma*: Jane Austen’s Errant Heroine,” further argues that Emma is a “misarranger of other people’s lives” (589). Emma tries to manipulate the situation but all she does is misarrange the situation rather than logically arrange it. And even though Emma understands the consequences of

marrying someone below her social status, she still sees herself as an all-knowing matchmaker which leads Emma down a dangerous self-destructive path.

As Tanner says, she deludes herself into thinking that she can “toy and tamper with other people’s relationships” (180) just because she made one good match—Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Her own father advises her to stop: “You are more likely to have done harm to yourself, than good to them, by interference” (Austen 10). Though most of the time, Mr. Woodhouse is a hypochondriac who worries about everything from the weather to losing Emma if she married someone, his advice here is actually logical. If she had listened to him, she could have avoided all the pain she inflicts on herself and the people she tries to manipulate. But, much like Newland, Emma remains oblivious to reality, choosing to ignore the truth of her father’s words. She sees things the way she wants to, not the way they actually are, and even though Emma believes she is clever; Austen shows otherwise. As Goodheart writes, “If the capacity for accurate interpretation is a sign of intelligence, Emma seems to fail the intelligence test again and again, despite the ‘cleverness’ that Austen attributes to her, Emma in fact is a perfect illustration of how will or desire or preconception may determine interpretation” (590). She is not as intelligent as she claims. Her refusal to stop pursuing this destructive match-making path sets the stage for further disaster—a complete misunderstanding of people’s true feelings.

Because Emma refuses to see the reality of her misguided self-assumed power, she becomes the exact opposite of May who is firmly grounded in reality. However, like May, Emma also writes stories—only her stories are fictional and based on her imagination alone. Emma even calls herself “an imaginist” who is “on fire with speculation and foresight” (Austen 303). She wholeheartedly believes in her powers of

observation and her ability to recognize a good storyline when she sees one. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Austen coined the term, “imaginist” to describe someone who possesses imaginative powers. However, as Wendy S. Jones, in “*Emma*, Gender, and the Mind-Brain,” argues, Austen could have used “iminator,” an already existing word meaning the same thing: “By creating a new word, Austen defamiliarizes the term and directs our attention to its double valence,” and “it call[s] our attention to Emma’s association with the image, the visual, and to Emma’s imagination as that which perceives and shapes according to a model of artistic creation” (321). “Imaginist” exemplifies both Emma’s overactive imagination and her obsession with crafting the perfect image. There is nothing realistic about Emma’s match-making talent because much like her author, Emma imagines the world she wants her next victims to inhabit. She wields a story as expertly as any author could, but she fails to become the master manipulator that May becomes because her imagination drives her attempts to write her friends’ stories.

Instead of using real people to tell a non-fictional story like May does, Emma blurs the lines between the non-fiction and fiction genres and tells a fictional story using real people as her characters. Auerbach comments that “like an author fired up by her task of creating characters and plots, Emma goes to work (“contriving things so well”) on the people around her” (202). She is the epitome of a type author who seeks to mold characters into the people she wants them to be. In many ways, Emma does Austen’s job because her “manipulativeness . . . generates the plot,” and furthermore, “Emma is . . . the novelist within the novel” (Goodheart 597, 598). Emma’s imagination drives the novel; she stands on the inside of it while Austen writes from the outside. Even though Austen

does interject her own wisdom amongst Emma's imagination, it is Emma who writes the story, or tries to write it anyway. As Bree argues, "The chief manipulator of words and their meanings in the novel is of course Emma herself. Emma is lively and intelligent, with a bright and sometimes brutal mind, and vivid imagination" (135). Much like May who participates in a social performance manipulating Newland at every turn, Emma enters a kind of social performance as well by using word games to get what she wants. However, instead of using May's technique of tailoring her actions to accomplish her goal, Emma tailors Harriet, Mr. Elton, and Frank Churchill to fit her goal, erasing the people and replacing them with characters her vivid imagination has conjured.

Nardin further illuminates Emma's penchant for imagining characters by arguing that "when Emma arranges the lives of others, she unconsciously, but very emphatically, reduces them to objects, beings whose existence has no particular justification except insofar as it helps display Miss Woodhouse's talent and virtue" (111). As the author of her own carefully imagined world, Emma's only goal lies in writing others' love stories by reducing the people in her world to objects—pawns—she can move around and place anywhere she wants. However, unlike May, she gets everything and everyone wrong: "Emma is wrong, does wrong, can speak wrong, judge wrong, and can use her power in a way that can be destructive of other people's lives and happiness" (Tanner 176). In all the ways that May excels at manipulating Newland's every move, Emma royally fails because she imagines how the people around her feel instead of actually knowing how they feel. Her imagination is so much a part of her authorial vision that she cannot recognize that the people around her are real and not characters in a book.

**Harriet Smith: Emma's Project**

Harriet Smith represents the epitome of Emma's belief in people as objects and her love story becomes Emma's next authorial project. Now, before one can understand the depth of Emma's misperception one must first realize that although Harriet is a person, she is also Emma's invented heroine. One has no way of knowing Harriet's real background because as Austen notes, Harriet was an abandoned child: "Harriet Smith was the natural daughter of somebody. Somebody had placed her, several years back, at Mrs. Goddard's school, and somebody had lately raised her from the condition of scholar to that of parlour boarder" (Austen 19). Harriet is just a lowly parlour boarder—someone who resides in someone's home and lives off their charity, but Emma imagines a much more extraordinary identity for her. Emma speculates that the "somebody" is not just some random person, but Harriet's father himself. Because Harriet attends a finishing school, Harriet's father must have been a gentleman because he cared enough to see Harriet well-endowed for her future happiness. Austen must have created Harriet's background to be so ambiguous in order to fuel Emma's own authorial decisions. Though it is obvious that Harriet, being alone in the world, belongs to a lower class, Emma overlooks the reality of the situation in order to invent her version of Harriet's life and story.

Emma even spends more time on Harriet's personality rather than her heritage as if to further manipulate the story. Harriet possesses all the good qualities that Emma looks for in a friend: she's pretty, short, fair, and sweet (20), but, perhaps her best quality to which Emma is drawn is her acquiescent attitude. As Emma observes, there was nothing "remarkably clever in Miss Smith's conversation, but she found her altogether

very engaging,—not inconveniently shy, not unwilling to talk,—and yet so far from pushing, showing so proper and becoming a deference, seeming so pleasantly grateful for being admitted to Hartfield” (20). Instead of learning from Harriet’s humble restraint, Emma exploits it for her own imaginist agenda. In Harriet, Emma sees a girl who will never disagree with her—a friend who will do whatever she tells her to do. By using the word “clever” to define Harriet’s abilities or lack thereof, Austen returns her readers to Emma’s description earlier in the novel. Emma is clever in mind; she is a quick, independent thinker who can stand her own in a verbal battle of wits, but to Emma, Harriet is not clever—she is not independent and does not have enough will-power to think for herself. Although Harriet may actually be skillfully clever in all the ways Emma is not, by all accounts, she is Emma’s intellectual inferior—the perfect choice in a character because she will never question Emma’s guidance.

Harriet’s humble shyness fuels Emma’s egotism. Much like Newland Archer, who sees himself as May’s soul’s custodian, Emma sees Harriet as her project—someone she can mold into a copy of the perfect woman: “She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society: she would form her opinions and her manners” (20). In her mind, Harriet is her protégé—someone who will learn to be great at the feet of the master—a fact that Mr. Knightley fears. While talking to Mrs. Weston, formerly Miss Taylor, he argues that Harriet represents “the very worst sort of companion that Emma could possibly have. She knows nothing herself, and looks upon Emma as knowing everything. She is a flatterer in all her ways . . . How can Emma imagine she has any thing to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority?” (33). He fears that Harriet’s inferiority and

her impressionable attitude will only stimulate Emma's vanity, which it does. Harriet will never help Emma see her shortcomings because to Harriet's naïve mind, Emma has none. Mr. Knightley knows how flattery enhances Emma's self-absorbed attitude since he predicts the disaster such a friendship will undoubtedly create, and his fears were justified.

Because Emma finds Harriet to be such a malleable substance, she mistakenly confuses "her with a character in a book" (Perry 191). Harriet ceases to be a person and becomes a character that Emma can craft and manipulate as her idea for Harriet's romantic storyline unfolds. Emma refers to Harriet as a thing several times in the space of a single page: "A Harriet Smith . . . she could summon at any time to a walk," "a valuable addition to her privileges," and "the something which her home required" (Austen 22). Using words and phrases like "a" and "the something" to qualify Harriet reduce her to nothing. Even Nardin comments that "from the very beginning of their friendship, Emma never accords Harriet fully human (or adult) status, always regards her as an object, in fact, as a toy" (111). In Emma's eyes, Harriet is not human; she is not even real because Harriet becomes the character Emma fancies in her head. Just as Newland becomes May's puppet, Harriet does not exist outside Emma's control; she is an ornament, a decoration to enhance Emma's own existence—a child's play thing that will always be at her beck and call.

### **Harriet and Mr. Martin's Ruined Romance**

Because Emma sees herself as Harriet's guardian, she exercises her control by taking it upon herself to convince Harriet that Mr. Martin is not a worthy acquaintance. Emma believes Harriet's natural graces "should not be wasted on the inferior society of

Highbury” (Austen 20), and the Martins were inferior—at least in Emma’s self-absorbed mind. They were “coarse and unpolished, and very unfit to be the intimates of a girl who wanted only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect” (20). This passage further portrays Emma’s snobbery because she flippantly describes Mr. Martin as too common for Harriet’s big dreams, which in all actuality are Emma’s dreams instead. Harriet does not wish to become perfect. It is Emma who wants Harriet to be more than she is and become the representation of Emma—perfection incarnate. In “Reading Embodied Consciousness in *Emma*,” Antonina Harbus argues that “Emma’s plans to improve Harriet (as a person and socially) . . . are motivated by prejudicial ideas about Harriet’s needs and inherited refinement that Emma projects from her own viewpoint” (778). Emma operates under preconceived notions about how she wants the story to play out, while May writes Newland’s story based on how the story will actually unfold. Instead of playing to her character’s real ambitions, Emma’s over-active imagination fabricates Harriet’s feelings and needs to match her own even though Harriet does not share Emma’s opinion at all. In her mind, Mr. Martin lacks a suitable fortune so he is not a proper choice for an acquaintance: “The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do . . . a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore, in one sense, as much above my notice, as in every other he is below it” (Austen 25). The working class stands below Emma on the social hierarchy; she is above Mr. Martin, and since Emma’s imagination perceives that Harriet mirrors her thoughts, she must be above such association as well. Furthermore, Emma claims that Harriet is without a doubt “a gentleman’s daughter” and that Mr. Martin’s future wife will be a lowly farmer’s daughter (26), which is ironic in and of itself, considering Emma just

assumes Harriet belongs to a wealthy family. Emma has no real proof, and, chances are, Harriet is a lowly farmer's daughter and would be perfectly happy being with Mr. Martin. However illogical Emma's claim appears though, she still latches on to her assumption like it is the gospel truth and once again transforms Harriet into the character within her imagination.

Because she lives in a dream world, Emma fails to see how well Harriet and Mr. Martin complement each other. She cannot imagine Harriet's story featuring a "remarkably plain" hero, so she urges Harriet to go in another direction—towards an extraordinary hero instead. Furthermore, Emma places far too much confidence in her imagined version of Harriet's background considering she declines Harriet's plea for help in writing an answer to Mr. Martin's marriage proposal:

"Oh, no, no: the letter had much better be all your own. You will express yourself very properly, I am sure. There is no danger of your not being intelligible, which is the first thing. Your meaning must be unequivocal: no doubts or demurs; and such expressions of gratitude and concern for the pain you are inflicting as propriety requires, will present themselves unbidden to *your* mind, I am persuaded." (44)

Much like Newland, Emma is also far too enamored with her teaching skills, even though she really has not taught Harriet that much save the idea that she deserves to marry well. By using the words "intelligible," "unequivocal," and "unbidden," Emma believes Harriet shares her background and learning. Since Emma has made Harriet a gentleman's daughter, Harriet must know how to respond to inappropriate proposals, which, this is, in Emma's mind. Harriet's training should have taught her the accepted form of addressing

proposals of any kind. However, since Harriet is probably not on the same social level as Emma, she would not know how to accurately respond to such requests. She has not grown up in Emma's world; she does not know the right words to say without having to ponder and grapple for them first. Unlike Emma, Harriet is flattered by Mr. Martin's attention, and if left to her own desires, she would have undoubtedly accepted him from the very beginning. However, with Emma's imagination firmly in control of Harriet's mind, Harriet is unable to stand up for herself.

Furthermore, the above passage not only depicts Emma's over-confident assumption about Harriet's heritage, but it also shows Emma's subtle manipulation. By using "pity" and "disappointment," she hints that Harriet's answer should be a resounding no, but she coyly disguises this unsavory opinion by sidestepping all of Harriet's questions and pleas for help. She wants Harriet to make the decision on her own, but she still tries to manipulate that decision nonetheless. Mr. Knightley even outright accuses her of pushing Harriet to refuse Mr. Martin's proposal: "You wrote her answer . . . Emma, this is your doing. You persuaded her to refuse him" (53). He knows her vanity and recognizes her handiwork, and he does not shy away from telling her so. He pegs Emma's actions, considering that if her impatience over Harriet's indecision (46) is any indication, her hints earlier were a desperate attempt to keep Harriet tightly within her authorial grasp. If Harriet had possessed a stronger backbone, Emma would have been denied the opportunity to write Harriet's love story—a task she took upon herself of course.

While she believes Mr. Martin does not measure up to Harriet's social class, Mr. Knightley points out that it is actually the other way around—Mr. Martin is the superior

acquaintance in this equation: “What are her claims, either of birth, nature, or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin? She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations. She is known only as a parlour-boarder at a common school” (53). He voices what Emma’s imagination has overlooked—that Harriet has no exalted relations to speak of. But, because Emma imagines Harriet’s life to be far greater than it is, she believes Harriet shares her opinions about everything—including Mr. Martin’s unsuitable proposal. So, like Newland, Emma does not want an intellectual equal, but someone she can dominate and impose thoughts upon. Not only does she impose her beliefs on Harriet, but she also degrades Mr. Martin’s integrity. She practically laughs at his belief that he even stood a chance with Harriet, and her flippant comment about him having a good opinion of himself ironically mirrors her own self absorption.

### **Harriet and Mr. Elton’s Fabricated Relationship**

Once she succeeds in pushing Mr. Martin from Harriet’s mind, Emma turns her attention towards writing a far different ending to Harriet’s story and labels a much more acceptable man—Mr. Elton—as husband material. As Emily Auerbach argues, “Emma labors to change Harriet’s own ‘narrative’ featuring her affection for the sensible farmer Robert Martin to a more exalted script starring Mr. Elton” (203). Auerbach taps into the novel imagery by using “script” and “starring” to describe Emma’s attempts to match Elton and Harriet together. Her authorial imagination places Mr. Elton as the hero of Harriet’s story even though they really have nothing in common. He is handsome, respectful, cheerful, and gentle (Austen 29), but even more than that, he was financially stable: “Mr. Elton’s situation was most suitable, quite the gentleman himself and without

low connections . . . He had a comfortable home for her, and Emma imagined a very sufficient income; for though the vicarage of Highbury was not large, he was known to have some independent property” (30). In the mindset of her time, she places the promise of property and a sizable income on the top of her matchmaking list. But, here again, by the word “imagined,” Emma crafts Mr. Elton’s fortune and his affections for Harriet. Austen notes that Emma “repeated some warm personal praise which she had *drawn* from Mr. Elton” (29, emphasis mine). The word “drawn” connotes a sense of creative force; she manipulated the complement from his lips, so it cannot be real. She even admits that “she was soon pretty confident of *creating* as much liking on Harriet’s side as there could be any occasion for” (36, emphasis mine). At this point, Emma is clearly not hearing herself; she draws Mr. Elton’s affections and creates Harriet’s attraction. Nothing about this courtship is real; Mr. Elton and Harriet are simply characters in Emma’s unrealistic novel.

Emma fuels her overactive imagination and unrealistic storytelling by painting an idealized image of Harriet. Pondering the image, she applauds herself: “There was no want of likeness: she had been fortunate in the attitude, and as she meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance” (40). Not only has she crafted Harriet’s character and story, but now she is molding and changing Harriet’s appearance as well. Jones argues that “the portrait emblemizes Emma’s efforts to improve Harriet,” but at the same time acts like a mirror (321). By making the image of Harriet taller and more elegant, she molds Harriet into an exact replica of a perfect woman—perhaps even Emma herself. Since she sees Harriet as a younger version of herself, the next logical step is to paint her in that light as well.

While Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Elton praise Emma's artistic vision, Mr. Knightley voices what Emma herself knows to be true: "You have made her too tall, Emma" (Austen 41). Mr. Knightley is the only one to acknowledge the obvious discrepancy in Harriet's image. Emma is not the painter the other two claim; in fact, she has painted Harriet to match the identity she created for her. In voicing her failure to paint Harriet correctly, Mr. Knightley bluntly states his negative opinion of Emma's matchmaking schemes. He knows, as does Emma, that her artistic re-configuring reflects Reynolds' belief that painters should never simply copy an image but create an image that alters or corrects defects (Jones 321). Emma's artistic expression makes an image that exists solely within her head; she paints Harriet in the fashion she sees her—unrealistic though it may be. However, in painting Harriet in her likeness, she fails to grasp Mr. Elton's true reasons for taking it with him. She believes he accepts the picture because of Harriet's image, when he actually accepts it because Emma painted it: "Oh, Miss Woodhouse, who can think of Miss Smith when Miss Woodhouse is near? No, upon my honor, there is not unsteadiness of character. I have thought only of you . . . Everything that I have said or done, for many weeks past, has been with the sole view of marking my adoration of yourself" (Austen 117). Emma was so focused on making Mr. Elton and Harriet fall in love that she failed see that Mr. Elton only had eyes for her and not Harriet.

Moreover, if Emma had been a better reader of people and situations, she would have realized that Mr. Elton is a far worse match for Harriet than Mr. Martin ever was. Harriet and Mr. Martin are actually perfectly aligned in the social arena, but Emma's deluded imagination has severed that tie completely and placed Mr. Elton and Harriet on the same social scale instead, when in all actuality, they are from two different social

circles: “In trying to arrange a marriage between the vain and pompous Mr. Elton (not her first impression of him) and the young and naive Harriet Smith, Emma ignores both the temperamental disaffinity and the social distance between them—and more grievously she misunderstands the desires of Mr. Elton” (Goodheart 549). Because Harriet exists within Emma’s head as a gentleman’s daughter and Mr. Elton’s financial situation and family background align themselves perfectly with Emma’s imagined Harriet, she fails to recognize their incompatibility. Mr. Elton is not the gentleman she believes he is; in fact, Mr. Martin acts more gentlemanly throughout the novel than Mr. Elton ever does. While Emma cannot see the obvious, Mr. Knightley does and tells her so: “Elton will not do. Elton is a good sort of man, and a very respectable vicar of Highbury, but not at all likely to make an imprudent match. He knows the value of a good income as well as any body. Elton may talk sentimentally but he acts rationally . . . He knows that he is a very handsome young man . . . I am convinced he does not mean to throw himself away” (Austen 58). Mr. Knightley acts as the voice of reason in Emma’s matchmaking schemes. To her, Mr. Elton is the handsome and noble hero to Harriet’s love story, but as Mr. Knightley observes, he is far from that ideal hero—more pompous and self-absorbed than anything else. Mr. Knightley sees Mr. Elton’s true character where Emma only sees her imagined version of it. Emma’s imagination and authorial mind make a hero where there is none. However, for a second, she does doubt her perception of Mr. Elton, but then brushes it aside, believing that “Mr. Knightley could not have observed him as she had done, neither with the interest nor with the skill of such an observer on such a question as herself” (59). Mr. Knightley’s skills of observation cannot possibly mirror her own. After all, she is the author of Harriet’s story, not him, and authors, in her mind, see far more

than other people. Even though the Harriet-Elton, hero-heroine combination fails to survive, she does not ponder how Mr. Knightley knew it would fail, but simply moves on to another hero—Frank Churchill.

### **Frank Churchill: The New Hero of Harriet's Story**

Although Emma originally has her own sights set on Frank, a fated heroic rescue from gypsies (303) inspires her to place Harriet and Frank together instead. Before Frank's heroic status can make sense, his hero-tinted character must be addressed. Emma describes Frank as an "amiable young man" (132)—someone who would be a sensational "treasure to Highbury" (134). Frank's friendliness, his good-natured personality, to Emma, will enhance the character of Highbury and make the society even better. Such a statement paints Frank as the helpful and likable hero that appears in any story, or in this case, Emma's imagination. Emma pictures him as the hero, while Mr. Knightley realistically sees him as the weak man he actually is: "Your amiable young man is a very weak young man . . . It ought to have been a habit with him, by this time, of following his duty, instead of consulting expediency . . . He ought to have opposed the first attempt on their side to make him slight his father" (132-133). A stronger, more heroic character would have done the right thing years ago. A twenty-three year old could have made his own choices, but he still allowed others to govern his actions, and to Mr. Knightley, such complacency makes Frank more coward than hero. Unfortunately, Emma dismisses such sound observations and continues to believe in the heroic images she paints of Frank instead.

Meeting Frank only enhances that heroic image considering she sees him as a "very good looking young man; height, air, address, all were unexceptionable, and his

countenance had a great deal of the spirit and liveliness of his father's; he looked quick and sensible . . . and there was a well-bred ease of manner (172-173). The way Emma catalogs Frank's outward appearance—her attention towards his height, air, and address—helps paint Frank as the hero of the story. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “height” refers to his elevated status—his social class—his rank, “air” means the stylish or graceful way he carries himself, and “address” is the grand manner in which he talks. All three words illuminate Emma's imaginative placement of Frank as the hero of Harriet's love story.

She finds the idea of her heroine, Harriet, being rescued by a handsome young man, to be the most romantic plotline in the world. In fact, she claims that such a pairing was fated to happen: “By a most fortunate chance,” he had been delayed in Highbury “so as to bring him to her assistance at this critical moment” (303). Frank and Harriet were destined to be together, at least in Emma's mind, so she erases Mr. Elton from the page and sets her sights on Frank instead. Frank represents the ultimate chivalric hero coming to a fair maiden's rescue. In Emma's imagination, Frank rode in on a white horse to Harriet's rescue, but Austen records otherwise: “The pleasantness of the morning had induced him to walk forward, and leave his horses to meet him by another road, a mile or two beyond Highbury” (303). Frank did not come to Harriet's rescue on a horse but on foot, which according to Laura Mooneyham White, in “Beyond the Romantic Gypsy: Narrative Disruptions and Ironies in Austen's *Emma*,” “makes far less a figure of chivalric rescue than he would were he mounted” (314). Emma ignores Frank's horseless rescue of Harriet; instead she focuses on the romance of the situation, or, in this case, the imagined romance of the situation. Deborah Epstein Nord elaborates, “Emma turns this

incident into a tale of romance and chivalry, feeling sure that the potential lovers were thrown together by an unprecedented ordeal” (qtd. in White 309). It was fate that brought Frank to Harriet’s side in her time of need; it does not matter that he walked. All that matters is that he came to the right place at the right time as if someone else had predestined his delayed departure and his course. Auerbach argues that “Emma’s mind immediately goes to work on the material with professional enthusiasm” as soon as she hears about Frank rescuing Harriet (204). She latches onto the supposed romance of a gypsy rescue and changes the story to fit her vision because once an idea enters her head she does not let it go. Her first hero did not work out, so she creates a new one, making her characters conform to it. Again people become her pawns, Harriet gets a new love interest, and Frank becomes entangled in Emma’s imagination too. Her attention is so engrossed in her new plot that she forgets the meddling disaster of Mr. Elton and Harriet’s love affair because she does not present any kind of hesitation, any common sense; she just throws herself into the new imagined plot.

She imagines what people feel and what they think and uses her imaginations as proof that they are doing exactly what they are destined to do. Emma, in this sense, is extremely deluded and has no concept of what people actually want, and Frank Churchill’s situation is no different. Her plot is once “again based on a total misunderstanding of their respective natures and desires” (Goodheart 590). Auerbach further writes that “Emma is contented with her view of [Frank’s] feelings” (207). She sees herself as the author of Harriet and Frank’s love story, so she imagines more feeling into his rescue of Harriet than Frank does. Frank’s heroic act was simply that—heroic—there was nothing romantically appealing about it. Emma imagined the romance, the love

story—the heroic tale—all on her own. Like Harriet’s background, Emma shapes the plot to fit her imagined story, so she fails to realize that neither Harriet nor Frank have romantic feelings for each other. For one, Frank has secretly been engaged to Jane Fairfax this entire time, but Emma remains unaware. Though she prides herself in noticing things about people and imagining the correct course of their love lives, she fails to see Frank and Jane’s connection: “Upon my word . . . I [never] imagined him attached to [Jane] . . . I never had the slightest suspicion” (367). Frank and Jane’s secret engagement is something that Emma never imagines, never suspects, because she is so focused on placing Frank and Harriet together instead.

Even though Harriet believes Emma has the uncanny ability to “see into everybody’s heart” (Austen 367). Harriet’s praise for Emma’s exceptional talent for knowing what people really want must not be taken seriously because as her previous failed attempt to match Harriet and Mr. Elton together attests, she does not understand the human heart as well as she or Harriet boast. She misses the biggest plot twist any author could ever hope to find based on her own foolish perceptions, but, perhaps, Jane is partly to blame for Emma’s lack of suspicion too. As it turns out, Jane, like May, wears a mask, except since she already openly conforms to the role of the ideal woman, Jane hides her feelings behind a mask of indifference. She has been engaged to Frank this whole time but her indifference towards him contradicts that connection entirely. Because Jane wears this mask, Emma’s imagination does not perceive Jane as a possible heroine to Frank’s story; she does not realize that people could actually have their own secret agendas—their own desires to fulfill. If she had known Jane’s secret, perhaps their friendship would have developed further because she would have met a more genuine Jane—a woman who

hides behind a mask of indifference in order to have the husband and life she wants. For being such a romantic, Emma does not even imagine such a storyline because she is so in-tune with her own version of the story; Emma “cannot understand that all the men and women around her also feel like central characters in novels of their own composition—novels that they write themselves” (Auerbach 207). Her one-track mind consumes her so much that she fails to realize that people actually have their own ideas about where their lives are headed. Even though Emma can manipulate Harriet because of her inferior intelligence, most of the people around her are not characters she can control. Her authorial vision fails her because her imagination governs every storyline she attempts.

Emma’s inability to see that she does not know other people’s hearts as well as she thinks emerges again in Harriet and Emma’s first encounter following Frank’s knight-in-shining-armor moment which inspires Emma’s romantic inspiration in the first place. Harriet gushes with admiration for someone, and Emma automatically assumes it is Frank Churchill: “I am not at all surprised at you, Harriet. The service he rendered you was enough to warm your heart” (Austen 310). Since it is Frank’s romantic rescue that Emma cannot stop thinking about, she thinks the gesture is the source of Harriet’s joy. However, Harriet has had two men, Mr. Knightley and Frank Churchill, come to her rescue within the space of a few days. Before Frank rescues her from the gypsies, Mr. Knightley, in his kind-hearted manner, invites Harriet to dance with him so as to alleviate the pain of Mr. Elton’s rejection and save her from public humiliation (297). And, based on Harriet’s happy countenance and the context of her and Emma’s conversation, it is Mr. Knightley’s rescue that Harriet clings to: “Service! Oh, it was such an inexpressible obligation! The very recollection of it, and all that I felt at the time, when I saw him

coming,—his noble look, and my wretchedness before . . . In one moment such a change! From perfect misery to perfect happiness” (310). While Harriet stares in awe at Mr. Knightley, love-sick over his kindness towards her, Emma is still consumed with the gallantry of Frank’s fated rescue instead. Even though Austen’s placement of both rescues back-to-back reveals that “Mr. Knightley’s rescue was far more valuable to Harriet (and presumably to right-thinking readers) than was Frank Churchill’s” (White 309), Emma cannot get the image of Frank as the knight-in-shining-armor out of her head. Even though Mr. Knightley’s name alone connotes chivalry, to Emma, Frank’s rescue is far more romantic than Mr. Knightley’s because Frank actually saves Harriet from certain death—something most heroes do—and Mr. Knightley only saves her from public humiliation. In other words, because Emma has situated Frank as the hero of Harriet’s love story, she does not remember Mr. Knightley’s selfless act. Or, if she does remember it, perhaps, her own love for Mr. Knightley stops her from realizing the true object of Harriet’s affections.

### **Emma’s Epiphany**

It is not until the threat of Harriet’s intervention that Emma begins to realize the error of her matchmaking and authorial ways. At the realization that Harriet has set her cap on Mr. Knightley (Austen 368), Emma speaks with “forced calmness” (368) because her world has just shattered. Her carefully crafted allusions of her greatness—her superiority—disintegrate with Harriet’s confirmation that Mr. Knightley is her knight-in-shining armor not Frank. The knowledge that Emma herself loves Mr. Knightley—has always loved him—darts through her, as Austen says, “with the speed of an arrow” (370). In this epiphany, Emma finally grasps the greater ramifications of her actions and the

importance of her father's and most importantly, Mr. Knightley's, urgings to stop match-making because as she looks at Harriet, she encounters the weight of her own shortcomings.

Emma realizes “with insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of every body's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange every body's destiny” (374). She truly believed that she knew everything about what people felt and who they were supposed to marry. Her vain and pompous understanding of her self-assumed role as the writer of others' love stories blinds her to reality. She changed Harriet—crafted her into someone she was never supposed to be. If Emma had only left Harriet where she had found her, none of this would be happening:

Harriet was less humble, had fewer scruples than formerly. Her inferiority, whether of mind or situation, seemed little felt. She had seemed more sensible of Mr. Elton's being to stoop in marrying her, than she now seemed of Mr. Knightley's. Alas! was not that her own doing too? Who had been at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself? Who but herself had taught her, that she was to elevate herself if possible, and that her claims were great to a high worldly establishment? If Harriet, from being humble, were grown vain, it was her doing too. (375)

By assuming Harriet was a gentleman's daughter and teaching her how to make a suitable match, she turned a once sweet, humble, and selfless girl into someone far worse—someone like Emma—shallow and vain. Mr. Knightley even predicted such an outcome long before she realizes the bad example she set for Harriet: “She desired nothing better . . . Till you chose to turn her into a friend, her mind had no distaste for her own set, nor

any ambition beyond it” (55). In her pre-Emma existence, Harriet had been content with her lot in life; but, as soon as Emma appoints herself Harriet’s tutor, she became too ambitious for her own good. Tanner even comments, “Emma is no Frankenstein and Harriet no monster; but, with her meddling and planning and scheming, Emma has created a false Harriet who now threatens to act beyond the control of her maker” (183). She made a monster out of Harriet—an “incipient nemesis” (Tanner 184). By “incipient,” both Austen and Emma refer to the idea that Harriet’s enemy role is just beginning or budding, which ironically mirrors Emma’s desire to take Harriet under her wing in the first place. She wants to teach Harriet how to socially bloom in all the right ways, but her teaching has backfired. She has created an enemy—a rival for Mr. Knightley’s affections instead of a friend and confidant.

Emma’s epiphany that she has indeed been “no friend to Harriet” (Austen 55) brings her to the realization that matchmaking does not mean she has the power to write other peoples’ lives. As Perry notes, “Emma must be brought down a peg, must be cured of her vanity and arrogance” (187); she must reach rock bottom and come face to face with her vain and snobbish heart before she can even learn how to rectify her mistakes. It only takes a few minutes to see “with a clearness which had never blessed her before” how improperly and unfeelingly she had acted towards Harriet and Mr. Martin (Austen 370). Emma had tried to manipulate Harriet into marrying someone who would never make her as happy as Emma now realized Mr. Martin would have had she given him the chance. All it took for her to see how destructive her behavior had been was one look into a mirror—Harriet. Emma had set out to teach Harriet the art of being a gentleman’s

daughter, but, in the end, their roles are reversed and Harriet becomes the teacher—  
illuminating the shallow person Emma had always been.

### Chapter 5: May's Loss and Emma's Gain

In the end, May and Emma's authorial visions lead them down very different paths. While one succeeds in the beginning, the other succeeds in the end. On the one hand, May's realist approach to Newland's story enables her to know how the story should proceed. Her knowledge of her society and the people in it makes her the perfect type of author because much like authors who become engrossed in the lives of their characters, May knows Newland inside and out. She has invested herself in telling his story to the best of her ability, so she knows exactly how he will react in certain situations which is why she invites Ellen to the opera and tells him of her pregnancy the eve before he would have left her for good. As any non-fictional writer does, May uses already existing characters to act out her story. She does not change the character to fit her plan, but rather she changes her plan to fit the character. Emma's imaginist approach to Harriet's story, on the other hand, gets her into trouble. She does not even think to consider other people's feelings on her matches; all she cares about is her own imagined version of those feelings. She prides herself in knowing the inner workings of other peoples' hearts, but she has no such powers of observation. What she sees as heroic actions are simply matters of being in the right place at the right time. Her obsession with directing romances would have been more successful had she used fictional characters rather than real people to act out her imagined storyline. Unlike May, Emma creates the characters and the story, so she molds the characters to match her pre-ordained plan. Because her imaginist spirit fuels her authorial decisions, she fails at writing a true, authentic version of Harriet's love story. So, on the manipulative side of this writing debate, May clearly wins, hands down.

However, while May's realist approach is much more effective than Emma's imaginist one, May's mask, in the end, actually hinders May from finding true happiness. In her efforts to write Newland's story, May places the mask of ideal womanhood between them, so Newland never really sees the real, genuine May. He never really gets to know her at all. Louis O. Coxe, in "What Edith Wharton Saw in Innocence" argues that because Newland never really sees the May behind the mask, he misses out on May more so than Ellen (157). May, not Ellen, represents "the flower of life" (Wharton 281) that Newland believes he has missed because throughout their entire courtship and marriage, her mask stands in their way. Their relationship is not an open and honest one; it is not even built on common ground but on a lie. Her mask is so convincing that he can only see her as the mirror image of the lily-of-the-valley bouquets he sent her every day even though she was none of those things—not really. As Fracasso notes, "the toughness and tenacity, the depth of feeling and strength of character" that he admires in Ellen "were always present in May" (48), but Newland never took the time, or better yet, he never thought to look below the surface of May's carefully constructed authorial disguise to find that strong and perceptive woman underneath. He never really had any reason to—May's disguise was too strong—too convincing—and his understanding of the ideal woman only added more authenticity to it.

Even though she could have dropped the mask at any time throughout the novel, she chooses not to. Perhaps that persona, that façade has become such a part of her that she cannot let it go, or perhaps, she would rather watch Newland bend to her will than have to bend to his. Maybe she enjoys switching places with him, locking him in the cage he fashioned for her. But, perhaps the biggest reason behind her unwillingness to let go of

her carefully erected disguise lies in why she was determined to lock Newland in her world in the first place—prestige. In May's Victorian Old New York Society, marriage was a necessity, especially if one wanted to secure a good future. Love was never really a factor; it was more about climbing the social ladder. May needed to marry Newland in order to avoid becoming like Newland's sister Janey—the wallflower who had no power. May wanted power, so she hid behind her mask, and she never stepped outside that mask because her carefully constructed world hinged upon that barrier. So, even though May's mask was an effective writing tool, it caused her to miss out on a genuine relationship and the love to go with it.

Even though Emma's imagination misarranges people's lives, the fact that she does not wear May's ideal mask actually redeems her. Emma is able to do the one thing that May cannot—change, grow, and become a better person. If it all came down to courage, which it does, Emma would be the more courageous one of the two. She does not hide behind a fake persona and that is why readers of all generations love her. According to Tanner, Emma “has been really adored by generations of readers, for her brilliance, wit, energy, independence, fallibility, for her capacity to learn from and recognize her own errors, and finally, it seems, for her willingness to capitulate to a rational passion” (176). People adore Emma because she does not pretend to be the ideal woman. On the outside, she may believe that she is perfect, but in the back of her mind, she knows she is not. She may not be willing to accept her shortcomings until the very end of the novel, but she knows they exist within her. Unlike May, who remains hidden behind the mask of ideal womanhood and never allows the people around her to really know her, Emma is real—genuine; she lets people see into her mind and her heart. And,

although she constantly gets it wrong, her faults—her often comical mistakes—endear her to readers all the more because they can identify with her more than May. As Auerbach writes, “What redeems Emma from being a haughty, manipulative snob who practices her art at the expense of other people’s feelings is that she has grown into a genuinely loving and loyal young woman with a warm heart who can admit her errors and seek to change her ways” (217). She is not perfect, but she allows herself to learn from her mistakes and comes out a better person for it. Even Mr. Knightley, who spends the entire novel rebuking Emma for not acknowledging her shortcomings, calls her the “sweetest and best of all creatures, faultless in spite of all her faults” (Austen 392). He loves Emma in spite of her faults; he loves her because of her faults. If she had been the perfect woman her time wanted her to be, she would not be the fiery spirit and fierce independent woman he fell in love with in the first place. She enables him to see into the depths of her heart—to the woman who can eventually openly embrace her faults and learn from them.

Because Emma can change and grow, her relationship with Mr. Knightley is so much stronger and more tangible than May and Newland’s relationship ever could be because no mask exists between them. Their marriage is not built around a persona, but around reality. They know each other’s strengths and weaknesses; they know each other’s hearts—something that Newland never discovers about May because of the mask she wears. Even though May’s mask enables her to effectively and realistically write Newland’s life story and she succeeds where Emma’s imagination fails, May never finds the happiness that Emma finds with Mr. Knightley. Emma may not have needed to get married with the same intensity that May did, and she may have planned never to get

married because she could not bear to lose everything she already had, but, in the end, she gained something far more valuable, something May never had—love. Emma changes because Mr. Knightley loved her enough to rebuke her for everything she did wrong. She probably never would have realized the error of writing someone else's story without taking their feelings into consideration had Mr. Knightley not cared enough to be frank and honest with her. May never lets go of the ideal woman persona; therefore, she never realizes what she is missing by clinging to that mask. In contrast, Emma, after pondering her obsession with writing Harriet's love story, her envy over Jane Fairfax's accomplishments, and Mr. Knightley's sage reprimands, realizes that she cannot write other people's stories for them. Her friends are not characters in her imagination; they are real people who have their own desires and dreams. Unlike May who remains behind her mask and continues to write Newland's story even after her death, Emma steps away from the writer's chair, sets down her imaginist spirit, and lets her friends decide for themselves where their lives are headed. Allowing the characters, whether they be real or fictional, to direct the course of their own stories is the mark of a true writer; and, in the end, Emma surpasses May on that front. While Wharton's May, with the help of her mask, might have been the superior manipulator of these two aspiring "authors," Austen's Emma is by far the better "writer" because she sets aside her own desires, learns from her mistakes, and allows the story to write itself.

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