



Re-viewing Mr. Elton
& Frank Churchill
Through the Circle
Metaphors in *Emma*

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JANE AUSTEN'S *Emma* consistently replicates and then challenges the very foundations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society; i.e., the social and family circles upon which any community must depend. The novel accomplishes its aim on two levels. First, the finely brushed language successfully imitates, in novel form, the discourse practices of Austen's social milieu. These discourse practices, because of their metaphorical content, still structure today's linguistic practices and are therefore easily understood by the modern reader. Second, the linguistically exposed discursive structure then stands as timeless testimony to an artist careful and powerful enough to trust everyday language use as a vehicle of social import. The research of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson concerning cognitive metaphor forms a backdrop to this critical assessment, especially as segmented into its volume structure (Figure 1, *The Text as Circle Metaphor*). The resulting analyses offer new insights into the social constructs that inform what is arguably Austen's most intricately patterned novel.

Metaphor, according to Lakoff and Johnson, is the process in which ideational schemata are mapped from the domain of the

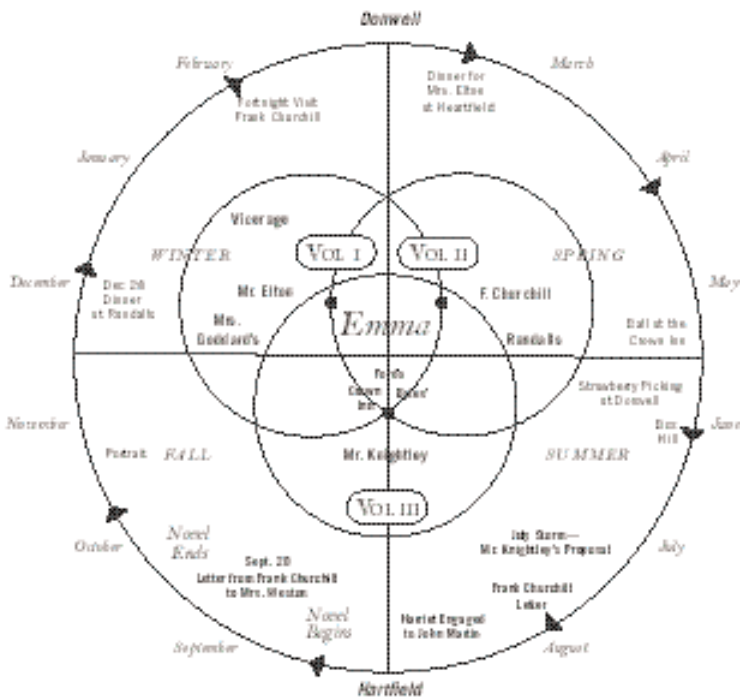


Figure 1: *The Text as Circle Metaphor*

physical experience onto the domain of the abstract. Metaphors represent our shared, embodied human comprehension of basic manipulations of everyday life, identified by Johnson as basic, conceptual metaphors. It is the circle metaphor, which Lakoff and Johnson classify as a container metaphor, that dominates the image-making devices in *Emma*, and that dominance has interpretative consequences. The first step is to map the concept of the circle onto the concept of the novel. In everyday language we speak of “circles of friends,” “quilting circles,” “theater circles,” and “circles of influence.” We also say that a particular person “radiates strength, warmth,” etc., meaning that he or she draws us into a circle of relationships with the person at the center, a radius away. These basic-level concepts of the circle permeate the structure of *Emma*. Essentially, readers form complex concepts concerning the interactions of the novel’s characters based on every-

Woodhouse characteristically only wants to invite Mr. Elton “to dine.” And Mr. Knightley, in his turn, opposes Emma’s intention to meddle: “‘Depend upon it, a man of six or seven-and-twenty can take care of himself” (14). The chance introduction of the seventeen-year-old Harriet Smith, “the natural daughter of somebody” (22), into the Hartfield world gives impetus to Emma’s matchmaking and results in a series of social gatherings intended to expose Mr. Elton to the charms of the “sweet, docile, [and ever] grateful” (26) Miss Smith.

Before long, the reader is overhearing Mr. Elton’s effusions to Miss Woodhouse: “*You* have given Miss Smith all that she required. . . . *you* have made her graceful and easy. She was a beautiful creature when she came to *you*, but, in my opinion, the attractions *you* have added are infinitely superior to what she received from nature” (42, emphasis added). What Emma fails to notice is that the pronoun “you” (as in “Miss Woodhouse,” the interlocutor of this conversation) is used often enough to place the real credit for Miss Smith’s added “attractions” firmly at Emma’s doorstep: It is the heiress of Hartfield that is attracting this clergyman. Mr. Elton is complimenting Emma and the “attractions” of the Woodhouse circle, not just Miss Smith. The resulting paradox is revealing. “[Q]uite convinced of Mr. Elton’s being in the fairest way of falling in love if not in love already” (42), Emma completely misses the essential truth of her insight: Mr. Elton is “falling in love,” but with Emma Woodhouse, an appropriate catch for a careful bachelor.

In point of fact, Emma is neither looking at nor listening to Mr. Elton because she is already chorded with Harriet Smith, to the exclusion of all others. In circle terminology, a chord is a straight line that connects two points on the circumference of a curve (see Figure 2). Emma hears and sees only what she wants to hear and see; she is metaphorically looking exclusively at Harriet, never really seeing Mr. Elton, except in a self-deluding, imaginative scenario of matchmaking. Mr. Elton’s determination to engage Miss Woodhouse, to get her to focus on him, as he is quite obviously focused on her, is doomed to failure. His every move entirely reinforces Emma’s narrow, chorded view of Miss Smith as the object of Mr. Elton’s interest and prevents her from

seeing him, in any direct way, as an eligible bachelor carefully fixed, instead, upon herself as a deserving prize.

This brings up the interesting question of how Miss Harriet Smith sees Mr. Elton. As could be expected, Harriet's view of the Vicar is a fluid one. It takes but a hint from Emma to begin to focus Harriet on Mr. Elton's attractions, creating "as much liking on Harriet's side, as there could be any occasion for" (42). Harriet, not surprisingly, is perfectly amenable to the suggestion that she, with Emma, attend exclusively to Mr. Elton. But remember, neither Harriet nor Emma is really looking at Mr. Elton. Harriet, by this time, sees only what Emma fancies. The chord between the two young ladies binds (and blinds) each of them. Although Miss Woodhouse is technically pulling the strings (the chords), she and Harriet are both securely tied to Emma's enigmatic, off-centered view of Mr. Elton.

The result is a series of predictable misapprehensions with equally predictable results. Harriet's Portrait scene erroneously reinforces in Emma's mind Mr. Elton's attentions to Miss Smith, while ignoring the fact that it is Emma that he is standing next to and crowding. The Great Charade misinterpretation, wherein Miss Smith must be carefully schooled by Emma as to Mr. Elton's "Courtship" intentions, is entirely based on Emma's false assumption that the unsigned bit of poetry concerns Harriet, and not herself. And finally, the Tragedy of the Broken Shoe Ties on Vicarage Lane reinforces Emma's delusion of Mr. Elton's being "Cautious, very cautious" (90) about Miss Smith, when he is merely being polite to Miss Smith and "cautious" about declaring himself to Miss Woodhouse.

Emma is not the only one concerned with Mr. Elton's cautious approach to matrimony. The rest of Highbury is extremely interested in the Vicar, his circumstance as an eligible bachelor, and the remedy. Mr. Elton's offer to take Harriet's portrait to London to be framed produces observations of this very distinguished gentleman through a number of points of view. A chance meeting between Mr. Perry and Mr. Elton results in the oft-repeated information that Mr. Elton has absented himself from his regular "whist-club night" to travel to London. That there "must be a *lady* in the case" (68) is acknowledged with a smile by Mr.

Elton and passed on by word of mouth by Mr. Perry to Miss Nash. This community viewpoint, as told by Miss Nash to Harriet who then tells Emma and the reader, further encourages Emma in her fantasy of Harriet as the object of Mr. Elton's interest.

By the end of the first volume, however, Emma is finally forced to focus on Mr. Elton's real intentions when, after the Weston's holiday dinner, the Vicar—"Without scruple—without apology—without much apparent diffidence" (129)—determines to take advantage of a private moment in the carriage ride home to press his suit:

"[My] visits to Hartfield have been for yourself only; and the encouragement I have received"—

—"Encouragement!—I give you encouragement!—sir, you have been entirely mistaken in supposing it. I have seen you only as the admirer of my friend [replied Emma]. . . . I have no thought of matrimony at present."

He was too angry to say another word; her manner too decided to invite supplication; and in this state of swelling resentment, and mutually deep mortification, they had to continue together a few minutes longer. . . . (132)

Thus do Mr. Elton's hopes and Emma's fantasies abruptly terminate. It isn't long before the Vicar abandons the field to find a suitable wife in Bath. His diminished importance, once his eligibility has been cancelled by his marriage to Miss Augusta Hawkins, removes him from the pride of place as a central character in the remaining two volumes of the novel.

In Volume 11, Emma refocuses her attention on another bachelor when Frank Churchill makes his long-awaited visit to Highbury. Again the image-schema of the circle (Figure 3, The Feminization of Frank Churchill) is mapped onto the concept of a volume. The center is the character of Frank Churchill, the circumference is composed of various female novel characters, and the radii that connect Frank to these women on the circumference are influential as well as instrumental. The paths of imitative influences reflect, mirror, and form the novel image of Frank Churchill, a textual representation, a manifest composite of fiction-

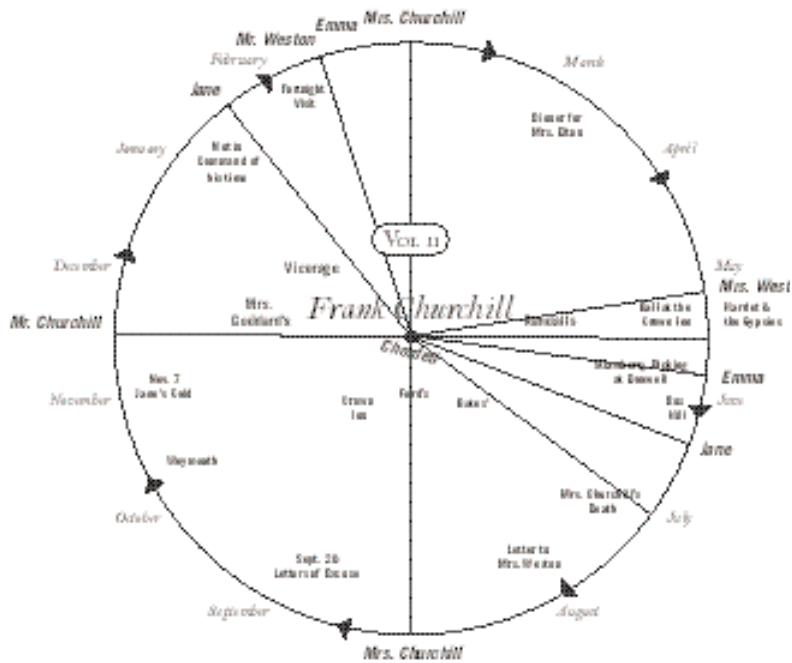


Figure 3: *The Feminization of Frank Church*

ally represented female characters who surround and therefore shape his character.

The question in this second volume implicitly concerns not only how character is realized, but how it is formed. First, there is our understanding of the existence of physical likeness in the world. We pronounce someone the “spitting image” of a parent or relative, and we commonly identify physical likenesses in the society around us as influential. We also attribute the development of likeness in personality to influences of nature as well as nurture. The image schema of likeness is used metaphorically on a basic level—i.e., unconsciously—to structure our common understanding of spiritual, emotional, and mental likenesses between people. Austen infuses into the novel’s overall structure an emphasis on the similarities that exist between individual characters in the text.

It is not, then, merely coincidental that Frank Churchill is seldom in the company of other men. He is out alone with his father twice in the novel—his first visit to Hartfield in chapter 5 of Volume II and on his leave-taking of Emma in Chapter 12. The remainder of the time he escorts Mrs. Weston and an assortment of other female residents, usually including Emma, as they walk through Highbury (197), visit its various residents, inspect Jane's new pianoforte (241), and decide on the suitability of Rands or the Crown Inn for a ball (253-56). Because he is surrounded and therefore most motivated by women, Frank Churchill is effectively centered by the feminine. As reflecting agents, both a circle's center character and the connecting character point on the circle's circumference have potential for motivation. These two points are separate, yet reflectively influential. The radii between character points on a social circle that is a structural element in a novel have influential effects that motivate the reader's perception of the quality of the relationships that exist between Frank Churchill and the women in his life. Their resemblances become obvious through metaphorical analysis.

Essentially, the reader discovers the powerful bases for similarity in character traits that result in similar characters acting in similar ways in the novel setting. Emma's accord with Mr. Churchill is especially illuminating. Even before she meets him in person, Emma is intrigued: "Now, it so happened that in spite of Emma's resolution of never marrying, there was something in the name, in the idea of Mr. Frank Churchill, which always interested her" (118-19). Of course Frank Churchill would interest Emma Woodhouse. Except for the difference in their sex, Emma and Frank are as twin manifestations of the same influences, and the similarities in their circumstances draw the reader's attention to the similarities in their personalities. They are both motherless children, having each suffered the loss of a biological mother. And both enjoy positions of relative social distinction. Having been "given up to the care and the wealth of the Churchills" (16), Frank can now be considered as handsome, clever, and rich as Emma herself. But the likenesses do not end here. While they are both seen to live in comfortable situations, whether at Hartfield or Enscombe, each is thoroughly enmeshed in the day-to-day care of

a parent/guardian who demands absolute attention and devotion.

The divergence between Emma's and Frank's predicaments is also revealing. Mr. Woodhouse's general indisposition as a gentle valetudinarian is transcended by Mrs. Churchill's reputation for hypochondriacal "ill humour" (121) along with "all the selfishness of imaginary complaints" (387) that "would try the temper" (388). But the result is the same. Both Emma and Frank have been schooled in the necessary arts of accommodation and compromise. The demands of illness, real or imagined, can always preempt the personal needs of either Emma Woodhouse or Frank Churchill. In a world where their time and their energy are never their own, they have learned that the direct approach is always the worst approach. Each has therefore developed an aptitude for subterfuge and indirection aimed at placating and controlling the surrounding environment.

Duplicity has become a social as well as a familial habit for both characters. Emma secretly wants to match Harriet to Frank as a suitable husband; Frank wants to pursue his secret match with Jane Fairfax. The attraction that subsequently radiates between Emma and Frank is based on a recognition of their kindred lives and spirits, rather than sex. Emma herself acknowledges, "I think there is a little likeness between us" (478). The likeness is more than "little." Emma and Frank are authentic mirror images, a mere radius away from each other. Their affinity is instantaneously obvious to the reader. More to the point, both characters are quickly seen to like themselves, almost excessively. It is therefore metaphorically predictable that they would find each other attractive, over and above the fact that their similar family situations make them "like" brother and sister, rather than lovers. Each is drawn to the other because of the recognizable similarities of their existence. No wonder they are attracted to each other.

While Emma, as a Woodhouse, is "first" (7) in Highbury, Frank's fame as an adopted Churchill precedes him and has long established him as a central topic of conversation. Technically, Frank is both familiar and foreign. "He was looked on as sufficiently belonging to the place to make his merits and prospects a kind of common concern," but "he had never been

there in his life" (17). Because of Mr. Weston's annual "fond report" of his son's progress, the particulars of Frank Churchill's existence are well known in Highbury. Even *in absentia*, his attachment to and dependence upon one woman—Mrs. Churchill—is a point of controversy for the residents of the village. Initially, Emma censures Frank for his tardiness in paying his respects to his father's new wife: "[O]ne cannot comprehend a young *man's* being under such restraint, as not to be able to spend a week with his father, if he likes it" (122).

This opening discussion focuses the reader's attention on Frank Churchill's neglect of his obligation. Frank's similarity to Emma is even here obliquely acknowledged. Emma, herself, has already admitted her own "negligence" in "not contributing what she ought to the stock of [Mrs. and Miss Bates'] scanty comforts" (155) by her irregular visits. She remains unrepentant because of her "persuasion of its being very disagreeable,—a waste of time" (155). Frank Churchill also demonstrates a marked lack of repentance in his very "late" letter of apology to Mrs. Weston (and indirectly to Emma). While he admits to a consciousness of wrong in not visiting Highbury sooner, the offhand remark is hardly an apology. He seems, in fact, to take pride in his rationale: "I did not come till Miss Fairfax was in Highbury" (437). Although he never says that visiting Highbury would have been a waste of time before Jane Fairfax was there, the inference is clear.

Simple negligence is not, however, at the heart of Frank Churchill's problems. Before long Emma, much to her own surprise, finds herself defending Frank's behavior against Mr. Knightley's censure: "You are the worst judge in the world, Mr. Knightley, of the difficulties of dependence. You do not know what it is to have tempers to manage" (146). In other words, an independent male can never truly comprehend the constrictions of a dependent (read "female") life. This says as much about what it is like to be a woman in this society as it does about Frank Churchill. Every woman of any importance in the novel is actively engaged in managing the difficulties of dependence as well as the tempers of the other people of the household.¹ Mrs. Weston's "very material matrimonial point of submitting [her] own will and doing as [she] were bid" (38), Emma's adroit management

of her “delicate” father or her sometimes “irritable” brother-in-law (101), and even Mrs. Elton’s handling of her *caro sposo*² support this claim (458). Growing up as he did in a household of a woman known for her imperious as well as capricious demands, Frank Churchill has learned well the feminine arts of submission and accommodation.

Emma continues to make her point. Frank Churchill’s “habits of early obedience and long observance” would make it very difficult for him “to burst forth at once into perfect independence and set all their claims on his gratitude and regard at naught” (148). Emma and Frank are similar because each has been nurtured and trained to fulfill a dependent, subservient, yet highly manipulative position in their respective households. Their similarities constitute a passive expression of likeness between fictional characters. Frank’s character, his ways of dealing with his surroundings, his habits, and even his handwriting—“I do not admire it,” said Mr. Knightley. ‘It is too small—wants strength. It is like a woman’s writing’” (297)—signify his effective feminization.

While Emma is an understanding and a reflective agent, Mrs. Churchill heads the list of negative female influences on Frank’s character. He is not only circumscribed by Mrs. Churchill’s wishes, but he has learned well the value of imitation under the constraint. Mrs. Churchill is identified as being “capricious” (15), “odd” (120), and even in possession of a “devil of a temper” (121). These are the very qualities that we can discover in Frank Churchill. The “sudden freak” that sends him to London “with no more important view that appeared than having his hair cut” (205) establishes his impulsive behavior. His real object of purchasing a pianoforte in secret and foisting it upon an already compromised Jane Fairfax is simply further evidence of his entirely selfish capriciousness. The strawberry-picking party and Box Hill confirm his oddity, conduct described quite aptly by Emma as “being very cross” (368).

But it is his own “devil of a temper,” centering on Jane Fairfax as it does, that is most revealing. She is the woman he feels obliged to describe as “disgustingly, . . . suspiciously reserved” (169)—the same woman he professes to love. Although Frank eventually apologizes for

his bad behavior, “such shameful, insolent neglect of [Jane] and such apparent devotion to Miss W., as it would have been impossible for any woman of sense to endure” (441), the implication is strong that it has been Jane’s very imperviousness, her being “unnecessarily scrupulous and cautious” (440) that has, in fact, been the stimulus for Frank’s outrageous behavior. Imperviousness here is prototypically feminine in that Jane’s “scrupulous and cautious” qualities are radii of the “governess-trade” (300), for which she has been in training. In this sense, Jane is also a negative influence on the character of Frank Churchill—she brings out the worst in him. More importantly, Frank’s conduct calls in question his ability to modify the deportment that he has unconsciously incorporated into his personality. He has successfully “out-Churchilled” (310) even *Mrs.* Churchill herself.

Thus the feminization of Frank Churchill emerges as an effective narrative device in the novel. We understand Frank as feminized because Austen’s depiction of him makes us perceive him as at the center of a circle whose circumference consists entirely of women and whose radii embody influences initiated by and reflective of those women. His character is both formed and revealed through a demonstrable similarity of character traits, the understanding of which is made possible by an explication of the radiating paths of circle construction. Austen uses her innate discernment of society’s circles to structure a fictional unit, the volume (three of which make the novel), as a complex metaphorical structure of her own. The reader projects metaphorically from an understanding of circle schemas in the reader’s own physical domain to abstract novel structure in order to form and understand the complex concepts and general categories that pattern the novel as a set of intersecting circle formations.

The reader focuses upon Mr. Elton in Volume I because other characters, the foremost of whom is Emma, are centering their attention on him as Highbury’s most eligible bachelor. He is a prototypical social construct, the radiating center of community interest, until his eligibility is forfeited and he deconstructs into a typical village vicar. In Volume II the character of Mr. Churchill, another eligible bachelor, is also a central focus, but to a different purpose. Here the development of character and personality traits is explored through the metaphorical device of influential radii

that stretch between a central character and characters on the periphery, resulting in the effective feminization of Frank Churchill. Volume 111, unexamined here, introduces the concept of a deserving “husband” for our heroine and rounds out the circular patterns of interaction that characterize the whole of the novel. The mapping and application of the elements of the geometric circle to structural entities in the novel demonstrate the extent to which Jane Austen encoded both basic-level and image-schematic metaphors into *Emma* while employing the language of the everyday and the ordinary as a discourse strategy in her writing. The resulting analysis encourages and sustains metaphorical assessments that at once verify Jane Austen’s canonical status and deepen our appreciation of her artistry.

NOTES

1. This fact is interpreted by Claudia Johnson as evidence of “female power” in the novel. In noting that “with the exception of Knightley, all the people in control are women” (126), she goes on to offer an important insight into the artistry at work: “In its willingness to explore positive versions of female power, *Emma* itself is an experimental production of authorial independence unlike any of Austen’s other novels” (126).

2. R. W. Chapman lists three different spellings: on page 278 and 356 the spelling is *caro sposo*. But the 1816 edition has *cara sposo* on pages 278 and 279 and *caro sposa* on page 302.

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