Extended Essay English A1 Category 1

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# *An exploration of Jane Austen's use of the outdoors in* Emma.

**Abstract**

This essay explores the different uses of the outdoors in *Emma*. It also briefly touches on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*. It examines the way Austen subtly uses the attitudes of various characters towards the outdoors to reflect their levels of self-awareness and perception. Emma herself is deluded and snobbish, and she views the outdoors as a tool for her matchmaking, whilst Mr Knightley is much more perceptive and self-aware, and both uses the countryside in farming and enjoys it, cultivating a tasteful garden in Donwell Abbey.

The other main function of the outdoors is to aid Austen in contrasting the two principal relationships by the setting in which they begin. Emma's gradual romantic awakening takes place in the countryside, where proper society's morals reign, but Jane Fairfax gets engaged to Frank Churchill in the traditionally debauched setting of the seaside town of Weymouth, keeping the relationship secret for months and deceiving those around them. There are parallels to be found in some of Austen's other novels, with both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* featuring inappropriate seaside romance.

Austen seems to condemn the decadent morals of the young people who frequent seaside resorts, and by implication seems to approve of the genteel country manners displayed by characters such as Mr Knightley. There appears to be a healing quality to the countryside which calms emotions and guides the novel's characters, Emma in particular, to a more natural, morally upright sense of themselves and a better perception of others.

*Word count: 247*

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*An exploration of Jane Austen's use of the outdoors in Emma*

**Introduction**

Jane Austen has sometimes been called an 'indoor writer', confining her novels to the drawing rooms of upper-middle class women, their friends, families and prospective husbands, but in *Emma*, the outdoors is used in a variety of ways. Emma's relationship with, and attitude towards, the outdoors seems to be linked to her fluctuating level of self awareness, and contrasted with Mr Knightley's attitude towards the same. She has, for nearly all her life, been confined to Hartfield and its grounds, and is snobbish and disdainful towards those in closer contact with nature – Mr Martin, a farmer and Harriet's suitor, and the gypsies who harass Harriet when she takes a country path. Mr Knightley on the other hand, is to a certain extent the book's voice of reason, and has a less fanciful and more practical attitude towards nature, with tasteful grounds and farmland. Outdoor settings are also used to characterise romantic relationships in Emma and to some extent in some of Austen's other novels. Emma's gradual and rational romantic awakening is set in the peaceful countryside, whilst Jane Fairfax falls into an illicit, passionate engagement at the seaside, suggesting different outdoor elements carry different moral connotations. This opposition is mirrored in *Pride and Prejudice*. In this essay, I will first examine the link between characters' attitudes towards nature and the outdoors and these characters' levels of self-awareness or insight. I will then discuss how Austen uses outdoor settings to help characterise two of the novel's main relationships, mainly by contrasting the countryside and the seaside and their different moral connotations. I hope to be able to make some conclusions about the use and importance of the outdoors in the novel.

For many of the novel's characters, there seems to be a parallel between their attitude towards the outdoors and the way they relate to themselves and others. Emma's attitude towards the outdoors seems, to a certain extent, to be related to her lack of self-awareness and snobbery. It seems that those characters usually deemed by readers and perhaps by Austen as the most likeable and sensible characters seem to enjoy the countryside more than those we are led to dislike. At the beginning of the novel, when Emma is arguably at her most self-involved, the extent of her contact with nature are the short strolls she takes around Hartfield's "lawn and shrubberies"[1], and her occasional walks into Highbury. In contrast, the young Mr Martin is presumably out of doors much of the time since his family own a farm, and the first time he appears in the novel is outside, "walking on the Donwell road"[2]. Before Harriet is "corrupted" and made vain by Emma, she too spent weeks staying at the Martins' farm, where Mr Martin picked flowers for her every day. However, after Emma has raised Harriet's opinion of her own social status beyond anything reasonable for "the natural daughter of somebody"[3], she no longer sees the Martins and would no longer associate with mere farmers. However, this is no simple class matter, as Mr Knightley, of equal rank and distinction as Emma, also enjoys and makes practical use of the outdoors in his own farming endeavours. "There was no denying [the Knightley brothers] had penetration," says Emma, even going so far as to admit that Mr Knightley had "much truer a knowledge"[4] of Mr Elton's true designs. He is perhaps the novel's most perceptive character, always sure of his own feelings and often correct when 'reading' other characters. Much like Mr Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Knightley's grounds are tasteful and modest, his "ample

[1] P. 6, Austen, *Emma*, Penguin Popular Classics Edition, London, 1994
[2] P. 24, Austen, *Emma*
[3] P. 18, Austen, *Emma*
[4] P. 104, Austen, *Emma*

gardens stretching to down to meadows washed by a stream"[5] a reflection of his reliable, natural character. In fact, the parallels between the two books are quite remarkable. When Elzabeth realises she is in love with Mr Darcy, she half-jokingly attributes this realisation to her first sighting of Mr Darcy's grounds at Pemberley. "She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste."[6] An understanding of the natural value of nature seems to be an important characteristic for Austen's heroines' suitors. Moreover, the theme of regard for nature being a positive quality recurs in her other novels. The distinctly dislikeable Lady Catherine de Bourgh show nothing but disdain for the "little wilderness" that is the Bennet family's garden, whilst Lizzie, an immediately engaging and far more accessible heroine than Emma, surprises the equally unpleasant Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst by having "walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself"[7] to visit her poorly sister.

The Knightley brothers seem to have what Austen seems to consider a healthy, balanced, pragmatic view of the countryside, and also show common sense, a degree of self-awareness and good understanding of others. Mr John Knightley takes his children out to get fresh air and exercise, and Austen seems to wholeheartedly approve of their "healthy, glowing faces"[8]. This practical use of the surrounding countryside seems to indicate that they, and by association Mr Knightly, are not 'above' the outdoors as Emma seems to consider herself, perhaps as a result of her father's excessive concerns about health and safety. Emma is perhaps too aware of the rules and expectations of society, and too little in contact with nature. She knows she would normally be expected to be romantically attached to her governess's stepson, Frank Churchill, has but little

[5] P. 270, Austen, *Emma*
[6] p. 235, Austen, *Pride and Prejudice,* Penguin Classics, London, 2003
[7] P. 33, Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
[8] P. 85, Austen, *Emma*

insight into her own feelings, changing her mind as to whether or not she was ever in love with him, eventually deciding "her own attachment had subsided into a mere nothing"[9]. She does not even realise her love for Mr Knightley "until now she was threatened with his loss"[10]. The gypsies who try to rob Harriet of her purse could be considered to be at the opposite end of this spectrum; *too* aware of their own feelings and desires and not enough confined by society's rules (though probably by no fault of their own). Mr Knightley is perhaps to be seen as standing in the desirable middle ground – not as snobbish as Emma, not bending to expectations she and Mrs Weston had about his being romantically attached to Jane Fairfax, never wavering from what he himself feels nor deviating from moral or social standards.

Another example of the parallel between a character's self-knowledge and attitude towards nature is Mrs Elton. While she considers herself "an *addition* to the society of Highbury"[11], Emma is not alone in thinking her "absolutely insufferable"[12]. She shares an (albeit exaggerated) trait of Emma's – that of wanting to spend time in contact with nature because of the romantic image it projects, without actually enjoying it. This is illustrated at the picnic at Donwell Abbey. "Delightful to gather [strawberries] for one's self – the only way to enjoy them!" she begins, before declaring "inferior to cherries – tired to death – could bear it no longer,"[13] and going to sit in the shade.

Emma does not use the outdoors to project a romantic image of herself, but rather she imagines that the matches she attempts to make are triggered by an idealised view of nature. The outdoors serves as a setting for Emma's romantic flights of fancy when she tries to make a match for Harriet. After meeting Mr Elton while walking back from a

[9] p. 237, Austen, *Emma*
[10] p. 324, Austen, *Emma*
[11] p. 232, Austen, *Emma*
[12] p. 210, Austen, *Emma*
[13] p. 271, Austen, *Emma*

visit to a "poor sick family"[14] on a charitable endeavour, she decides that "to meet in a charitable scheme [...] will bring a great increase of love"[15]. She then tries to leave the two alone together as they walk home by pretending to break her shoelace, perhaps hoping that the beauty of the countryside and the comparative solitude it affords might bring her friends' feelings into the open. This association Emma makes between romance and the outdoors is developed by her first painting Harriet pictured under a tree on "a warm day in summer"[16], hoping to awaken yet more romantic feelings in Mr Elton. Her final and perhaps most delirious fantasy involves the second love affair she erroneously attributes to Harriet – Frank Churchill. When she learns that he rescued her friend from the band of gypsies in a woodland road, she seemingly recreates the scenario in her head as a scene from a romantic novel, and is persuaded that a situation like that could not arise without "suggesting certain ideas" of attraction. The narrator notes here that Emma is an "imaginist" with a "groundwork of anticipation"[17], foreshadowing Emma's gross mistake. It should be noted that Emma seems to want to use outdoor settings to create romance, but ignores the feelings aroused in Harriet by Mr Martin's more thoughtful and practical gestures, such as when he "went three miles round to bring [Harriet] some walnuts"[18]. One could infer that Austen is using Emma's attitude towards the outdoors to criticise her self-conscious romanticism, as none of her whimsical outdoor scenarios unfold as she wanted them to.

What I consider the turning point of the book takes place at a picnic at Box Hill, when Emma insults her lifelong friend Miss Bates. Confused about Frank Churchill's flirtation at the picnic and "less happy than she had expected"[19], she cruelly says that

[14] p. 65, Austen, *Emma*
[15] p. 69, Austen, *Emma*
[16] p. 38, Austen, *Emma*
[17] p. 252, Austen, *Emma*
[18] p. 22, Austen, *Emma*
[19] p. 278, Austen, *Emma*

Miss Bates may have trouble participating in a game of Frank's invention because she "will be limited as to number" and only allowed to say "three dull things"[20]. This to a woman whom "no one named without good will,"[21] and in the company of Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates' niece. Perhaps, having been limited to drawing rooms and dinner parties, the freeing, more liberal atmosphere of the picnic combined with the flush of "being flattered"[22] by Frank's attentions cause her to lose her usual manner. It seems to be the break in routine that provokes her outburst. It is hard to imagine her being so tactless and mean in her sitting room in Hartfield or dining at Randalls. The fact that the Eltons, who usually impose their seniority on Emma implicitly, almost openly insult Emma's intelligence is another sign that the freedom of the outdoors seems to bring out usually suppressed thoughts and actions. When everyone in the group is asked (by Frank) to tell Emma what they are thinking, Mrs Elton exclaims, "*I* should not have thought myself privileged to enquire. Though, perhaps as the *Chaperon* of the party–", and Mr Elton replies "Quite unheard of – but some ladies say any thing. Everybody knows what is due to *you*."[23]

After the picnic, Mr Knighley reproaches Emma, who begins to feel remorse and realise the damage she has done to those around her. When she learns of Frank and Jane Fairfax being engaged, and upon finding Harriet not put out at all, she realises that Mr Knightley is in fact the mysterious man she desires. The latter leaves for London, and Emma begins to believe he might be consulting his brother about marrying her friend. As Emma realises the depth of her feelings for Mr Knightley and begins to feel hopeless about "the loss of Donwell" and her impending "ruined happiness", the weather mirrors

[20] p. 280, Austen, *Emma*
[21] P. 17, Austen, *Emma*
[22] P. 278, Austen, *Emma*
[23] p. 279, Austen, *Emma*

her mood. "A cold stormy rain set in", and "the wind was despoiling"[24] Hartfield's shrubs and trees. "The weather continued much the same all the following morning; and the same loneliness, and the same melancholy seemed to reign at Hartfield", but in the afternoon, just before Mr Knightley's return, "the clouds were carried off; the sun appeared; it was summer again"[25]. It seems unlike Austen to use a device as common and transparent as the pathetic fallacy of nature following Emma's mood, and it could be argued that this is a touch of irony designed to undermine the full emotional impact of Emma's blossoming relationship with Mr Darcy. I will discuss this point later in this essay.

The openness that the outdoors brings is vital to Emma's growth not only at Box Hill, but also on Mr Knightley's return, as he attempts to broach the subject of his feelings for her as they take a turn together in Hartfield's gardens. Believing his hints allude to Harriet, she tries to avert having what she imagines will be a painful conversation, and is about to step back inside. "You are going in, I suppose?" Mr Knightley asks, but Emma changes her mind, regretting the fact that this seems to hurt him. "I should like to take another turn. [...] I stopped you ungraciously just now, Mr Knightley, and, I am afraid, gave you pain. But if you wish to speak to me openly as friend [...] you may command me."[26] I believe it is significant that her decision to put Mr Knightley's wishes above her own is illustrated by her decision to stay outside, where they may "speak openly". Had she returned inside Mr Knightley, mortified by her apparent disinterest, would probably never have disturbed her with unwanted attentions again, and Emma's happiness might have been ruined. It is in fact a selfless act, however small, that allows for the novel's happy ending.

[24] p. 319, Austen, *Emma*
[25] p. 320, Austen, *Emma*
[26] p. 324, Austen, *Emma*

A strong contrast exists between two of the book's main relationships, accentuated by the settings in which they develop. Emma gradually comes to realise her feelings for Mr Knightley, a rational kind of attachment, based on longstanding affection, and formed in the peaceful countryside, whereas Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill fall passionately in love at the seaside, in Weymouth, which I shall argue has morally dubious connotations.

Emma's final decision in regard to Mr Knightley is a logical, comfortable one. He is a friend of her father's, and depicted as having not a bad bone in his body. He is far more reliable than Frank Churchill, and, significantly for this argument, has a comfortable estate close to Hartfield. Lizzie Bennet, in *Pride and* Prejudice, follows a similar pattern. The chemistry between herself and Mr Wickham came to nothing, and in time she comes to realise her feelings for a man much more suited to her; the intelligent and honourable Mr Darcy. Austen seems to believe her heroines should choose lovers with their heads as much as with their hearts. Indeed, Mr Bennet chose a wife based on compatibility of temperament, not of mind, and his marriage came to consist largely of him locked in his study. The romance with Mr Knightley is only introduced in the last quarter of the book, suggesting that it is not the focus of the book, which seems instead to be Emma's evolution from a shallow, manipulative young woman to the repenting, reformed Mrs Knightley of the last page. How long her resolutions will last is debatable, and, I believe, exactly what Austen wants the reader to ponder over. The romance is sprung on the reader so quickly that there is no time to connect with the couple emotionally. This last part of the book sees Emma at her most becoming, modestly fearing rejection when she realises her feelings for Mr Knightley, and almost sacrificing her own happiness for her father's wellbeing when he becomes "so miserable, they were almost hopeless."[27] At their wedding there is "little finery", much

[27] P. 365, Austen, *Emma*

to Mrs Elton's disgust. They seem to represent unassuming, thoughtful country morals, and all Emma's personality seems to have faded away into a courteous, upright Mrs Knightly. As if to make sure that we don't see the novel's end as a typical happy ending to a love story, there is an absurd plot device in the last page. "Mrs Weston's poultry house was robbed of all her turkeys,"[28] a comic and startling intrusion of the outdoors just before the novel ends with the happy couple's union. This robbery is the reason Mr Woodhouse warms to the idea of having Mr Knightley close by in Hartfield. Austen could no doubt have explained Mr Woodhouse's acceptance of the engagement in some less peculiar or comical manner, so mentioning turkey theft in the closing paragraphs of the novel could be interpreted as an attempt to block a purely emotional response, and perhaps provoke readers into thinking critically about Emma's relationship with Mr Knightley.

The novel's secondary love story is much less proper and correct. As Emma puts it, "[Jane Fairfax's] affection must have overpowered her judgement." Though Jane is generally considered to have "steadiness of character and good judgement"[29], her secret engagement to Frank is deemed deeply reprehensible, and perhaps not as rational as Emma's attachment to Mr Knightley. Referring to her son-in-law Frank, the disappointed Mrs Weston notes, "I thought I knew him."[30] Emma, horrified that Frank had flirted with her and was not destined for Harriet, declares the secrecy has been nothing but "hyprocrisy and deceit[,] espionage and treachery"[31]. The seaside setting is portrayed as morally ambiguous, composed of "the idlest haunts of the kingdom"[32], as Mr Knightley puts it. Young holiday makers migrated to towns like Bristol and Weymouth, often un-chaperoned and free to meet with whomever they liked. For Jane

[28] P. 366, Austen, *Emma*
[29] P. 303, Austen, *Emma*
[30] P. 299, Austen, *Emma*
[31] P. 302, Austen, *Emma*
[32] P. 164, Austen, *Emma*

to form not just a sentimental attachment, but an engagement, she must have been remarkably free to see Frank on her own, as neither the Dixons nor the Campbells were aware of anything suspicious. Though Emma thinks only of her father when she gets engaged, Jane and Frank are quite inconsiderate of their families in keeping such a big secret, though one could perhaps say that Frank spared his sickly aunt the distress of hearing of an engagement she would surely have objected to. In hindsight, it also seems Frank was less than honest with Mr Weston, claiming he could not visit; that he "could not command his own time"[33]. When he finally does come, his visit suspiciously coincides with his fiancée's. At Box Hill, Emma reflects that the comment "Mr Frank Churchill and Miss Emma Woodhouse flirted together excessively"[34] would not be an unfair one, showing a cruel streak in Frank as Jane was of the party. The fact that Frank is, by the end of the novel, the least likeable character Emma meets is perhaps not unrelated to the fact that he is an outsider, and his conduct has not been formed in accordance with Highbury's moral standards.

What Susannah Fullerton calls "seduction at the seaside"[35] is a recurring theme in Austen's novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia Bennet enters into a potentially disastrous engagement with Mr Wickham, humiliating her family and putting them into financial difficulty. Lizzie, one of the more sensible characters in the novel, had warned her father about the dangers of sending Lydia to Brighton alone, warning that she will soon "be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous,"[36] if allowed to go with only her friend Mrs Forster, but to no avail. The seaside seems to intensify the feelings of the young men and women who are so often confined to drawing rooms. *Persuasion*'s heroine Anne feels the same rush of feelings as Lydia and

[33] P. 92, Austen, *Emma*
[34] P. 278, Austen, *Emma*
[35] http://www.jasa.net.au/seaside/Seduction.htm
[36] P. 223, Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane, "praising the morning [and] glorying in the sea", and her companions "were all wild to see Lyme"[37]. This can lead to chaos, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, but Anne's tired looks are revived by the bracing sea air, "the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion,"[38] which leads to her reunion with her suitor, Wentworth. Anne, however, is comparatively old, at 27, and thus perhaps immune to the seaside fever which leads Austen's younger characters astray.

The passionate nature of Frank and Jane's seaside engagement follows through into the rest of their relationship. When in Highbury, Jane worries Mrs Elton and Mrs Weston by walking to the post office in the rain to collect a letter, presumably from Frank. "You sad girl, how could you do such a thing?"[39] cries Mrs Elton, and starts to think of preventive measures should the idea ever cross Jane's head again. For a young woman of Jane's situation and temperament, it is an unusual decision, but the excessive protests from Mrs Elton make the tale of Jane's passion seem self-aware and ironic. Austen's heroines are passionate in a reserved and proper manner, and the most dangerous or dramatic thing Jane does is to risk catching a cold on a short walk. As mentioned before, this is comparable to Elizabeth Bennet's three-mile morning walk through the mud to see her sister. Jane's motive is presumably a secret love letter, and though they share a certain concern for their loved ones and fearlessness of the elements, Jane's walk may not necessarily indicate the same love of nature that inspires Lizzie not to take a carriage or any other means of transport, instead showing an intense wish to read the letter as soon as possible.

[37] P. 93, Austen, *Persuasion*, The Penguin English Library, Middlesex, 1978
[38] P. 185, Austen, *Persuasion*
[39] P. 222, Austen, *Emma*

**Conclusion**

Though the large majority of Austen's novels take place inside the homes of the upper-middle class gentry, nature is always close, and of great significance. The outdoors serves as a moral touchstone by which to judge characters – those with negative or fanciful attitudes towards the countryside are generally unpleasant characters, and the most down-to-earth and honest characters tend to have a healthy, practical view of the land around Highbury. Contrasting the countryside with the seaside helps to characterise the main relationships between Frank and Jane, and Emma and Mr Knightley. Frank's engagement, formed at the seaside, is shrouded in secrecy and deceit, and his behaviour throughout the book complies with the traditional debauchery of seaside resorts, whereas Emma's very appropriate engagement to Mr Knightley is formed without scandal and with the utmost consideration for her family. The settings of these two love stories highlight Austen's appreciation of well-mannered, unpretentious country-dwelling people, and her disapproval of the decadence of seaside towns where young men and women roam unchecked, as well as those inhabitants of the countryside who seem frightened of the outdoors, such as Emma's valetudinarian father. The outdoors seems to allow characters to somehow heal, or grow into something more than they once were, seeing their feelings more clearly and behaving with more moral integrity, honesty as well as more naturally.

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