

Oedipal Inclinations In Jane Austen's Character Emma Woodhouse: A Freudian Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines Jane Austen's character 'Emma Woodhouse' in her novel Emma (published 1815), and argues that the titular character suffers from 'Oedipus Complex', which renders her emotions to abstain from romantic attachments or marriage throughout her youth. For this investigation, Sigmund Freud's concept of Oedipus ('Electra', in case of women) Complex is employed which argues that if a girl's unconscious desire for the opposite-sex parent remains unresolved, the 'phallic-stage fixation' arises, which therefore keeps her fixated on her father as her 'libidinal object'. Freud says: "It is a distinct echo of this phase of development that the first serious love... of the girl [is] for an older man equipped with authority" (Freud 74). By utilizing this concept, this study contends that Emma Woodhouse subconsciously desires none other but her father as her 'libidinal object', which keeps her from loving or marrying anybody else. It is only through 'repression' of these desires into her unconscious, which springs forth from cultural bounds, that she chooses someone quite her elder, a father-figure, as her life partner in the conclusion of the novel.

Keywords: Electra Complex; libidinal object; unconscious; repression; Emma

Introduction

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This paper argues that Jane Austen's protagonist, Emma Woodhouse, in her novel Emma (published 1815) suffers from what Freudian psychoanalysis calls the 'Electra Complex'. Due to this disorder in Emma's psyche, she finds herself fixated within the phallic-stage, which consequently renders her desiring her father, Mr. Woodhouse, as her 'libidinal object' at a subconscious level. This research employs Sigmund Freud's concept of the 'Electra Complex', which asserts that if a girl rests much longer in her phallic-stage without outward enforced repression, she is likely to develop libidinal feelings for her father (Freud 74). Freud, in his Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory (1905) states: "It is a distinct echo of this phase of development that the first serious love... of the girl [is] for an older man equipped with authority" (74). This occurs due to her 'superego', as molded by her sociocultural barriers, which forces her to repress this socio-culturally incestuous desire, thus deviating that desire to a subsequent individual i.e., an older man who can be a substitute for her father. Therefore, we observe Emma Woodhouse opting Mr. George Knightly, a man almost twice her age, as her life partner at the end of the novel to subconsciously reenact her relationship with her father.

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Kafi Fatima explores this Freudian psychological condition and states that: “Freud considers the parents as the first window for the child to realize the opposite gender and believes that children, who ... [are raised] by a single-parent [remain] unable to lucidly guide their psychological growth, will not overcome phallic stage because of their unfulfilled desires leading to serious complexes that may affect their adulthood” (Fatima 15). Such children tend to develop Oedipus complex, or in a girl’s case, Electra complex (owing to Oedipus’s counterpart in the Grecian mythological tradition).

Through Jane Austen’s exposition of Emma’s character in the first chapter of the novel, it is eloquently suggested that Emma is practically the mistress of her house. Jane Austen mentions that Emma is the younger of the two daughters, and greatly loved by her father (Austen 1). She is so much in control of her house affairs that she seems to be the mistress of her house, and of her father’s, by extension. Her elder sister being already married made her the sole contender of such a position in the household. Moreover, we learn through the narrative that her mother had passed away long ago, so much so that she could hardly reminisce her love and/or memory. And, although her mother had soon been replaced by Miss Taylor (later Mrs. Weston) as governess, yet Emma, being the sole candidate inside the family, had occupied the place of her mother (Austen, Chapter 1, p. 5). An infant girl, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, just like a boy, also desires her mother as her primary ‘libidinal object’. However, during her growth, she realizes that she has no phallus, and hates her mother for not giving her one. So, she is required to shift from her mother as her libidinal object to her father. If she does not possess a phallus, she will possess her father as a replacement (Klages 72). With her mother long gone, which creates space for Emma’s desires to be nurtured under a single-parent i.e., her father, she seems far removed from any possibility of the Freudian ‘penis envy’ (Klages 70-72) that could resolve her Electra complex as she grows older. Emma’s mother’s early death, therefore, proves to be a catalyst in her ‘phallic-stage fixation’. Her elder sister Isabella, who could potentially stand as hindrance next to her mother in symbolic possession of her father, had also vacated space for her, following her marriage. Consequently, Emma practically possesses everything in Hartfield (Mr. Woodhouse’s estate) including her father. Moreover, Miss Taylor would have seemed to have filled the mother’s stead as Emma’s governess (though, an acting-mother). But, upon Miss Taylor’s wedding to Mr. Weston, her father only has Emma as a companion. After the wedding, when Mr. Woodhouse expresses his unhappiness at Miss Taylor’s departure, Emma curiously states: “...you would not have had Miss Taylor live with us forever... when she might have a house of her own?” (Austen, Chapter 1, p.7). This instance illustrates Emma’s unconscious desire to revel in the removal of Miss Taylor, a mother-figure, although she consciously seems admiring the latter throughout the novel due to their fervent attachment. Freud claims that unconscious slips of tongue spring out whenever there’s a specific emotion associated with it seems approachable. Specifically, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (published 1901) Freud expansively elucidates these ‘slips’ in his work. Specifically, in this book, Freud explores how unconscious thoughts, desires, and emotions can manifest in everyday actions, including slips of the tongue. He states: “In my experience, I have never known a slip of the tongue to be simply and solely ‘an accidental and meaningless disarrangement of speech sounds.’ It is always significant and it never fails to reveal the speaker’s hidden thoughts.” (Freud 58, Chapter VI: Mistakes in Speech). We observe Emma even taking credit for Miss Taylor’s wedding, as she claims being a source of encouragement to Mr. Weston in his regular visits to Hartfield (Austen, Chapter 1, p. 4-6). This behavior of Emma’s is peculiar in the capacity that she subconsciously desires Miss Taylor to become Mrs. Weston and, consequently, leave Hartfield. Therefore, her unconscious desire for her father compels her to create situations, albeit subconsciously, through which she could exclusively stay in company of her father. In Chapter 9 of the novel, we witness a similar situation. Furthermore, upon his elder daughter’s visit with her husband, Mr. Woodhouse insists that Isabella should stay a bit longer at Hartfield. But Emma quite discernibly resists her

father's request by stating that Isabella could never stay away from her home for so long and implies contempt for such a thought from her father (Austen, Chapter 9, p.63).

Further in the narrative, Mr. Woodhouse articulates his displeasure upon Emma's match-making recreation, for he says in distress that everything that she schemes comes true. In reply, Emma avows: "I promise you to make none for myself, papa; but I must, indeed, for other people." (Austen, Chapter 1, p.10). Lois Tyson, in her book *Critical Theory Today*, remarks that the 'unconscious' is a reservoir for such guilty desires, passions and memories that a person least desires to recall, under fear of being overwhelmed by them (Tyson 12). Emma always seems to feel disgust at the idea of her marriage to anyone. When talking to Harriot upon this subject, we observe her utter unwillingness to either marry or being in love with someone. Yet, marriage and match-making for others are prime engagements for Emma. She is often seen busy in observing any two individuals, even if they were recently acquainted, imagining their romance and subsequent matrimony in her mind. This is what Emma does in order to escape her unconscious desires by projecting them on to others. In Freudian terminology, these are known as 'defense mechanisms.' There are several defense mechanisms that the unconscious part of our mind employs in order to keep the desires of the unconscious, or 'Id' as Freud calls it, confined within the unconscious. The 'Superego' (superimposed sociocultural self) wrestles with the 'Id' in order to mold it as appropriate according to our social norms and dynamics. The 'Ego', or the embedded 'self' plays referee between them to maintain balance in our personality. However, sometimes the 'Id' begins to overpower the 'Superego', and this is where defense mechanisms come into play. In Emma's case, her unconscious applies 'projection' as defense. Lois Tyson describes 'projection' as an act through which a person subconsciously ascribes their fear, or a guilty desire, to another person and utterly denies the fact that they possess these symptoms themselves (15).

Emma's 'projection' is manifest in her match-making, which her unconscious enacts in order to sooth herself from her "guilty desire[s]" (15). Since beginning, we observe Emma picking on people, juxtaposing them in order to find them fit for one another. Nonetheless, we may observe that she does not make their matches per say; rather, she projects upon them her desire to achieve her own intimacy and gratification, which is the end product of every matrimonial union. When Harriot asks her advice upon Robert Martin's proposal, Emma seems preoccupied with the notion of Robert Martin being too young: "Only four-and-twenty. That is too young to settle" (Austen, Chapter 4, p.23). Emma goes on and compares Mr. Weston to Harriot's Mr. Martin, upon which Harriot replies that Mr. Weston is old, and must be in his late forties or early fifties. Emma seems excited by this remark, and affirms that the older a man is, the better his manners ought to be, and so, is more desirable (Austen, Chapter 4, p.26). Emma's foremost motive in this conversation is her own projection upon Harriot, in order to justify her own desire for an old man (essentially, her father). Even though Mr. Knightley scolds her for deviating Harriot's mind from Robert Martin, whom Mr. Knightley himself approved as a perfect match, Emma stays stubborn over what she did as right. She even states that Mr. Knightley is wrong in his judgement to reassure her stance. Moreover, she seems to be aware of Harriot's uncertain lineage as much as anyone in her town, yet she instructs Harriot that she should never doubt being a gentleman's daughter, and that she should stay firm on this belief (Austen, Chapter 4, p.24). All this debate between Emma and Harriot emphatically suggests Emma's projection upon Harriot in moderating her own desire for her father who is both an old man, and belongs to gentry.

As Harriot stays firm upon her argument of a man as old as Mr. Weston, being a bit too old, Emma comes up with another option. This time it is Mr. Elton, the town's vicar. While he is not as old as Emma's standards, yet she deems him to be old enough for Harriot, who is only seventeen years old. That Mr. Elton is not old enough for Emma is evident in the incident where Mr. Elton proposes to Emma instead of Harriot. Here we observe Emma as signifying disgust with the thought of Mr. Elton proposing to her. She expresses her wild contempt in

saying that she did not even think such a thing could be possible, and considers the proposal to be an abomination (Austen, Chapter 15, pp.100-101). She claims before Harriot that she does not desire fortune, nor any sort of employment. She goes on to further state: "I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's" (Austen, Chapter 10, p.67). These words provide a vivid picture of Emma's subconscious desire to be the mistress of none but, in essence, her father's. Mr. Elton, who is described by almost everyone as being a "fine young man", is not at all appealing to Emma, not because he is a vicar and therefore in want of high status, but because he is a "fine 'young' man", which further reiterates that he is not old enough for Emma to reenact her relationship she so desires with a paternal figure.

Next of Emma's 'projections' is seen in her anticipation and interest with the thought of Miss Jane Fairfax being involved with Mr. Dixon in a romantic relationship. Emma seems captivated with the thought of this transgression, as Mr. Dixon is a married man. She feels ecstatic upon thinking that Jane Fairfax had seduced a married man, and thinks of this act as a guilty desire in disguise of love (Austen, Chapter 20, p.126). It is evident that Emma is thrilled with the thought of Jane Fairfax stealing the anticipated love from a husband's wife. The art of seduction is reminiscent of Freud's concept of a daughter's hate for her mother in supplanting her from the scene entirely, consequently acquiring possession of her father's love. The idea of a married couple, and one of them being snatched away as a 'libidinal object' is nothing more than another instance of 'projection' for Emma; a projection of her subconscious desire for her father; father being perceived as a married individual within the sociocultural (Superego) context. Kafi Fatima in her dissertation sheds light on this premise as follows: "An erotic attachment is thus, activated by the unconscious to discharge a desire for the father [a man], and accordingly little girls feel jealous of the same sex [i.e., women] ..." (Fatima 16). Essentially, what Emma commits to here not only refers to her hatred for a mother-figure but, also, to a hatred for all individuals belonging to her own sex. She takes delight in the fact that Jane Fairfax will somehow supplant Mrs. Dixon from the picture and take her place as Mr. Dixon's spouse. Therefore, this scene does not only suggest incestuous motives of Emma, as projected by her upon Miss Fairfax, but a personalized catharsis too that she receives by a mere thought of such an action. Moreover, when Miss Bates recollects the scene, where Mr. Dixon, Mrs. Dixon and Jane Fairfax are on a boat, and a sudden storm breaks through, Emma seems most amused. The way Miss Bates describes Mr. Dixon's gallantry in getting hold of Jane Fairfax, who was about to fall into the water, not only compliments Mr. Dixon's manliness for Emma, but also the fact that he chose Jane Fairfax over his wife. The transgression of a married man seduced by another woman to such an extent that he is captivated by another woman makes Emma vicariously satiate her own desires.

The introduction of Mr. Frank Churchill is also noteworthy in the series of Emma's projections. Frank Churchill, before his arrival, is boasted about by almost everyone among Emma's acquaintances to be a very good looking "young man", with remarkable physicality, a high-spirited individual, possessing a countenance just like Mr. Weston's (Austen, Chapter 23, p.143). Emma seems to be rapt by his description, especially by the "his countenance", which at least in words had great resemblance with a paternal figure. Upon his arrival, we observed that Emma quickly feels attached to him. This attachment is misunderstood by many (most notably by Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightley) as rather an infatuation. Nevertheless, in reality she is not at all attached to Frank Churchill as the following account of events unravels: Frank Churchill belongs to the gentry; possesses a large sum of money through his uncle and aunt (Mr. and Mrs. Churchill); and qualifies in every aspect of appearance that any woman could wish for. Yet, Mr. Churchill possesses everything that any woman wishes, but not everything that Emma wishes. He is not old enough to qualify as an 'object' of Emma's desires. He is, in fact, just "four-and-twenty" years of age. Emma finds herself unable see the reflection

of her real desired object, her father. It is made evident by the narrator of the novel that Mr. Woodhouse had not married in his young age. This instance emphasizes that he would most likely have been a middle-aged man. And Emma, who was “youngest of the two daughters” would have had observed him properly well after his prime. Therefore, we witness her as simply unable to attach herself to anyone so young of age. This also can be supported by the fact that Mr. Robert Martin, Mr. Elton, and Mr. Frank Churchill are sequentially introduced by Jane Austen in the novel positively described as “young” men. Moreover, their age is mentioned specifically, in order to emphasize its importance to Emma.

Apart from being “young”, the character of Frank Churchill also lacks another integral quality that Emma desires: he is not a “man equipped with authority”. As it is evident from the course of events, Frank Churchill is always somehow bound by the will of his aunt, Mrs. Churchill. He displays lack of judgement, specifically when he is supposed to be with his father at such an auspicious occasion and yet, somehow, he is bound by his aunt and does not leave her side to be with his father. Mr. Knightley expresses his extreme displeasure on Frank Churchill’s indecisiveness. Emma seems to agree to those concerns herself. In addition, Frank Churchill also shows signs of being ruled by wealth. He does not disclose his secret engagement with Jane Fairfax, humiliates her along with Emma, and facsimiles his feelings as though Emma is his object of desire. His slavishness towards wealth is remarked by Emma herself, when she finds out about him and Jane Fairfax’s engagement. She understands how due to the fear of his aunt’s disapproval of the attachment, as well as of being consequently disinherited, makes Emma weigh and reconsider him upon her standards.

Curiously however, the only man who prevails over the rest of the three potential suitors happens to be Mr. George Knightley. His characteristics of being “an older man equipped with authority” (Freud 74) is described most vividly by Jane Austen. Again, these characteristics seem crucial for Emma. He is described by the narrator as an older man in his late thirties possessing great sensibility, who not only is an “old friend” of the Woodhouses, but also Isabella’s husband’s “older” brother (Austen, Chapter 1, p.8). It is noteworthy here that Mr. Knightley’s description carries an underlying but substantial meaning that is indispensable to affirm the argument at hand. If we pay attention to the words in which he is described in a peculiar fashion, the suggested meaning comes to surface. Firstly, Mr. Knightley’s age is significant, as he is in his late thirties; secondly, he is a “very old” friend (the word “old” here emphasizes itself in contrast to the other three candidates described in the novel as being “young” men); thirdly, he is the “elder brother” of “Isabella’s husband, which is so emphatic in suggesting his, so to say, ‘oldness’, as he is an “elder brother” to Emma’s elder sister. This insistent contrast in the narrative lays ground for the fulfilment of Emma’s desires for her father in the person of Mr. Knightley.

Through the course of the novel, Mr. Knightley appears to be the sole person who is evidently seen to point out Emma’s faults and misdoings, as well as the only person to chide her about them (Austen, Chapter 1, p. 9), which symbolizes him being an authoritative, paternal figure for Emma. Specifically, when Emma abhors Harriot’s infatuation with Robert Martin, she contrasts his personality to that of Mr. Knightley’s and states that one should not ever commit such a mistake of comparing a man such as Mr. Martin to Mr. Knightly, whom she upholds as a perfect gentleman (Austen, Chapter 4, p.26). Emma’s praise implies authority and conviction in Mr. Knightley’s personality. The “gentleman” that Mr. Knightley appears to Emma shows her reflections of a father-figure in him. And, as Emma desires to be with no one but her father forever, Mr. Knightley seems a perfect candidate for her apart from being the mistress of her father, which is not possible in the sociocultural context. In other words, Emma is unable to fulfill her libidinal incestuous desires within the confines of the Superego.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Knightley’s recollections of Emma’s childhood inculcate the former in the latter’s mind as a father-figure. At first, we see Emma perceiving Mr. Knightley her a friend. But the age difference does not allow that. It is in Chapter 12 that

we observe Mr. Knightley's words inducing the thought of him as a 'father' to Emma. As Mr. John Knightley and Isabella have come to visit Hartfield, Emma is with her youngest niece in a room, holding her in her arms, when Mr. Knightley joins them. The conversation, along with the situation, creates a sense of father-daughter bonding, which is of course, oblivious to both of them consciously. Mr. Knightly tells Emma that if she would not have been controlled so much by her whims in her assessment of men and women, they might think alike. He even expresses his superiority to her by mentioning that he is sixteen years older than her, which makes him more prone to good judgement than Emma. She seems to agree a great deal with Mr. Knightly at this point as she feels that she needs someone at her side who is sixteen years older than her after all (Chapter 12, pp.77).

In this scene, the most significant action is Emma holding her niece (an infant) in her arms. Mr. Knightley talks to her in a way that makes Emma feel as a child to him. He makes her feel as if there is a father-daughter discussion going on. Emma's confession in saying that they might have disagreements if she is on the wrong, which shows her being submissive to him as a 'daughter' is towards her father. And then we see Mr. Knightley informing her that he has the experience that she lacks, again suggesting their age difference. He again states that he was sixteen years old when Emma was born. One cannot ignore the fact that while both of them are amidst this conversation, Emma is holding the baby in her arms during the whole time, and both should be looking time and again at the baby. This situation cannot be ignored as one of the significant causes in shaping Emma's thoughts about Mr. Knightley being a father-figure to her. His emphasis on being "sixteen years" older than her, as well as his authority as illustrated in his conversation, make him a superior not only to Emma, but also to all the other men that Emma could have considered as potential candidates in marrying her.

The unconscious gradually shapes Emma's thoughts in formulating Mr. Knightley as her new 'libidinal object'. However, she does not realize this consciously still. Her superego, still prevails over her as authority in directing her thoughts. It is not until Mrs. Weston, unintentionally, makes her realize that Mr. Knightley should never marry, Mrs. Weston unfolds of what she claims to be one of her "discoveries" to Emma. She is under the impression that Mr. Knightley could not have arranged his carriage (which he does not often use for himself) for the Jane Fairfax, unless he is in love with her. Upon hearing such a thing, Emma seems extremely annoyed. She states her disgust for such a thought even from Mrs. Weston, whom she had always as a confidante. She obstinately maintains that Mr. Knightly should not marry. Not only to Jane Fairfax, but never. The reason for this that she apparently provides is that Henry (Isabella's son) must inherit Donwell Abbey entirely. She even seems to scold Mrs. Weston upon the thought of disinheriting "little Henry" from his birthright, and that how could she even let such a horrendous thought enter her mind (Chapter 26, pp.169).

Once again Emma goes through the same trauma. She was once deprived of having her father due to her mother, and following her death by Mrs. Weston (then Miss Taylor) as an obstruction in possessing her desired 'object'. Now, it is Jane, who apparently is on the verge of snatching her 'father-like' figure, and thereby keeping her from reenacting her libidinal desire with him. She goes to the extent of using her nephew "Henry" as a defense, and projects her own guilt upon Mrs. Weston. As the concluding chapters reveal, she is not at all worried about "little Henry" being cut off from his family estate. If it were the case, she would have never married Mr. Knightley after all. Her repulsion in the thought of Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax's probable marriage is in fact Emma's restoration of the competition with the same sex, generated by her 'oedipal' desire. Tyson states that if a girl remains in competition with her mother for her father's possession, long after her death, she will most likely be attracted to those men, who are married or have girlfriends, partners, etc. so that their attachment to other women might give her a chance of reliving the same competition that she experienced with her mother, with a high chance of winning this time (Tyson 14). So, Emma is also under the impression that Jane Fairfax could potentially be Mr. Knightley's 'object', and therefore, she

expresses her concerns using Henry's name. She illustrates through her behavior that she could go to any extent in supplanting any woman that comes in her way: "Mr. Knightley must not marry!" Mr. Knightley who is a father and a husband to Emma (Weinsheimer 199).

In the concluding chapters, when Emma and Mr. Knightley had decided to marry, Emma's 'libido' once again takes hold of her. She seems to be having second thoughts about this marriage: "Marriage, in fact, would not do for her. It would be incompatible with what she owed to her father, and with what she felt for him. Nothing should separate her from her father." (Chapter 48, pp.314). Due to this reason, she cannot leave Hartfield and is flattered by Mr. Knightley's offer of him coming to Hartfield, instead of her moving to Donwell Abbey. As Mary Klages states: "[Freud] ends up saying that women stay in the Oedipus Complex forever, since nothing ends it for them, and that they always pretty much desire their fathers. Somehow, they learn to become non-incestuous, but they usually end up marrying men who are like their fathers" (Klages 73). Emma "becomes" non-incestuous by marrying Mr. Knightley, but her 'libidinal' drive never discontinues. Her "Electra Complex", therefore, serves as a basis in the development of the entire story, and is chiefly marked in her disposition throughout the novel.

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