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# “Abandoned and Natural Children” in Jane Austen’s *Emma*

Asako Yoshino

*Emma* was written by Jane Austen and published in 1815. In this novel, Austen wrote human relationships which can have tension. The stage of Emma is fixed in Highbury and its surroundings. In Highbury, people have various kinds of human relationships.

There is a movement of social positions in *Emma*, and the stage of it is not stable. Raymond Williams explains the times of the Austen’s novel.

Yet it must be clear that it is no single, settled society, it is an active, complicated, sharply speculative process. It is indeed that most difficult world to describe, in English social history: an acquisitive, high bourgeois society at the point of its most evident interlocking with an agrarian capitalism that is itself mediated by inherited titles and by the making of family names. (115)

There are various kinds of people in Highbury. In this society, people try to make their life better by working. Mr. Elton has “first entered not two years ago, to make his way as he could, without any alliances but in trade, or any thing to recommend him to notice” (136), and tries to get into higher society through the marriage with Emma. Mr. Martin works hard and makes his home comfortable. Mr. Knightley always works, and tries to improve his farm. In addition, there are upstarts like the Coles. On the other contrary, Miss and Mrs. Bates suffer

from a financial downfall. In the society which has much social movement, the status of Hartfield is not stable.

The stage of *Emma* is fixed, but we know there is an outside world of Highbury, because there are names of other places, such as London, Richmond, Bath and Weymouth. Jane, Frank, and Mrs. Elton come from outside Highbury. They bring tension into the human relationships, and they have power to change the social hierarchy in Highbury. Furthermore, they have the ability to change the status of Hartfield, because the change of human relationships in Highbury influences the status of Hartfield. Hartfield has possibility to lose its first position by the change of human relationships.

### 1. Crisis Caused by Frank

Frank was an abandoned child. His father gave up raising him, because he was busy with his work and social activity, so he sent him to Enscombe, as Mr. John Knightley indicates with some reproach.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Mr. Weston did not plan ahead for Frank's inheritance. He did not intend to give his property to his son. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that Frank was abandoned by his real father.

As an abandoned child, Frank inclines to behave like God and tries to control other people. Emma may be also called an abandoned child, because Miss Taylor, who had taken the role of Emma's mother, left Hartfield. Her father does not play the role of father, and yet she has to take care of him. Emma also tries to control other people like Frank. Frank and Emma have something in common. Both of them are abandoned children and have less mobility because of the restriction from their families. The two characters can be applied to Marthe Robert's definition of "abandoned child" type, that is they have a tendency to create their own worlds which are separate from

reality (50). They try to control other people without considering the reality. Frank and Emma have the power to change the lives of other people, because they are in a high social position. Frank has the influence to change Jane's life. Jane owes her future to Frank, and what Jane can do is wait passively until she gets a response from him regarding marriage. Emma also has the ability to change Harriet's life, and she gives Harriet a chance to change her life. However, Frank and Emma are resisted by Jane and Harriet, who passively suffer from their domination.

There are also differences between Frank and Emma. As Marvin Mudrick insists, Frank has the experience of having had the relationship with the difficult Mrs. Churchill (120). From an early age, he had to make an effort to be liked by his foster parents, especially Mrs. Churchill, a difficult old lady, because there was always a risk of being expelled from that place of the Churchills. Frank must support himself to become the inheritor, because Frank is "more than being tacitly brought up as his uncle's heir" (17). The promise of inheritance is uncertain. He has been in more severe situation relating to inheritance than Emma, so he understands people better and has a tendency to control them more tactfully than Emma. He is able to do this without letting others learn of his secret engagement with Jane Fairfax.

Frank accelerates Emma's imagination. He offers the materials which supply the suspicious relationship between Jane and Mr. Dixon. Frank and Emma are complicit, because they share the same imagination and develop the same vision. As abandoned children, they tend to control other people. Both of them like secrets. Keeping a secret makes them feel that they are in a superior position, though Frank controls Emma in fact.

Emma has an opportunity to judge Frank objectively before he comes to Highbury, because his long absence means that Frank does not pay enough respect to Mrs. Weston, so Emma says "I shall not be satisfied, unless he comes" (123). However, she stops thinking objectively and starts to believe that he is an ideal partner for her. She also can doubt when he goes to London, it is only for a haircut, but she makes effort not to dislike him. She does not think reasonably with evidence, and regards him as she likes. As Susan Morgan indicates, "Emma will see what she wants even if it is not here, and will not see what she does not want even if it is" (330). She manages with some effort to maintain a good opinion of Frank. Emma convinced herself by thinking about him favorably.

Frank brings crisis to Emma by making use of Emma's imagination and controlling her without being noticed. Frank also brings crisis into Hartfield estate by ignoring the social order, because he does not pay enough attention to Mr. Woodhouse as people do who are admitted to enter there when he planned the party at the Crown. Moreover, Frank says badly about Mr. Perry, whom Mr. Woodhouse has complete confidence in, though he is not permitted to talk like that in Hartfield. Jonathan Grossman explains that "Their (Frank and Mr. Woodhouse) disagreement reveals both Frank's flirtatious selfishness and his lack of candor, but the argument itself represents his primary transgression: he is rude to Mr. Woodhouse" (149).<sup>2</sup> Frank does not consider the authority of the master of Hartfield.

In Box Hill, Frank gives the definitive crisis to Emma. Frank's flirtation and flattering towards her dampens other people. Frank copes with Emma as a queen of the group, but almost everyone does not regard her as such and does not pay enough respect to Emma on Box Hill. Emma's cruel and

thoughtless attitude in the party provoked by Frank becomes a cause of losing her value to the group. Emma is confronted with a crisis by Frank, and she notices that her position is vulnerable. The group consists of members, who are allowed to enter Hartfield, so all of them must pay respect to Emma, as the mistress of the place, but some do not. The order which was maintained until this time collapses in Box Hill. The party loses the power balance. Emma faces this reality without any help on Box Hill.

Emma's dignity is determined by the human relationships, which are invisible, so her dignity is unstable. The dignity of Hartfield is not stable either, and there is possibility that it falls down. In contrast to Donwell estate, in which they can see the process of making property, they cannot see the process of making property in Hartfield, because the property depends on "the other sources" (136). Moreover, Emma's precarious position comes from her position as an unmarried woman, as Butler explains "Emma is vulnerable, and one reason is that her stake is not deep. Her very claim to social precedence is so precarious, while she (Emma) remains a spinster, that she is superseded by Mrs. Elton" (273). Compared to Mrs. Elton, who has confidence by marriage and acknowledges herself "*Chaperon* of the party" (370), Emma's position becomes weak when she is with her.

The greatest danger Frank brings to Emma is that not only Emma, but also other people notice that she has possibility to lose her social position. In Box Hill, Emma is not able to restrain Mrs. Elton, who aims at Emma's position in Highbury, like Mr. Knightley did when they planned exploring Donwell, and she cannot show her dignity as a lady of Hartfield. Moreover, Emma loses Mr. Knightley's support by her flirtation with Frank. He becomes the cause of Mr. Knightley's

separation from her. Frank is the one who ruins Emma's dignity and confidence, and brings the crisis to the Hartfield.

## 2. Crisis Caused by Harriet

Harriet Smith is a natural daughter of somebody unknown. In this novel, she is the only person whose roots are unknown, so she occupies a particular position. There is one crucial reason why Emma likes Harriet. Emma likes her, because she is a natural daughter and has no clear root, so Emma can decide what kind of class Harriet belongs to.

The character evaluations of Harriet differ greatly between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Malcolm Bradbury explains, "Harriet's illegitimacy means that she can be judged very differently by different people; and each of them associates her with a rank that indicates the nature of their judgment" (163).<sup>3</sup> Mr. Knightley receives the fact as it is. He does not think that Harriet's father might be gentleman, or she might belong to his and Emma's society. Harriet has a blank in her life, because nobody knows her birth, but he does not dare to fill Harriet's blank. He regards Harriet's blankness with aversion. On the other hand, Emma takes advantage of Harriet's ambiguous personal history and creates a story. She thinks that Harriet should be a gentleman's daughter and should belong to a higher rank than Mr. Martin.

Emma invites Harriet to Hartfield because Miss Taylor is absent. She was Emma's best partner, and she has "fallen little short of a mother in affection" (5). Emma already lost her real mother, so Miss Taylor took the role of her mother. However, she got married and left Hartfield. Emma, who was left in Hartfield, has emptiness in her mind. The fact Miss Taylor left Hartfield is a crucial change for Emma. After Emma lost Miss Taylor, she faces the situation that her spirit is in danger.

Emma is an abandoned child in Hartfield substantially since Miss Taylor left her there. After she left her, there is no one to take care of her. Mr. Woodhouse is her real father, but he does not play the role of father. On the contrary, Emma takes care of him. When she goes to the party alone, she has to find a guest for him, like a mother finds a baby-sitter for her own child. Their relationship is quite upside-down. He cannot think rationally, so he just deplors the change of his environment by Miss Taylor's marriage. On the other hand, Emma is able to understand its merit objectively, so she must accept the fact and celebrate it. Emma is the one her father relies on completely. After two people left Hartfield, Mr. Woodhouse does not wish to be left. He completely relies on his daughter. Emma would be able to live without Mr. Woodhouse, but he would not be able to live without her. Therefore she is not allowed to leave Hartfield.

Emma does not need to marry because Mr. Woodhouse has no son. He can leave Emma abundant property, and she can accept a comfortable life and place in Hartfield. However, there are some restrictions. She has to take care of her father, and she is not to be allowed to leave. This is a kind of barter treat between Emma and her father.

For Emma, Harriet is a welcome newcomer, who can fill in Emma's emptiness by imagination. However, Harriet is not a person with whom she can heal herself, because she cannot be a substitute for Miss Taylor. It is Emma herself, who fills her own emptiness by making use of Harriet through imagination. Harriet cannot be Emma's partner of intelligent activity, but makes Emma, who is confined and has "intellectual solitude," imagine. Being a natural daughter, Harriet is an ideal object for Emma to imagine her birth and future. Emma's birth is too clear to imagine, and her outlook is already decided. She will



continue to be the mistress of Hartfield, and take care of her father. She has a limitation of her choice for her future, but Harriet's future possibility is infinite, and she can go wherever she wants. Therefore, it is a pleasant work for Emma to fill in Harriet's blank with imagination, and constructs Harriet's future instead of Emma's own.

Emma, a substantial abandoned child, creates her favorite story in a natural daughter, Harriet. Emma sets Harriet in her story, because she believes that Harriet must be a gentleman's daughter even though there is no trustworthy proof. At the same time, Harriet is helped in creating her own identity by Emma, who has authority in Highbury. It is advantageous for Harriet to be admitted as a gentleman's daughter, and have a permission to enter Hartfield. She might raise her status and get into high society. She can rearrange her life when she accepts Emma's story, and enter a new world — that is Hartfield. The two women are very closely interdependent. While Emma enjoys creating the story, Harriet enjoys hearing and believing the story that Emma makes.

Marthe Robert indicates that novelists can be divided into two types, which are Oedipal, the "natural child" type, and the "abandoned child" type. A man of the "natural child" type tries to test his own ability, and discover a new world. On the other hand, a man of the "abandoned child" type tries to create "another world" (50-53).<sup>4</sup> If we define a novelist as a creator of fiction or story,<sup>5</sup> Emma and Harriet's role can be applied to each type. Emma is a substantial abandoned child who creates a story and another world, but she cannot be a protagonist in the same story, because Hartfield has tradition and her own birth is too clear to rearrange her life. Then she fixes Harriet as a protagonist in her story as her substitute. She behaves like God<sup>6</sup> and has Harriet under her control. Harriet, who is

“natural child” type, notices the fact that she can be a protagonist of Emma’s story when she is inoculated the story in her head by Emma, and believes it. Harriet tries to go to another real world with the story she believes in.

Mr. Knightley resists Emma’s attitude, and gives a warning. He is cautious about the fact that Harriet is “a natural daughter of nobody” (61) and of her lack of definite social origins.

“After receiving a very indifferent education she is left in Mrs. Goddard’s hands to shift as she can; — to move, in short, in Mrs. Goddard’s line, to have Mrs. Goddard’s acquaintance. Her friends evidently thought this good enough for her; and it was good enough. She desired nothing better herself. Till you chose to turn her into a friend, her mind had no distaste for her own set, nor any ambition beyond it. (62) (Underline mine)

As Mr. Knightley says, it is Emma who places Harriet in a higher position than that she should have been in. Emma gives Harriet her “line,” instead of “Mrs. Goddard’s line.” Then, Harriet values herself more and more highly. In “Mrs. Goddard’s line,” there are some who want to marry Mr. Martin willingly, as Mrs. Nash, who is a teacher at Mrs. Goddard’s boarding school, says that “either of the Coxes would be very glad to marry him” (233). However, Harriet changes the “line,” and goes to Emma’s “line.” She changes the ideal person for marriage from Mr. Martin to Mr. Elton, who is admitted to Hartfield and admired by people who are in “Mrs. Goddard’s line.” Harriet can know “very real gentlemen” in Hartfield. She changes her human relationship and her life by being in Emma’s “line.”

It is a comfortable story for Harriet, so she believes it with delight. Therefore, Harriet says “How nicely you talk; I love to

hear you" (76), when she is told by Emma that Mr. Elton admires her. Emma constructs the story, and prepares Mr. Elton as Harriet's partner. Her scheme of marriage between Harriet and Mr. Elton is mainly prepared for Harriet, because she is the main character in Emma's story. Therefore, if they get married, Harriet takes advantage of the marriage greater than Mr. Elton. Emma regards Mr. Elton as a character in her story.

Harriet is a person who can enter Hartfield more deeply than other. The evidence for this fact is that she has her own room in Hartfield. Even Mr. Knightley, who is always welcomed, does not have his own room. Harriet goes in and out both Hartfield and boarding school, and has rooms in both Emma's "line" and "Mrs. Goddard's line." Then she moves toward Hartfield more and more. Then, she sends her own thing to Hartfield instead to Mr. Goddard's boarding school. She is not merely a visitor, but she is almost an inhabitant of Hartfield. She can enter two different worlds and compare them. Then she chooses Hartfield as the place which gives her more benefit. She changes her stage from Mrs. Goddard's boarding school to Hartfield.

Harriet, a natural daughter, finds the most desirable person to marry in Hartfield. She changes it from Mr. Martin to Mr. Elton, and later, she chooses Mr. Knightley after was settled there. If Emma had not invited Harriet to Hartfield and encouraged her, she would not have hoped to marry a gentleman of socially higher rank.

When Harriet chooses Mr. Knightley as her ideal partner, she becomes a threat to Emma and Hartfield. If Harriet became the mistress, Emma would lose her authority as the first lady of Highbury. Emma's social position might change by the emergence of the mistress of Donwell. The social position of Hartfield, to which other people pay large respect, also might

change. That means the position of Emma and Hartfield in Highbury is not stable. There are upstarts whose property overtook Hartfield like the Coles, and Mrs. Elton who aims at Emma's position. Hartfield and Emma's authority are supported by Mr. Knightley and Donwell, but she loses their support if Harriet is married to Mr. Knightley. Harriet brings a crisis to Emma, and Hartfield was put in serious crisis as well.

### 3. Relief from Crisis by Mr. Knightley

Emma is helped by Mr. Knightley to keep her authority at Highbury. The authority and dignity of Emma and Hartfield can be raised by admission from Mr. Knightley and good relationship with Donwell. Mr. Knightley is the only person, who always watches Emma, and gives her advice without flattery. His character and the authority of Donwell make it possible to act as he likes.

It is only Mr. Knightley who tells Emma to be cautious about the relationship with Harriet. He can judge Harriet's right social position, and considers that Emma moves her from that with misjudgment. Different from Emma, who likes the blank to fill in, he dislikes ambiguity. He does not perceive Harriet's blank. His sense of alarm at ambiguity makes him keep away even from Harriet.

Mr. Knightley keeps his eye on the reckless attempt of abandoned children. On that account, he deserves the role of father. He is alert to the dangerous of Frank's egoism even before he actually arrives.

“What! At three-and-twenty to be the king of his company — the greatman — the practiced politician, who is to read every body's character, and make every body's talents conduce to the display of his own superiority; to be dispensing his flatteries around, that he may make all appear like

fools compared with himself!" (150)

He is the only person who can notice the secret relationship between Frank and Jane. As Duckworth indicates, Frank behaves selfishly when Mr. Knightley is absent, so he can manipulate other people in Mrs. Bates's house, but he cannot hide his secret when Mr. Knightley is present in Hartfield (173). Mr. Knightley notices that Frank has a secret. He also prevents Emma's thoughtlessness as an abandoned child. He does not take kindly to the relationship between Emma, a substantial abandoned child, and Harriet, a natural child. He volunteers for the role of father for Emma, but she does not accept it, and tries to remain an abandoned child. He once gave up supporting Emma when he noticed there was a close relationship between Emma and Frank, who is another abandoned child, in Box Hill. However, they patch up a strained relationship when Emma admitted his role as a father. On the other hand, Mr. Knightley notices the possibility of the natural child's ambition, and he judges Harriet's right position, that is "Goddard's line." From the beginning, he knows the house which is suitable for Harriet. Moreover, he helps Harriet to have her own house, because it is him who sends Mr. Martin to London, and makes him meet her. He helps them to restore their relationship which is once broken.

Donwell is a place Emma respects, with its owner due to its influence and authority. The prosperity of Donwell is maintained by working people. As a master of Donwell, Mr. Knightley always tries to improve it, and he has a supporter, Mr. Martin. The authority of Hartfield is strengthened by the relationship of Donwell which is ahead of the times. Hartfield faces the crisis, but it can be saved by Mr. Knightley, who decides to live in Hartfield after the marriage with Emma.

In Hartfield, he will be able to take the role of father whom

Mr. Woodhouse and Emma depend on. He can protect the place, using the practical experience of the master of Donwell. Emma insists on the importance of Mr. Knightley's existence for her father.

— Did not he love Mr. Knightley very much? — He would not deny that he did, she was sure. — Whom did he ever want to consult on business but Mr. Knightley? — Who was so useful to him, who so ready to write his letters, who so glad to assist him? — Who so cheerful, so attentive, so attached to him? (466)

The only answer is Mr. Knightley. He becomes Emma's husband, though he can also take the role of father for Emma. Mrs. Weston, who had taken the role of Emma's mother, admits him to become Emma's partner as a replacement for her, so she considers that "he deserved even her dearest Emma" (467). He can protect Emma from faults which she might commit in the future, because he can restrain her imagination. Moreover, he can give her effective advice effectively in Hartfield. Before Emma faced a crisis in Box Hill, she could not accept Mr. Knightley's advice obediently, but after she admitted he was right, she is then able to accept his advice easily, and she can accept his role as father easily. He can help Emma spiritually.

Mr. Knightley supports Hartfield by dealing with practical business. He brings the rightness which he defines, and dominates Hartfield spiritually. He can take care of Mr. Woodhouse. He helps Emma by giving advice, and protects her from faults. Mr. Knightley, who can embody fatherhood, saves Hartfield from crisis.

## NOTE

1. I call him Mr. John Knightley, because it is difficult to distinguish him from his older brother. On the other hand, I call his older brother, who is a master of Donwell, Mr. Knightley, because many critics call him so.
2. Grossman also explains that Mr. Woodhouse acts "as a seismograph for tremors," when he resisters Frank's disrespect.
3. In addition, Bradbury explains that Harriet's uncertain background becomes a "dramatic delaying device." Harriet's uncertainty also affects the structure of the novel.
4. I used these pages for explanation, because Roberts clearly defines the contrast of the two types. In addition, Robert explains the two methods of creating novels. One is the method of "natural child," with which a man accuses the world and creates realistic novel. The other is the method of "abandoned child," with which a man escapes from the reality and creates novels. In other parts, Roberts also describes the characters in the novels with two types of orphans. See, for example, p.103.
5. Joseph Litvak indicates "Emma is, admittedly, acting like a bad novelist," in "Reading Characters: Self, Society, and Text in Emma" *Jane Austen's Emma*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1987) p.127. It is considerable to think that Emma is a novelist, and creator of a fiction.
6. Marvin Madrick uses the word "God" to insist Emma's tendency in "Irony as Form: Emma," *Jane Austen: Emma*, ed. David Lodge (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 107. He explains, "Emma is moved to play God, but without tenderness or social caution (or the artist's awareness) she falls into every conceivable mistake and misjudgment."

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