Candidate 3

Title of Dissertation	Word count (Max 3000)
READING WELL: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF SEEING CLEARLY IN JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND EMMA, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO NARRATIVE VOICE, CHARACTERISATION AND STRUCTURE	a'640

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Reading well: a critical analysis of the theme of seeing clearly in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice and Emma, with particular reference to narrative voice, characterisation and structure.

Word Count: 2640

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W. H. Auden once said of Jane Austen "You could not shock her more than she shocks me"[1] and her novels do shock the reader as they are centrally concerned with human folly and blindness. Moreover they reveal that often it is not only the characters who must acquire better judgement, but also the reader. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* both focus on the female protagonists' painful and uncertain journey to acquiring self-knowledge and true love – the latter being largely dependent on the former. Both heroines are sympathetic characters but they have the very human capacity for damaging their own lives and those of others. They are complex, moral beings and therefore accountable to themselves, to authorial judgements and to the reader who is often quick either to judge their actions (as many judge Emma) or follows the heroine's misjudgements (as many do with Elizabeth). First time readers of Jane Austen's novels experience the odd sensation of experiencing the same faulty vision as the protagonists: blind to the narrative complexity and colluding in Elizabeth and Emma's blindness, we too must develop greater moral clarity by the end of the novels. A second or third reading encourages better reflection on the behaviour and choices of the characters and we start to see through their misjudgements and revel knowingly in the ironies of Austen's narrative techniques. The role of the omniscient narrator in the novels is central to the eventual ability of the reader both to sympathise with and judge the heroines. By seeing plot events sometimes through their eyes, readers too can be blind to complex emotional truths, and yet by the end of the novels readers come to understand Emma and Lizzie: our knowledge of their characters becomes much richer, as a result of having shared their inner sufferings, their longings and anxieties.

Elizabeth Bennett is a complex character. She faces an economically uncertain future: the property of her family will be passed on to the next male heir: a financial shadow hangs over their lives and subsequently it is implied that though money should not be the main reason for marriage, it is an important feature if a marriage is to be satisfactory. This explains both Mr Bennet's withdrawal from the demands of family life into the security of his library and Mrs Bennett's agitated fussing to provide husbands for her many daughters. Elizabeth, however, doesn't allow herself to be attracted to marriage purely on the basis of finance. Darcy, who could provide her with everything, evokes only feelings of dislike at their first encounter: *"He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world."*[2] And so compelling is Elizabeth's lively, intelligent view of things, as filtered through the shifting, ironic narrative voice, that the reader is likely to follow her misconceptions.

Emma Woodhouse is a stark contrast to Elizabeth. Her future is secure and she intends *"never to marry.*[3]*"* Her economic and social freedoms take the form of misjudged match-making attempts, which in the process involve herself in a sequence of errors which structure the novel: each attempt at controlling other people's lives leads to her confronting her own moral blindness and resolving never to make the same mistake again. That this sequence of error and resolution repeats itself until the final, almost disastrous climax, constitutes the central irony of the novel.

Austen's narrative technique of using an omniscient narrator allows us to see events sometimes through the heroine's eyes but also round and beyond. At these moments the narration swings from a character's subjective viewpoint (Elizabeth comments on Mr Wickham *"Whatever he said, was said well; and whatever he did, done gracefully"*[4]) to more ironic authorial direction (as is done in the

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[1] Peter Ackroyd, Albion, The Origins of the English Imagination, 2005, pg. 378
[2] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 9
[3] Jane Austen, *Emma*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 22
[4] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 80/81

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opening line of the novel "*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife*"[5]) to rarer examples of direct authorial judgement (Austen seems to impose judgement on Mr Collins "*the greatest part of his life been spent under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father*"[6]).This shifting, sometimes direct, sometimes ironic narrative voice invites the unwary reader to share the misconceptions of the characters. The trick lies in the fact the various narrative perspectives can be almost indistinguishable, creating a belief that the protagonist "knows it all" and that her judgement, just like the narrator's, is reliable.

Yet Elizabeth is full of flaws. From the very beginning she misses the undeniable attraction between herself and Mr Darcy. She swiftly becomes the object of his affection, but Elizabeth stays "*perfectly unaware*"[7] because she is caught up in a web of prejudices and sees Darcy merely as a man who "*made himself agreeable nowhere*."[8] When she registers his attention she perceives it as anything but admiration and love, but rather that "*there was something about her more wrong and reprehensible, according to his ideas of right, than in any other person present*."[9] This complete failure to see clearly extends to the first time reader; immersed in Elizabeth's attractive mind, our reading is shaped by her prejudices. Only subsequent readings make clear the undeniable sexual charge between them, an attraction arising from shared intelligence that no other character can match, but all this is disguised by Elizabeth's fervent criticisms of Mr Darcy's character. The only voice of reason, the only foreshadowing of a possible mistake is Jane Bennet. However, her more positive view of Mr Darcy is undermined by the narrative voice: Jane is too kind, too keen to see the best in people, and we prefer to see Elizabeth as the voice of reason. Only the author knows the depths and lengths of her character - coincidentally, the only member of the Bennett family not to be prejudiced against Darcy bears her name. All the clues are there, of course, in the narration itself, but if we miss them, then we collude in Elizabeth's faults; as she progresses through her trials, the reader too must undergo their own moral education.

Emma Woodhouse also falls victim to her own delusion. The narrative voice in Emma lulls the reader into colluding in the heroine's sequence of mistakes. John Mullan argues that this free indirect style is used to "*render the protagonist's deluded view of her little world, so the reader should always know to be suspicious of what he or she is being told*."[10] However, he admits that the narrator follows the heroine so closely that the "*real motives can easily be missed by the reader, as they have been Emma herself*."[11] Her mistaken judgments are always followed up by realisations as to her lack of awareness and resolutions to do better. Thus she proves mistaken in her assumption the clergyman Mr Elton is in love with Harriet Smith, when in reality his object of affection is Emma. When faced with his declaration of love, the harsh truth that Mr Elton has "*never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence*"[12], Emma realises the error of her ways. She admits her folly, "*It was foolish, it was wrong*"[13] and resolves "*to do such things no more*"[14]. Yet her match-

[5] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 1
[6] Ibid. pg. 67
[7] Ibid. pg. 21
[8] Ibid. pg. 21
[9] Ibid. pg. 47
[10] John Mullan, Noticing and not noticing, London Review of Books, 20 November 2014, pg. 28
[11] Ibid. pg. 28
[12] Jane Austen, *Emma*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 126
[13] Ibid. pg. 132
[14] Ibid. pg. 133

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making does not stop and Emma goes on to make more such mistakes; she falsely believes that Frank is "*undoubtedly very much in love*"[15] with her and later on, mistakenly believes that Herriot's affections lie with Frank Churchill as well. There is a pattern in her behaviour, yet the reader, so immersed in Emma's mind, is seduced into seeing things as she does.

However, a closer read provides the reader with all the clues needed, yet we can be too blind to see them. Where the narrative voice of the novel leads the reader to follow the footsteps of the main protagonists, the characterisation within the novels seems to offer clues to misjudgements. In Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Benet is described as having a "*lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous.*"[16] Here, her character is defined through straightforward authorial direction, and the reader accepts this positive first impression. On a first read that is what Jane Austen provides the reader with: first impressions that are often flawed or misleading. It is easy to miss the authorial irony when Lizzie's judgements are not always shared by the narrator. For example, whilst defending Wickham to Jane, she claims that "*there was truth in his looks*"[17]. In this emphasis on his exterior appearance lies doubt: her judgement can be flawed, as first impressions often prove to be wrong. Yet clues like these are easily missed by the first-time reader who is so deeply immersed in Elizabeth's mind that they fail to see her credulous belief in Wickham's honesty. Elizabeth is guided by first impressions and indulges in them, as is the reader of the novel. In Elizabeth's words: "*How humiliating is this discovery?*"[18]

Emma too leaves first-time readers colluding with her vanity, despite the narrative clues as to her partial sight. She is described as "*handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence.*"[19] These first impressions may seem straightforwardly positive, but careful analysis unravels a more ambivalent reading of her identity: the verb "*seemed*" casts a shadow on her characterisation; the word "*handsome*" feels uneasy applied to a young girl and together with the adjectives "*clever and rich*" implies that these are surface qualities only. Her interior or moral landscapes are pointedly not commented on and once again, readers of Jane Austen must realise the folly in believing first impressions. Authorial comments, such as Emma believing she, unlike Harriet would have "*discovered the truth*"[20] about who her parents were, give clues to Emma's blindness to the real truths. Ironically, she believes she could discover truth, yet completely misjudges the truth of her own heart.

Her greatest misjudgement, her worst error is her unthinking cruelty to Miss Bates. During their picnic at Box Hill, she insults Miss Bates, we see a "*breakdown in Emma's usually unfailing sense of decorum.*"[21] When Frank asks for some entertainment for Emma, he gives them a choice:

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[15] Jane Austen, *Emma*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 257
[16] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 10
[17] Ibid. pg. 83
[18] Ibid. pg. 202
[19] Jane Austen, *Emma*, Collins Classics, 2010, pg. 3
[20] Ibid. pg. 24
[21] "Emma at Box Hill: A very Questionable day of Pleasure", http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol25no1/rogers.html, accessed on 23/2/2016

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"one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated- or two things moderately clever- or three things very dull indeed."[22]

Miss Bates responds to the request, with her own joke, insinuating that whatever she says will be dull indeed, yet Emma finds herself insulting Miss Bates even more, when she exclaims that she should limit herself to *"only three at once."*[23] Susan Rogers argues that Emma's behaviour comes from her fear of becoming Miss Bates- *"in attacking Miss Bates Emma rejects this possible future for herself"*[24]. She fears the fate of most females, dependence, and with the two witnesses of her most recent misjudgements sitting beside her, Frank and Harriet, she fears she will become a Miss Bates and she becomes cruel and unkind. Austen highlights the gravity of Emma's mistake by offering no authorial comment at all, but by dramatizing Knightley's reaction. He loves her and so is shocked by her insensitivity, asking *"how could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age and situation?"*[25] In one of the novel's most emotionally intense sections, she must confront her moral blindness and face the possibility she has irrevocably jeopardised his regard for her and acquired his *"ill opinion."*[26] At last Emma realises her mistake, seeing clearly the damage done to Miss Bates and their wider community of friends, an acknowledgement that leaves her *"depressed"*[27] as never before.

This structural pattern of realisation and resolution continues until the truth of her own heart surfaces and she finally understands she is in love with Mr Knightley. When they meet in her garden in Hartfield, she misreads all the clues and absurdly assumes *"he wanted to speak to her of his attachment to Harriet."*[28] But Knightley also misreads Emma. Due to her ill-judged flirtation, he had believed Frank Churchill was the object of Emma's affection until she finally admits to *"blindness."*[29] They both seem confused, unable to acknowledge their mutual affection. Only when he openly admits his love for her, does her vision clear. It turns out that her greatest mistake was not to understand her own heart and it is this blindness that creates the emotional climax of the novel. The moment of realisation is an extraordinary passage:

"Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn...It darted through her with the speed of an arrow, that Mr Knightley must marry no-one but herself"[30]

The authorial voice reports her eyes were *"withdrawn"* as Emma is finally looking inward to her own heart, no longer blind to the truths it hides. Imagery of the arrow carries connotations of swiftness, hitting a target and it symbolises a point of clearance of Emma's vision. This newfound sight enables her to see how to react and behave and it helps her understand her own hear, but it also enables the reader to move past Emma's mistaken view of reality and grasp the novel's true message.

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[22] Jane Austen, *Emma*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 360
[23] Ibid. pg. 360
[24] "Emma at Box Hill: A very Questionable day of Pleasure", http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol25no1/rogers.html, accessed on 23/2/2016
[25] Jane Austen, *Emma*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 364
[26] Ibid. pg. 366
[27] Ibid. pg. 366
[28] Ibid. pg. 412
[29] Ibid. pg. 413
[30] Ibid. pg. 396

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Characters both reveal and betray themselves in what they unwittingly say. Marian Cox argues that "Jane *Austen relies on speech to deliver her characters to the reader*"[31]and this becomes the crucial clue in clarifying Elizabeth's misconstructions. From the beginning, Elizabeth is presented as sure of her own opinions. Jane questions Lizzie's thoughts on Mr Darcy and Wickham, but Elizabeth is quick to reassure her that "*one knows exactly what to think*"[32]. Her overconfidence in her own judgements gives readers all the necessary clues to doubt Lizzie, yet we are willingly guided by her view until it proves false.

But amidst misconceptions, when faced with the truth comes harsh realisation. When Mr Darcy proposes, telling Elizabeth "*I love you*"[33], the reader is just as shocked as she is. Despite all the hints, our astonishment matches her own-"*beyond expression*"[34]. Yet nothing matches the astonishment of reading his letter: every fault he was charged with is proven wrong, and Elizabeth's prejudices are discharged. His letter is presented to the reader as it is to Elizabeth: we are not offered her opinion of it but the letter itself and for the first time we judge for ourselves. The letter delivers the needed truth, and thus delivers clarity. Elizabeth, like the reader, grows "*absolutely ashamed of herself*"[35]. She realises she has been "*blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd*"[36] and the language used in the novel, reflects her newfound clarity. She realises her folly in believing in that which "*appeared*"[37] to be so and she is "*struck*"[38] with realisation that her judgement of Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham was mistaken. In Darcy's second confession of love, his "*affections and wishes are unchanged*"[39] but Elizabeth's have changed. She now admits her love for Darcy and just as in *Emma*, pride and prejudice is replaced by clarity, followed by the reader's realisation that all the clues were there, but just missed.

In conclusion, both *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* follow characters who need to undergo a moral education out of their blindness before they can achieve happiness. But it is not the conventional happy ending that matters. The deeper satisfaction for the reader lies in the *process* of reading. Austen challenges us to become better readers, to read between the lines, to look beneath the surface, to see round and through characters' own often mistaken perspectives. Novels like these invite the reader to understand more clearly not just human folly, but the act of reading itself, where the power of words is that they mean far more than they say. Readers of Jane Austen undergo an educational journey, and the moral vision of these novels is as much about that reflection on experience as it is about Emma learning to control herself rather than other people, or Lizzie learning to question her initial mistaken judgements.

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[31] Marian Cox, The linguistic moral universe of Jane Austen, April 2009, pg.21
[32] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, pg. 83
[33] Ibid. pg. 183
[34] Ibid. pg. 183
[35] Ibid. pg. 202
[36] Ibid. pg. 202
[37] Ibid. pg. 202
[38] Ibid. pg. 202
[39] Ibid. pg. 352

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