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# Perspectives of Self-Actualization in Austen's *Emma*

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Maria Civitello

Perspectives of Self-Actualization in Austen's *Emma*

Professor Arnell

Happiness and the Nineteenth-Century Novel

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Early in Jane Austen's *Emma*<sup>1</sup>, the novel's hero Mr. Knightley declares that "there is an anxiety, a curiosity in what one feels for Emma. I wonder what will become of her!" (Austen 40). This statement, which foreshadows Emma's quest for moral and spiritual fulfilment, lays the foundation for the novel's chronicling of Emma's search for personal meaning. Given that the titular heroine finds "perfect happiness" at the end of the novel, readers may well wonder how Emma's moral journey is related to her happiness (Austen 484).

Like Austen, psychologists have long wrestled with the question of how such personal fulfilment can lead to happiness. In the twentieth century, the prominent American psychologist Abraham Maslow developed his famous Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow). Conceptualized as a pyramid, the Hierarchy of Needs provides a framework for considering people's physical and psychological needs, as well as the relative importance of those needs (Maslow). At the top of the hierarchy lies self-actualization, a state of personal fulfilment, which Maslow believed was only achieved by a select few individuals (Maslow).

In later life, Maslow conceived of a sixth level of personal development, self-transcendence, in which "the individual's own needs are put aside, to a great extent, in favor of service to others and to some higher force or cause conceived as being outside the personal self" (Koltko-Rivera 307). However, because Maslow set forth this idea privately rather than publicly, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is generally considered to include just the first five levels, ending with self-actualization (Koltko-Rivera 307-308).

In this paper, I hope to explore how Emma Woodhouse's quest to live a fulfilling life both aligns with and diverges from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I believe Austen shared

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<sup>1</sup> Austen, Jane. *The Oxford Illustrated Emma*. Edited by R. W. Chapman. Oxford UP, 1988.

Maslow's view that especially intelligent and morally upright individuals could attain a state of self-actualization. However, whereas Maslow conceived of self-actualization as a largely personal process, with self-transcendence as a later step achieved by some self-actualized individuals, Austen conceived of self-actualization and self-transcendence as inextricable. In Austen's view, individuals could only attain true personal fulfilment (self-actualization) by living a moral life in service to others (self-transcendence).

Austen views moral and psychological fulfilment within a community framework (Sullivan). Furthermore, in contrast to Maslow's secular ethic, Austen believed that, in order to achieve self-actualization, people had to embrace the Christian values of charity, humility, and appreciation for others. Emma's peers, particularly Mr. Knightley, make her development possible as they teach her how to live a virtuous life. Moreover, as Emma finds happiness in performing good works for her family and neighbors, the entire village of Highbury benefits from her kindness and intelligence.

Maslow's original Hierarchy of Needs includes five levels. At the most basic level, people need physical sustenance such as food, water, and oxygen (Maslow). Just above that level, people need safety and economic security (Maslow). At the middle level, Maslow believed that interpersonal relationships were crucial to people's psychological well-being (Maslow). On the fourth level, Maslow argued that people needed the "esteem," or the liking and respect, of others. Finally, Maslow believed that the fifth level of human needs was self-actualization, a concept originally proposed by Kurt Goldstein. Maslow described self-actualization as "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow). Such self-actualization, Maslow

believed, was a necessary step towards achieving self-transcendence, Maslow's little-known sixth level of human needs (Koltko-Rivera 306).

For Maslow, the process of self-actualization was a deeply personal one. He expressed an individualistic view of psychological fulfillment, writing that "the specific form that [the need for self-actualization] will take will of course vary greatly from person to person" (Maslow). Moreover, he believed that the process of self-actualization would often take a creative form, declaring that "in people who have any capacities for creation it will take this form" (Maslow). Thus, in Maslow's view, self-actualization is typically a process by which individuals achieve intellectual or creative fulfillment. Furthermore, the process of self-actualization is unique to every individual.

By contrast, Austen believed that self-actualization was an interpersonal process that led to moral and spiritual, as well as psychological, fulfillment. In Austen's view, individuals can achieve self-actualization only by learning from others and becoming a caring community member. Moreover, as a "thoroughly religious and devout" woman, her view of self-actualization is informed by a Christian ethic (Galperin 72). Austen's works demonstrate that the Christian virtues of charity, appreciation for others, and humility are key to the process of self-actualization, and this view permeates *Emma*.

Austen suggests that, in order to attain her own self-actualization, Emma must learn to recognize and celebrate the virtues in her peers so that she may emulate those characteristics. This process is vividly illustrated through Emma's relationship with Miss Bates, her longtime neighbor and family friend. Near the end of the novel, Emma, who had previously treated Miss Bates with condescension or disdain, learns to appreciate the virtues of kindness and forgiveness in Miss Bates. Armed with her newfound appreciation

for Miss Bates' noble traits, Emma strives to follow Miss Bates' example of treating others with warmth and generosity, a process which Austen suggests is key to her self-actualization.

In the last volume of the novel, Emma insults Miss Bates at the Box Hill party by suggesting that she is "dull" and overly talkative (Austen 370). After the party ends, Mr. Knightley severely chastises Emma for her behavior. Notably, he emphasizes Miss Bates' generous and forgiving nature in his rebuke, telling Emma, "I wish you could have heard how she talked of [you]-with what candour and generosity. I wish you could have heard her honoring your forbearance, in being able to pay her such attentions, as she was forever receiving from yourself and your father, when her society must be so irksome" (Austen 375). Mr. Knightley's praise of Miss Bates' "candour and generosity" lays the foundation for Emma's remorse and eagerness to make amends with Miss Bates.

Indeed, Mr. Knightley's emphasis on Miss Bates' kindness and forgiveness is all the more forceful because it is juxtaposed with his denunciation of Emma's behavior as "unfeeling...[and] insolent" (Austen 374). Most importantly, Emma is deeply affected by Mr. Knightley's criticism; the narrator tells us that "never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life," asking herself how she could have been "so cruel, so brutal, to Miss Bates!" (Austen 376). Thus, in the wake of the Box Hill party, Emma is forced to acknowledge a painful truth: whereas her own behavior was hurtful to an "old friend," Miss Bates has demonstrated praiseworthy virtue in the face of her insult (Austen 371).

With this in mind, Emma begins to appreciate Miss Bates as a kind and forgiving friend. For instance, Emma resolves to maintain "a regular, equal, kindly intercourse" with

Miss Bates (Austen 377). Significantly, the use of the word “equal” here suggests that Emma feels that she can learn from Miss Bates, marking a noticeable change from her previously “scornful...[and] ungracious” treatment of Miss Bates (Austen 377). In addition, Emma is touched by Miss Bates’ forgiveness towards her at this visit. When Miss Bates praises Emma as “always kind,” the narrator tells us that “there was no bearing such an ‘always,’ and to break through her dreadful gratitude,” Emma has to change the subject (Austen 380). At the end of their visit, Emma tells Miss Bates “everything that she could venture to say of the good wishes which she really felt,” reinforcing Emma’s respect for Miss Bates’ virtues.

Moreover, after learning to appreciate these virtues in Miss Bates, Emma amends her behavior, adopting similar traits of kindness and forgiveness. Miss Bates’ influence on Emma is especially notable in Emma’s change of heart towards Jane Fairfax after the Box Hill party. When Jane becomes ill, Emma, deeply concerned for her, invites her to Hartfield several times, but Jane, heartbroken over her split with Frank and jealous of Frank’s apparent affection for Emma, rejects her without any explanation. When Jane and Frank’s engagement is announced, Emma realizes that Jane rebuffed her offers out of jealousy; however, Emma is able to “disengage [herself] from the injustice and selfishness of angry feelings” to acknowledge “that Jane Fairfax would have neither elevation nor happiness beyond her desert” (403). Later in the story, Emma makes a point of befriending Jane, and when Jane attempts to apologize for her behavior, Emma tells her, “I feel all the apologies should be on my side. Let us forgive each other at once” (Austen 459). Thus, just as Miss Bates forgave Emma for her insult, Emma forgives Jane for her rejection of Emma’s friendship.

Through her relationship with Miss Bates, Austen shows that part of Emma's development consists of her learning to value and to emulate the positive traits in others. Emma learns to prize Miss Bates' kind and forgiving nature, and this, in turn, influences her behavior toward Jane Fairfax.

Another virtue on which Emma relies as she reaches self-actualization is her generous and charitable nature. Throughout the novel, Emma is praised for her generosity towards others. Moreover, as Emma's moral development continues over the course of the novel, this trait becomes more pronounced within her. Mary Elizabeth Tobin writes, "Austen asks the reader [of *Emma*] to judge Emma by her attitude toward poor women" (Tobin 418). As Emma journeys towards self-actualization, she learns to devote her energies towards helping others in concrete ways, exemplifying the virtues of generosity and charity.

Early in the novel, Emma visits a poor family to offer them financial and emotional support. The narrator praises Emma's charitable efforts in this scene, writing that "Emma was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse. She...entered into their troubles with ready sympathy, and always gave her assistance with as much intelligence as good-will" (Austen 86). This passage is perhaps most significant because it serves as an aside in a chapter (Volume 1, Chapter 10) which otherwise casts Emma in a very unfavorable light.

At the beginning of the chapter, Emma remarks to Harriet that "a single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid!" (Austen 85). Her remark reveals a harshly judgmental attitude towards impoverished spinsters, who were

“economically vulnerable and socially powerless” in the society in which Emma lived (Tobin 415). Moreover, after Emma pays her visit to the poor family, she spends the rest of the chapter scheming to allow Harriet and Mr. Elton, the supercilious man whom Emma believes to be in love with Harriet, to be alone together. Thus, Austen chooses to embed a scene in which we see Emma at her best in a chapter which shows her at her worst.

Austen’s choice allows her to juxtapose Emma’s laudable charitable giving with her less flattering traits, such as meddling in Harriet’s life and failing to have empathy for poor single women. This juxtaposition foreshadows the importance of generosity and charity to Emma’s ultimate self-actualization. By showing readers that Emma, while a flawed character, demonstrates remarkable competence in charitable endeavors, Austen suggests that Emma will ultimately find her niche in performing good works for others.

In line with this idea, Emma’s charitable activities increase as she moves closer to achieving self-actualization. For example, when Jane Fairfax is ill near the end of the novel, Emma feels the “warmest concern” for Jane and is “eager to discover some way of being useful” to her (Austen 390). She invites Jane to Hartfield, believing that “to give her quiet rational conversation, even for an hour or two, might do her good” (Austen 390). She also sends Jane “arrow-root of very superior quality...with a most friendly note” (Austen 391). While Jane declines these offers, Emma has “the consolation of knowing that her intentions were good, and... that could Mr. Knightley have been privy to all her attempts of assisting Jane Fairfax... he would not... have found anything to reprove” (Austen 391).

Finally, one of the virtues key to Emma’s self-actualization is humility. As Elaine Bander notes, Austen believes that “human perfection is achieved not through faultless behavior... but through a process of self-reflection and self-correction that all of Jane

Austen's novels valorize and all of her heroines exemplify" (Bander 161). Thus, in order to achieve self-actualization, Emma must develop humility so that she may recognize her flaws and work to correct them.

Examples of Emma's newly developed humility within the last part of the novel are myriad. After the Box Hill party, Karin Jackson notes, "Austen actually uses the Christian terms of 'contrition' and 'penitence'" to describe Emma's feelings, suggesting that Emma feels humbled on a spiritual level by her actions (Jackson). In addition, Emma "would not be ashamed of the appearance of the penitence, so justly and truly hers" (Austen 377-378). Reflecting on her attempts at matchmaking, she concludes that she had behaved with "insufferable vanity... [and] unpardonable arrogance" (Austen 412-413). Most significantly, when she realizes that she loves Mr. Knightley, she assumes that he cannot reciprocate her feelings.

Humility, in Austen's ethic, is key to self-actualization because it allows individuals to grow and change. Jackson writes that "Emma must experience... the Christian cycle of sin, repentance, redemption, and grace... in order to come into a state of grace, harmony, and right relationships" (Jackson). This view is evident, as Bander notes, in Austen's prayers: in one prayer, Austen writes, "Look with mercy on the sins which we have this day committed and in mercy make us feel them deeply, that our repentance may be sincere, & our resolution steadfast against the commission of such in future" (Bander 161). Moreover, Emma's journey encapsulates this ethic. For example, her "contrition" and "penitence" at hurting Miss Bates spur her to begin a "regular, equal, kindly intercourse" with Miss Bates (377-378).

Emma acknowledges the importance of humility to her self-actualization when, at the end of the novel, she wishes only that “the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future” (Austen 475). She also recognizes the importance of this virtue when she reflects with gratitude that Mr. Knightley, who was “one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them,” had demonstrated “an endeavour to improve her, and an anxiety for her doing right, which no other creature had at all shared” (Austen 11; 415).

Finally, the importance of humility to self-actualization is evident in Mr. Knightley’s change over the course of the novel. As Michele Larrow argues, Mr. Knightley must “see that his judgment is not perfect [and] humbly admit to his faults” in order to find “perfect happiness” with Emma (Larrow; Austen 484). For instance, when he proposes to Emma, he tells her, “I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it” (Austen 430). Wendy Jones writes that this statement reveals “a self-consciousness about his privilege that makes him worthy of Emma’s love” (Jones 151). He also energetically refutes Emma’s belief that he is more deserving of her than she is of him, telling her that they have “every right that equal worth can give, to be happy together” (Austen 465). By taking Mr. Knightley on a journey of humility that parallels Emma’s, Austen reinforces her belief that humility is a crucial trait for self-actualized individuals.

It is crucial to Austen’s story that Emma’s moral development occurs within a social context. As the wealthiest woman in her village, Emma is positioned as the “Queen of Highbury,” and her moral development over the course of the novel prepares her for this role by permitting her to become a caring community leader (Galperin 197; Doody 169).

Her marriage to Mr. Knightley, with whom “the undeniable leadership and economic power of Highbury reside,” makes it all the more important that her moral development concentrates on her role within her community (Doody 162). Tobin argues that Emma, “whose economic and social power are enormous,” must, as part of her own moral development, learn to provide charitably for others in her community in order to remedy the “large economic problems caused by uncontrollable forces” that serve to oppress poor women such as Jane Fairfax. As a wealthy gentlewoman, therefore, Emma must do her part to “hold the social fabric of this little community together with compassion and patronage, with a blend of Christian and chivalric values that prescribe charitable acts as a remedy for the ills of the poor” (Tobin 424).

Thus, whereas Maslow considered self-actualization to be an internal process that affects each individual differently, Austen views self-actualization as a spiritual journey that takes place within a broader community context. Austen, therefore, views Maslow’s concepts of self-actualization and self-transcendence as a single process. In order to achieve her self-actualization, Emma must learn to give of herself to others, to “love her neighbors as herself,” reaching what Maslow might describe as a state of self-transcendence (Matthew 22:39; *King James Bible*<sup>2</sup>). Furthermore, in Austen’s ethic, this process is a religious one. In order to achieve self-actualization, Emma must adopt the Christian values of humility, appreciation for others, and generosity. Through this process of self-actualization and self-transcendence, Emma, like Mr. Knightley, promotes the welfare of her community by serving others.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*. Edited by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett. Oxford UP, 2008.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Bander, Elaine. "Emma and the Pique of Perfection." *Persuasions*, vol. 21, 1999, pp. 155-62.

In this article, Bander, a professor of English at Dawson College, considers the concept of perfection in *Emma*, in light of Austen's view that "pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked." Bander argues that, in Austen's view, characters achieve moral fulfilment (perfection) not by behaving flawlessly, but by having the self-awareness to recognize their faults and learn from them. This ethic, Bander believes, is informed by Austen's Christian beliefs, which emphasized human fallibility and the need for people to recognize and repent their sins. Thus, Emma reaches her self-actualization by learning that her moral development will be a lifelong process. Bander argues that readers should not view the novel's final sentence, describing the "perfect happiness of the union" between Emma and Mr. Knightley, as ironic; rather, Austen views "perfection" as a process through which people continually strive for moral and spiritual fulfilment. This article is most useful to me because it comments on the importance of the Christian values of penitence and contrition to Emma's moral development.

Doody, Margaret. *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Places, Persons*. U of Chicago P, 2015.

This work considers the symbolic importance of names (including place names as well as character names) to Austen's novels. Doody argues that Austen's choice of names was intentional, evoking historical figures to characterize individuals. For example, Doody contends, Mr. George Knightley bears a striking resemblance in gentility and principle to

the widely admired King George. This source is most useful to my work because of Doody's exploration of the Regency society in which *Emma* is set. For example, Doody discusses how the high mortality rate of the era may shed light on the hypochondria afflicting characters like Mr. Woodhouse, and the need for less wealthy individuals like Jane Fairfax to take particular care for their health.

Galperin, William H. *The Historical Austen*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2003.

This book considers Austen's works as reflections of the time period in which they were written. Moreover, Galperin explores the influences of Austen's own experiences on her novels. The book is especially useful to my research because it will help me understand how Austen's religious views informed her work; my argument centers on the notion that Austen, a devout Christian, believed that individuals had to embody Christian values of humility, charity, and appreciation for others in order to reach their full moral and spiritual potential. In addition, Galperin's work will help me understand Emma's social consequence within her village, especially relative to her genteel, yet less wealthy, peers. Another major implication of my argument is that Emma's self-actualization is requisite for her to assist those in her community.

Jackson, Karin. "The Dilemma of Emma: Moral, Ethical, and Spiritual Values." *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 21, no. 2, Summer 2000, [www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol21no2/jackson.html](http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol21no2/jackson.html).

In this article, Jackson proposes that *Emma* lays out a blueprint for living a moral life which is influenced both by Christian ethics and a "more modern psychological perspective"; my

own argument advocates this reading of *Emma*. The article is especially useful to my own work because it considers Emma's psychological processes in the light of Jungian psychology. Carl Jung was one of the greatest humanistic psychologists, and doubtless influenced Abraham Maslow, who was a later giant of humanistic psychology. Jackson argues that Emma embodies the Jungian idea of psychological integration, in which an individual experiences a "maturing of the psyche" that allows them to process their experiences into a coherent whole to help them live their best life. Moreover, Jackson also argues, like I do, that spiritual growth is key to Emma's psychological development; Jackson believes, as I do, that Austen considered Emma's development in the light of Christian ethics.

Jones, Wendy. *Jane on the Brain: Exploring the Science of Social Intelligence with Jane Austen*. Pegasus, 2017.

In her book, the psychologist and former English professor Wendy Jones examines how an understanding of psychology and neuroscience can enhance our appreciation for Austen's novels. Jones considers how psychological concepts such as attachment theory, theory of mind, mentalization, empathy, and the therapeutic alliance can help to explain the behavior of characters in all six of Austen's novels, as well as her minor works. In addition, the author explains the neurological bases of these behaviors, in such a way that laypeople and scientists alike can understand. The book is topical, examining a variety of psychological constructs in relation to Austen's work; thus, it does not have a clear thesis. However, an overarching theme of the book involves theories of empathy: Jones believes that Austen "possessed extraordinary powers of empathy," and throughout the book, she considers

how characters such as Emma Woodhouse can both empathize with others and fail to take their perspectives. This book is especially useful to my research because it takes a hybrid approach, combining psychological analysis and literary criticism, to Austen's novels, which will help me situate Austen's story within a broad psychological context.

Koltko-Rivera, Mark E. "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification."  
*Review of General Psychology*, vol. 10, no. 4, Dec. 2006, pp. 302-17.

This article considers Maslow's idea of self-transcendence, or a sixth level of human needs in which people forfeit their egos for the greater good. Such self-transcendence involved significant self-sacrifice and humility. Koltko-Rivera traces the development of this idea through Maslow's personal writings and urges academics in the field of psychology to teach this notion. This article is very useful for my project because it considers a lesser-known aspect of Maslow's theory. A central theme of my argument is that Austen sees Maslow's processes of self-actualization and self-transcendence as one.

Larrow, Michele. "'Could He Even Have Seen into Her Heart': Mr. Knightley's Development of Sympathy." *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 37, no. 1, Winter 2016,  
[jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol37no1/larrow/](http://jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol37no1/larrow/).

In this journal article, Michele Larrow, a psychologist at Washington State University, analyzes Mr. Knightley's growth over the course of Emma. She argues that, at the start of the novel, Mr. Knightley often fails to understand Emma's emotions, but that he gradually becomes more attuned to her feelings as he falls in love with her. Moreover, while Mr.

Knightley acts as an “impartial spectator to [Emma’s] wrongs” for much of the novel, Larrow believes that he must acknowledge his own imperfections in order to have a happy marriage with Emma. This article is useful to my research because it considers the process of moral and spiritual development from Mr. Knightley’s standpoint, providing a useful contrast to Emma’s journey of self-actualization.

Maslow, A. H. “A Theory of Human Motivation.” *Psychological Review*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1943, pp. 370-96. Rpt. in *Classics in the History of Psychology*, by Christopher D. Green, [psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm](http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm).

In this article, Maslow details his Hierarchy of Needs, a framework for considering people’s motivations, needs, and desires. He lays out five categories of needs, ranging from the vital physical needs of food and water to the need for especially intelligent and spiritually aware individuals to achieve self-actualization, a state of moral, psychological, vocational, or spiritual fulfilment. He emphasizes the notion that people must attain each level of the hierarchy in sequence; that is, one cannot achieve self-actualization if one has not yet satisfied their physical needs and built relationships with others. This article, as a primary source, is critical to my paper because it provides a standard psychological theory of self-actualization against which I may compare Austen’s views of self-actualization.

*The Bible*. King James Version.

Austen, as a “deeply religious woman” who was the daughter of a clergyman, often implicitly addressed religious themes in her work, and several Bible verses have particular significance to *Emma*. While none of these verses are specifically invoked in the novel, the

ethics they promote permeate the story and, I argue, are crucial to Emma's self-actualization. For instance, Philippians 2:3 reads, "In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves;" to attain her self-actualization, Emma must follow this commandment and learn to value the virtues in others. Acts 3:19 reads, "Repent ye, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;" in Austen's view, humility and repentance are crucial to self-actualization. Proverbs 19:17 reads, "He that has pity on the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again;" in line with this verse, Austen suggests that those who are kind to the less fortunate will be rewarded for their generosity.

Tobin, Mary-Elisabeth Fowkes. "Aiding Impoverished Gentlewomen: Power and Class in *Emma*." *Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1988, pp. 413-30.

This article considers the economic plight of widowed, unmarried, or impoverished gentlewomen, who, in the words of Mary Wollstonecraft, could neither "work" nor "beg" to earn a living (Tobin 416). Tobin describes how education for middle-class women was limited, and poor gentlewomen such as Jane Fairfax had no choice but to either support themselves as governesses or hope that wealthier male relatives might provide for them. Tobin argues that *Emma* was written at a time when a new middle class was emerging, and may be read as Austen's attempt to justify a more conservative, genteel society by exploring how privileged individuals, like Mr. Knightley and Emma Woodhouse, might work to help the less fortunate as part of their own moral development. This article will be useful to my argument because it provides concrete historical context for the changing world in which *Emma* takes place. In addition, Tobin focuses on how Emma's moral

development permits her to become a more generous member of her community; my own paper will support this argument.