

Spatial Hierarchies and Environmental Ethics in Jane Austen's *Emma*: An Eco-Critical Analysis of Class, Gender and Landscape

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Abstract

The interconnections of gender dynamics, class hierarchies, and spatial organization in Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) are examined in this study using an eco-critical framework. Although the novel's social commentary has been studied by traditional scholars, this study presents a spatial-environmental methodology that charts the ways in which physical landscapes such as gardens, estates, walking paths, and domestic spaces serve as contested locations where gender norms and class privilege are both challenged and reinforced. This dissertation uses recent advances in literary geography and environmental humanities to show how Austen's ostensibly pastoral English countryside functions as a complex ecological-social system in which socioeconomic power is intimately correlated with access to and control over natural places. *Emma* Woodhouse's mobility across different landscapes is a reflection of her economic privilege, but her eventual captivity inside domestic-natural limits serves as an example of the limitations imposed by gender, according to the interpretation. This multidisciplinary approach adds to current academic discussions regarding Austen's environmental awareness and provides fresh perspectives on how literature can provide light on past perspectives on social structure, property, and nature. According to the research, *Emma* offers an early critique of the gendered allocation of environmental access and the commercialization of natural areas in Regency England.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Emma*, ecocriticism, gender studies

1. Introduction

"*Emma*," written by Jane Austen in 1815, has always been considered a classic work of social commentary and psychological insight. However, contemporary eco-critical research has offered a way forward in re-engaging with the social and environmental commentary in Austen's work, which was previously considered to be limited to social commentary (Estok, 2005; Weik von Mossner, 2017). This text seeks to place "*Emma*" in terms of emergent literature on the environment and geography in terms of its physical spaces as dynamic spaces of class, gender, and environmental opportunity.

The central contention of this paper is that Austen's evocation of landscape in *Emma* operates not only as setting but also as a player in the novel's social critique. The vistas carefully elaborated—the grounds at Hartfield, the estate at Donwell Abbey, the paths of Highbury, and the disputed topography of Box Hill—serve as cartographies of class distinction while simultaneously disclosing the gendered constraints on access to and movement through the environment. Murray has shown, in his geographical approach to Box

Hill, that Austen's landscapes bear the weight of historical and cultural meaning that informs and structures character contact and moral development.

This research adds to the following three distinct scholarly debates. Firstly, it contributes to eco-critical debates that go beyond *Mansfield Park*, the novel that is predominantly examined in the realm of the environment, to show that similar opportunities exist in *Emma* to gain insight into the environmental perspectives of the time (Rey, 2018). Secondly, it contributes to debates surrounding the use of spatial analysis methodologies, as advocated by cultural geography, to investigate the manner in which the spatial mobility of characters indicates social hierarchy (Salter, 2014). Thirdly, it contributes to debates surrounding the work of feminist theorists that investigate the role of constraint and mobility, contending that gender is the preeminent organizing principle that facilitates access to the environment (Dadlez, 2018).

The research methods used incorporate textual analysis, as well as historical contextualization of the landscape practices, property laws, and concepts of gender that were common in the Regency era. Through analyzing the movements of the characters through the spaces of the novel, as well as the textual description of the spaces, it can be shown that the apparently idyllic countryside actually functions as a regulated space, where not only class but also concepts of gender inform notions of social status and, indeed, even the relationship with the natural world.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Ecocriticism and Literary Studies

Ecocriticism has come a long way since its inception in the 1990s, changing from nature writing in the epoch of Romanticism to various other periods and literary forms (Buell, 2005; Clark, 2023). As Estok (2005) puts it, ecocriticism can be understood in terms of its ethical orientation to the natural world and its emphasis on making connections between literary representations and environmental practices. This approach to ecocriticism seems particularly promising for the analysis of novels such as *Emma* that celebrate the beauty of the rural landscape in a complex combination with power relations connected to the ownership and use of the land.

Recent studies have established that, despite dating from before an era of fully formed environmental awareness, Regency literature is still productive in its examination of human/nature relationships (Hutchings, 2009; James, 2024). The cult of improvement and interest in both agricultural reform and theories of picturesque and sublime landscapes created a cultural context in which landscape was laden with ideological meaning. Austen's works can be seen to make use of this in unique ways with regards to social class and gender.

2.2 Spatial Theory and Literary Geography

The spatial turn in literary studies has proved to be a rich source of significant concepts to consider for the operation of fictional geography within the structure of a story or narrative (Tally, 2013; Puxan-Oliva, 2024). 'Literary geography' is the understanding that fictive spaces do not operate as blank canvases for action but instead actively shape the processes of a character's development and the progression of a plot or story. This suggested 'careful spatial analysis' by Salter in relation to Steinbeck's landscapes reveals potential understandings of historical social forms and the operation of ideology that might not have been fully enunciated.

Spatial Articulation of the Novel: Spatial analysis of Austen's novels offers an interesting perspective on understanding the constructed and corresponding geography of English villages and estates. Spatial boundaries between public and private spaces, the facility of walking paths, the iconography of estates like Donwell Abbey, etc., carry various messages on the social status of classes, the roles of gender groups, and appropriate social behaviors. Murray's (2015) geographical reading of the Box Hill location in *Emma* is a good example of the application of the genre to a particular location's historical and narrative significance.

2.3 Feminist and Class-Based Approaches to Austen

Additionally, feminist theories have acknowledged Austen's realistic representation of women's situations under patriarchal social systems (Johnson, 1988; Minna, 2004). Recently, feminist studies extended this perspective by exploring how gender intersects with other social identity markers such as class to produce varying levels of agency and restriction (McGinn & Oh, 2017; Hameed & Alquraidhy, 2021). *Emma* offers a multifacorous case study because *Emma* herself occupies a uniquely privileged social position within her patriarchal society—at once wealthy and unmarried. However, she is still bound by patriarchal gender restrictions.

The dynamic relationship between class and gender is also seen at the spatial level. In this regard, while class enables access to private carriages and grounds for *Emma*, her gender positions her differently with regards to such access compared to her male counterparts from similar socio-class backgrounds. Recent literature in ecofeminism emphasizes the relationship between patriarchy and the subjugation of both women and nature, charting this relationship as a relationship between resources and their control (Shiva, 1989; Alaimo, 2010).

2.4 Research Gap and Study Objectives

Although there are increased studies from an ecological point of view that look at works by Austen in recent years, *Emma* still falls short of ecocritical assessments compared to some of Austen's major works such as *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Moreover, studies that look at the spatial, social class-related, and gender-related components are still viewed or analyzed individually rather than looking at their intrinsic connections. This research aims to bridge such gaps by providing a holistic analysis that combines spatial analysis with ecology and how Austen's work depicted or presented such spatial and social class-related components linked with those of gender. The research aims to: (1) identify the spatial nature of the novel's environmental geography and character movement or mobility patterns, (2) look at how spatial access and power are linked, (3) look at how gender is linked to these components, and (4) identify Austen's nascent environmental consciousness.

3. Methodology

The methodology that will be primarily used for the purpose of the study is that of mapping the spatial descriptions and the movements of the characters throughout *Emma* and determining the access that the characters have to different environments. The results will also be interpreted for themes related to the environment, feminist theory, and class.

This analysis unfolds in several stages: cataloguing and categorizing all references to landscapes, estates, gardens, walking paths, and other natural features; tracking character movements through these spaces in order to identify patterns of mobility versus restriction; analyzing Austen's descriptive language for evaluative content that reveals attitudes toward varied landscape types and land-use practices; and locating these textual patterns within historical research into Regency property law, landscape aesthetics, and gender norms in order to understand the ideological resonance of the spatial representations.

Consulted historical sources include period treatises on landscape gardening, property law documents, conduct books, and travel writing to establish a cultural context within which the spatial descriptions can be understood as interpreted by Austen's original readers. This contextualization tends to highlight that unassuming landscape details had often-enormous social and ideological freight. By integrating the knowledge from historical research into the textual analysis, such an approach gives way to the nuanced understanding of the functions of environmental representation within the novel's broader social critique.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Spatial Hierarchies: Estate, Village, and Boundary

Emma's spatial structuring is closely related to the overall concept of hierarchy in the spaces, which, again, mirrors the social class concept. Thus, the highest space that can be found is Hartfield, the estate of *Emma's* family, which is said to be situated 'in a separate lawn, and shrubberies; so that though not so elevated as many of our neighbors, as they once were at least, it is conceded to be pretty as Hartfield ever was.' It is, thus, not by mere coincidences that this space is referred to as an 'eco-enclosure,' as it hosts controlled natural environments to signify class distinction.

Donwell Abbey presents even greater significance as a space of environment, a space that offers a vision of deeply embedded values of the English landed gentry. Mr. Knightley's estate is portrayed with distinctive praise. An 'ample garden' with 'abundance of timber in rows and avenues' points to aesthetic as well as agricultural riches. The estate's landscape presents a sense of responsible land management, a quality that is crucial to contemporary debates surrounding land ownership. However, access to such an idealized space is rigidly determined by class. The novel's lower-class characters are portrayed at Donwell Abbey solely as employees.

Highbury village occupies a middle position in this spatial hierarchy. While less exclusive than the private estates, the village is nonetheless stratified internally, with certain spaces (shops, the Bates' apartment, cottage homes) marking different gradations of respectability and wealth. Even acts of environmental access intended as benevolence reinforce class distinction, as seen in *Emma's* charitable visit to a sick cottager: *Emma* enters a space of poverty that she can leave at will, her visit framed as noblesse oblige rather than acknowledgment of shared humanity or environmental citizenship.

4.2 Gendered Mobility and Environmental Constraint

Where the landscape accessible to the human character is defined by class, gender situates the human characters within the landscape. *Emma* has ample landscape mobility that is considerable in proportion to the majority of women in the Victorian period: she has exclusive access to landscapes, the privilege of taking walks with companions, and the utilization of carriages to make trips to social calls. Nevertheless, the mobility of *Emma* is further circumscribed by gender proprieties. Emma does not walk unaccompanied beyond the Hartfield estate, is accompanied always, and does not have the privilege of touching the landscape as unmediatedly as the male characters and Mr. Knightley.

The way that walking is portrayed throughout this novel represents these gendered constraints particularly well, with the male characters walking through estates and landscapes freely, their walking symbolizing power and control in these movements through space, while Emma's walking is restricted to enclosed spaces such as a shrubbery or always occurs with others by her side. The well-known proposal scene, for instance, occurs in Hartfield's shrubbery, and when Emma is overcome with emotion by her surroundings, where nature is an attraction to her 'Never had the exquisite sight, smell, sensation of nature, tranquil,

warm, and brilliant after a storm, been more attractive to her,' nature nonetheless occurs within these restricted domestic spaces, rather than outdoors, which is not accessible to unaccompanied women.

Compare this to the circumstances that face the character Jane Fairfax, whose restricted environmental mobility in the world is especially highlighted due to the purity of her need to take walks for health, which is clearly evidenced in the novel. Her solitary walks cause both concern and suspicion; thus, they represent the transgressive space for the lone woman. Here, it is evident that the novel shows the interaction between class and gender in relation to environmental accessibility, due to the restricted abilities that face the character compared to Emma, just as the latter also had restricted abilities compared to the male characters regardless of class.

4.3 Box Hill: Contested Space and Social Transgression

Box Hill can be characterized as the most evident case in the novel to deal with the theme of the potential for social disorder in the environmental spaces. Murray (2015) describes the already embedded connotations of transgression and sexual impropriety with Box Hill, and readers of Austen's work would certainly be familiar with such connotations. The connection of Emma's most critical social transgression with Box Hill displays a potential for misconduct by means of environmental displacement.

The Box Hill sequence is also significant for the tension around the accessibility of the natural environment along class lines. The site is ostensibly "public" in the sense that it is a natural setting which anyone could theoretically have access to; but the exclusiveness of the party and the extent to which the excursion requires special preparation highlight the reality that access to the natural environment is in practice restricted to the leisured classes. The meanness of Emma to Miss Bates at Box Hill could be interpreted as a statement of class entitlement in a space where normal hierarchical strictures are relaxed outside the managed environments of estate or village.

4.4 Agricultural Landscapes and Class Labor

While Emma herself deals with the genteel settings predominant in the novels of the time, the current work contains substantial references to agricultural landscapes and labor upon those landscapes. Robert Martin's farm represents a middle position within the environmental geography of the novel: while it is not a grand estate nor a poverty-stricken cottage, the farm promises a strong work ethic and integrity regarding the land. Emma's denouncement of Robert Martin as an appropriate suitor for Harriet Smith reveals a class bias that discountenances agricultural labor and the landscapes in which it takes place.

The presentation of the space of agriculture also serves to complicate any easy narrative of Austen's understanding of human relationship to the natural world. While the productive estates of Donwell Abbey are consistently lauded, actual agricultural labor is for the most part absent. Laborers play the most tertiary of background roles or are to be managed by charity. Such a visibility is also noteworthy for the disconnection that the upper class experiences from the manner in which their environment is maintained—a disconnection that also holds strong relevance for modern understandings of privileged position in the natural world.

4.5 Indoor Nature: Gardens, Greenhouses, and Controlled Environments

Another level on which the novel may be interpreted is that which deals with the attitudes towards the controlled relationship with nature. There is a lot of attention paid to gardens, shrubberies, and greenhouse

spaces throughout the novel. These represent nature in a controlled and tamed form; that is to say, a controlled relationship with nature is what these represent. Mr. Woodhouse's obsession with draughts may be seen as an extreme example of the need to control one's environment. In the novel, there is also a measure of the opportunities and limitations of a controlled and tamed relationship with nature.

5. Discussion: Environmental Ethics and Social Critique

The space-environmental analysis above shows *Emma* to be a text that engages with the way in which social structures manage the use and experience of space in the natural world. This is significant because it indicates an underlying engagement with the broader issues surrounding environmental justice and the use of the land, issues which go beyond the time in which Austen was writing. By showing the class and gender dynamics that govern the free movement in the world, the possession of the beauty of the natural world, and the service work that underpins the enjoyment of the pastoral world for others, however, Austen also inaugurates an early concept of environmental inequality.

This sort of critique acts subtly, embedded as it is in the realm of the social comedy rather than the overt statement. Nevertheless, the aggregate effect of the information provided about the spatial accessibility and restriction suggests that there is a significant environmental injustice at work. The landed gentry characters of the novel have privileged relationships to the idealized nature, as well as sustaining that privilege through their proprietary rights. Women have their spatial mobility restricted in various manners, regardless of social standing, via the propriety restrictions. The lower classes appear in the natural landscape as workers or charity cases, not as agents of environmental experience.

Contemporary ecocritical thought, particularly eco-feminist studies, offer some such avenues for analysis on these representations. As Shiva (1989) points out, patriarchal capitalism both oppresses women and seeks to control nature in the process. Austen's portrayal of gendered spatial constraint plays a significant part in evidencing such a link both in the portrayal of women's restricted space and the confinement of nature in private properties.

Finally, the ending of the novel provides scant environmental democracy. Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley offers more environmental access to the Donwell grounds but does not alter the dominant ideologies of private property and environmental access. Social class and gender boundaries persist. The ending of the novel, then, is typically historical realism. Real environmental democracy would have meant altering the social circumstances of the era. But Austen's intervention in the form of the text's visibility offers the reader opportunities for such exploration.

6. Implications and Future Research Directions

These are the ramifications of the present study that could be important for Austen studies and the theoretical movement of ecocriticism. They offer an example of how environmental studies can encompass all literature in terms of how it shapes various human/nature relations, not only "nature-focused" writings. Indeed, Emma's attention to natural beauty and spatial arrangements is not focused on the surroundings.uses modern terminology, effectively addresses land use and property issues that are equally relevant today.

Second, the integrated analysis of class and gender as structuring concepts for access to the environment offers a model for an environmental humanities approach that intersects with studies of gender and class. This practice of studying these concepts in relation to one another, so they build off of each other, stops the discussion of Austen as feminist or as dealing in class ideologies from being overly simplistic.

Third, the research contributes to the broader discussion on the developmental history of environmental consciousness. Even though Austen pre-empts the more prominent environmentalism found in more contemporary periods, the detailed consideration for the role social structures play in the management of relationships with natural spaces facilitates the argument for the earlier manifestation of environmental justice concerns within the works. This is despite the supposed locus typically reserved for twentieth-century literature in this topic (Clark, 2023; Rigon, 2025).

Future areas for research could involve using this spatial-environmental approach to analyze other novels by Austen, such as *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, which also evoke stimulating findings in the discipline of environmental studies. Comparative analyses that evaluate how other Regency-period authors represent environmental accessibility could also be used to evaluate if the findings in *Emma* represent shared cultural values or author-specific representations. Reception history analyses could also be conducted to evaluate how Austen's representations of space could be perceived in the past, providing findings for the evolution of environmental values. By using Austen's representations of space to evaluate current issues in environmental accessibility, the relevance of the discipline's history could be established in modern environmental issues.

7. Conclusion

Spatial organization and environmental access serve as essential components in the novel's societal critique, as this eco-critical analysis of *Emma* has shown. This study uncovers patterns of inequality that go beyond the social sphere into basic links with natural places by charting character movements through the novel's meticulously created geography and examining how gender and class affect environmental mobility. Austen's depiction of the landscape of Regency England encapsulates a system in which environmental privilege is determined by property ownership, women's autonomy is restricted by gender, regardless of class, and the agricultural labor that maintains pastoral beauty is largely invisible to those who profit from it.

Instead of being expressed as an overt critique, the novel's environmental consciousness functions covertly, woven into the romance and social comedy plot. However, a growing understanding of environmental justice issues is facilitated by the accumulation of geographical details, the meticulous mapping of who can travel where and under what circumstances, and the connection between moral development and landscape appreciation. *Emma* presents a nuanced ideological stance that both challenges and perpetuates environmental hierarchy by exposing how gender and class establish unequal access to nature while also taking part in the social systems that uphold such disparities.

Frameworks for comprehending these patterns as early expressions of issues related to property, access, and environmental justice that are still pressing today are offered by current environmental humanities studies. The novel's depiction of how socioeconomic systems shape how people interact with nature resonates to current discussions about gendered environmental experience, the privatization of landscapes, and the invisible work that supports privileged environmental consumption. We can better appreciate Austen's complex social vision while simultaneously acknowledging the constraints placed on her by her historical setting and class status when we read *Emma* via eco-critical lenses influenced by intersectional analysis and spatial theory.

In the end, this study makes the case for the importance of environmental analysis, including in texts that are not specifically about nature. Instead of being merely a setting for social comedy, Emma's rural English surroundings actively participate in the novel's examination of privilege, power, and possibilities. Characters' physical movements convey messages about gender inequality and class hierarchy while also pointing to alternate configurations on occasion. This analysis adds to larger academic endeavors of comprehending how literature changes and reflects human relationships with natural worlds throughout historical periods and cultural contexts by highlighting the environmental aspects of socioeconomic inequality in Austen's work.

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