***Emma***

***Chapter 16***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Summary:***

Snowed in at Hartfield, Emma takes this time to reflect on Mr. Elton's true motives behind his professed love for her. She comes to the conclusion that he must only be interested in her status and will soon find someone else to fixate on.

Emma wonders how she will tell Harriet that Mr. Elton is not in love with her and decides to do her best to completely avoid Mr. Elton.

***Analysis:***

Emma's character is continuing to grow as she analyzes Mr. Elton and his supposed love for her. Far from being romantic or impressed with this devotion, she is appalled.

Emma is a deviation from the norm of the women in this time period and is clearly a free thinker who is unafraid to state her mind and not marry the first eligible man that proposes.

***Summary in detail:***

Emma is ready for bed, her hair curled and the maid sent away. She can now evaluate the evening's events and consider "the evil to Harriet." She wonders "How she could have been so deceived!" and reviews all the events in connection with Harriet, including the earlier caution that George Knightley had given. Concluding that Mr. Elton has no real affection for herself and wants only to enrich himself through her as an heiress of thirty thousand pounds, she is obliged in honesty to admit that her complaisance, courtesy, and attention might have led him to misunderstand her. Granting that the first and worst error lay at her door, she is ashamed and resolves "to do such things no more." She turns her thoughts to Harriet again and within a moment wonders about soothing her friend's disappointment by making William Coxe the object of new intrigue, but he is an unendurable, pert young lawyer. Blushing and laughing at her own relapse, Emma goes to bed with nothing settled.

The next morning she is more disposed for comfort, especially when the sight of much snow on the ground informs her that she, Harriet, and Mr. Elton will be kept "quite asunder at present." In fact, though it is Christmas Day, she cannot get to church. Because of further snow and freezes, the confinement extends for days and only George Knightley, "whom no weather could keep entirely from them," ventures outdoors. Since John is cleared of the ill humor which he had at Randalls, having her sister's family in the house is a matter of pure pleasure for Emma — or would be if the coming explanation with Harriet did not hang over her like an evil thing.

***Analysis in detail:***

Chapter 16 is remarkable because, unlike most of the novel’s other chapters, it deals almost exclusively with Emma’s thoughts and feelings, her inner life. On the whole, Emma seems to have gained a measure of understanding, but the narrator has provided hints that she has more to learn. We see her grow in humility and selflessness as, shaken by Elton’s proposal, she thinks that she would have gladly undergone an even greater blow to her ego, if only she could have avoided hurting Harriet. In addition to increased self-understanding, Emma shows an increased understanding of Elton’s character as “proud, assuming, conceited; very full of his own claims, and little concerned about the feelings of others.” Whereas the preceding chapter encompassed the external, physical climax of Volume One, this chapter presents the internal climax. With outward events making Emma's blindness to them no longer possible, she must adjust and come to terms as much as she can with the realities of the situation. This means that she must admit and come to terms with her own self-deception. Since she is an intelligent and sympathetic heroine, it is only right that she be as fair as possible — and she is. She accepts her own errors and, in regard to Harriet at least, she plans to face the issue and do what she can to improve the situation.

Two story elements, however, are not yet worked out, and their incompleteness prepares the reader for more to come. First, the reader is made aware that the present moment is a pivotal one: Not only has Emma's scheming met with reversal, but also the tables are turned in reference to the social-level suitability of two marriageable persons. Emma has been presuming that lowborn Harriet will do for Mr. Elton, but she is now surprised and provoked to note that toward her he "should suppose himself her equal in connection or mind! — look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and be so blind to what rose above, as to fancy himself shewing no presumption in addressing her!" Unless mere reversal is the main point being made — as it is not with Jane Austen, who is far more interested in the effects of emotion than in the momentary eruptions of emotion — more story obviously is to come. Second, in spite of Emma's new insight into events and herself and in spite of her new resolutions, the reader is warned that she is highly capable of relapse and that her lifelong habit of managing things has not come to full terms with itself, even on the level of self-deception. Furthermore, though nature gives respite for Emma and perhaps Mr. Elton to compose themselves, nature tends in no way to resolve the problems, which are human ones that still must be met by a very human Emma.

Emma is upset about Mr. Elton's behavior towards her for several reasons. The first and most obvious reason is that it humiliates Harriet, and Emma has the burden of telling Harriet that Mr. Elton never had the slightest interest in her. The second relates to Mr. Elton's motives for pursuing Emma. Among Emma’s objections to Mr. Elton is the fact that his devotion to her is largely fiscal. He so desperately wants to move up in society and perceives marriage to Emma as the ideal opportunity.

Emma is also insulted that a person of Mr. Elton’s social status would consider himself fit for her. This demonstrates some arrogance, for Mr. Elton is too low for Emma but good enough for her close friend. She dismisses Mr. Elton because he does not come from a reputable family, the same reason that he rejects Harriet Smith. Also, the qualities that Emma finds objectionable in Mr. Elton ­ he is "proud, assuming, conceited; very full of his own claims" ­ are the very qualities that she instills in Harriet.

Still, even Austen makes some distinction between what Mr. Elton does and what Emma attempts to do for Harriet. Mr. Elton uses Harriet's attentions to get to Emma and behaves with no sense of polite manners (as when he expresses his feelings in the carriage). Emma, Harriet and Mr. Elton may have the same reasons for pursuing and rejecting suitors, but the two women behave with tact, while Mr. Elton is manipulative and rude.

et another reason why Emma is upset is that her plans go awry. Emma wishes everything to be orderly, and in this situation nothing has gone as she planned. Nevertheless, she shows some newfound signs of maturity. She accepts the blame for the situation and realizes that she erred. She also concedes that both Mr. Knightley and his brother were correct in their appraisal of the situation.

***Summary part by part and analysis***

***Summary part 1:***

Full of pain and humiliation, Emma miserably reflects on the situation with [Mr. Elton](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters). In addition to her mortification at her mistake, she is thrown into confusion about how to re-evaluate the events of the previous weeks. However, she feels worst about the blow to [Harriet](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters), whose feelings she knows she encouraged towards Mr. Elton. Emma reflects that she would gladly have suffered greater humiliation and discomfort if she could only lessen the hurt for Harriet.

***Analysis part 1:***

The vast majority of the chapter is devoted to Emma’s self-reflection and remorse, a remarkable turning point for the proud protagonist. Forced to realize her error, we see more selfless thoughts developing: she would gladly endure a greater blow to her pride if she could lessen Harriet’s potential heartbreak, which she feelingly takes responsibility for.

***Summary part 2:***

[Emma](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) feels little sympathy for [Mr. Elton](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters), whose showy displays of love she believes to be insincere. He sinks in her opinion as a man conceited, insensitive, and ambitious; she is sure that he has no real love for her, and his interest is only in marrying a wealthy heiress. She is doubly provoked that he is so sensible to the gradations of rank below him regarding [Harriet](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters), and so blind to those above as to believe him equal to Emma, whose wealth, family, and talents are greatly superior.

***Analysis part 2***

Emma’s assessment of Mr. Elton does her less credit, as she is most offended by his presumption—both in believing her friend so below him, but also in believing him to be Emma's equal. Her ready dismissal of his feelings may be justified, as she realizes his arrogance and affectation, but she is at least in part responsible for his mistaken perception.

***Summary part 3***:

However, [Emma](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) pauses to reflect on her own responsibility for [Mr. Elton](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters)’s mistake. She reflects that her own behavior has been so pleasant and attentive to Mr. Elton for [Harriet](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters)’s sake that she can understand his misperception. She admits that if she has so misinterpreted him, she can hardly wonder that he, blinded by self-interest, has also mistaken her.

***Analysis part 3:***

Emma reveals her ability to grow, as she possesses the intention and integrity to attempt a fair evaluation of herself and others. Though she, like Mr. Elton, is full of her own claims, she acknowledges that their misperceptions have both resulted from self-interest.

***Summary part 4:***

[Emma](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) concludes that she has been assuming and foolish in her attempt to make matches, “making light of what ought to be serious.” Ashamed, she resolves to never match make again—though she catches herself thinking up another suitor for [Harriet](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) a moment later.

***Anlaysis part 4:***

Emma learns from her mistake, but we find that she has still more to learn. She relapses into her matchmaking fantasies almost immediately after resolving to abstain from them.

***Quotations and explanation:***

***Quotation 1:***

The real evils, indeed, of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself: these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.

***Explanation:***

This quotation, which appears early in the novel’s first chapter, foreshadows the novel’s structure as a whole. What Emma fails to perceive—that it is possible to have too much of one’s own way or to be too satisfied with oneself—is exactly what she learns over the course of the book. She is permitted too much influence over Harriet and comes to understand that this power threatens not only Harriet’s happiness but also her own. Her flirtations with Frank Churchill satisfy her vanity, but they also expose her to embarrassment and hurt and mislead Mr. Knightley.

This quotation also displays Austen’s gift for understatement. The narrator’s commentary on Emma seems merely part of a standard character introduction. Like so many of the statements in the book, we can only feel the full force of the narrator’s observation upon a second reading.

***Quotation 2:***

The first error, and the worst, lay at her door. It was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious—a trick of what ought to be simple. She was quite concerned and ashamed, and resolved to do such things no more.

***Explanation:***

These are Emma’s reflections after Mr. Elton proposes in Chapter 16, revealing to her that she was wrong in thinking him attached to Harriet. Though Emma is never totally cured of her impulse to make matches for others, here she rightly diagnoses what is wrong with her matchmaking. Courtship should be serious and simple; it should flow naturally from spontaneous affinities and affection between two people. In the novel, courtship rarely follows these guidelines. Mr. Elton’s courtship of Emma is marked by the artificiality and ostentation of his compliments, which reveal his underlying lack of real feeling for her. Frank and Emma’s flirtation is light and elaborate in its wit, again signaling us that they are not truly meant for each other. At the end of the novel, Mr. Knightley’s direct and simple proposal embodies the ideal proposed here.

***Quotation 3:***

It was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious, a trick of what ought to be simple. (16.10)

***Explanation***

Emma’s moralizing, while accurate, only lasts as long as she remembers to keep her imagination in check.

***Quotation 4:***

Perhaps it was not fair to expect him to feel how very much he was her inferior in talent, and all the elegancies of mind. The very want of such equality might prevent his perception of it; but he must know that in fortune and consequence she was greatly his superior. He must know that the Woodhouses had been settled for several generations at Hartfield, the younger branch of a very ancient family—and that the Eltons were nobody. (16.9)

***Explanation:***

There’s a strange elitism in this attempt to empathize with Elton. He can’t understand how unfit he is for Emma – because he’s too unfit to understand.

***Quotation 5:***

[…] she would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistaken—more in error—more disgraced by mis-judgment, than she actually was, could the effects of her blunders have been confined to herself. (16.1)

***Explanation:***

Although Emma often imagines things which don’t exist, she’s never callous about their after-effects. Guilt becomes key to her transformation. Here, however, it’s only fleeting guilt.