***Emma***

***Chapter 21***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Summary:***

Mr. Knightley discusses the past evening with Emma, attempting to bait her regarding Miss Fairfax. Emma eludes him and does her best to convince him that she truly does like Miss Fairfax. Mr. Knightley seems to be in very high spirits and is about to announce a piece of good news when Miss Bates and Miss Fairfax burst into the room.

The news is that Mr. Elton is going to marry a Miss Hawkins, and Mr. Knightley watches Emma closely to see her reaction. After thanking Emma and Mr. Woodhouse for the leg of pork that they sent over to them, Miss Bates launches into a complete story about this impending marriage. Of course, this was Mr. Knightley's news as well, and Emma is quite shocked and concerned for Harriet.

Harriet has run into Mr. Martin and his sister Elizabeth at a store in Highbury, and is much too upset over that for the full effect of Mr. Elton's impending marriage to sink in. Both were quite congenial to Harriet and she is desperate for Emma's advice on what she should do.

***Analysis:***

More of the Woodhouses' charity to the poor is revealed, with their gift of a leg of pork to the Bates family. Mr. Knightley's character seems to have more life in this chapter as he watches Emma for her reaction. Is he aware of Mr. Elton's previous avowal of affection for Emma, or is this merely because of her attempts to match Mr. Elton with Harriet?

The re-entry of Mr. Martin on the scene is a foretaste of more high jinks that are soon to be on the horizon. This chapter continues to develop the contrast between Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley in terms of their interactions with Emma. While the former has an incredibly idealized picture of Emma, even going as far as to praise her for deep kindness towards Jane Fairfax, the latter is realistic and perceptive. Although he compliments Emma for treating Jane Fairfax kindly when they dined together, he indicates that he is aware of Emma's true jealousy towards Jane Fairfax. Yet again, Emma has demonstrated great tact and manners toward a person she dislikes.

In this chapter, both of Harriet Smith's prospective suitors return to some prominence in the plot, and each one makes Harriet ill at ease. Mr. Elton's imminent marriage to Miss Hawkins demonstrates the true reason for his vacation from Highbury and confirms what Mr. Knightley had suspected was true. He did have a prospective marriage possibility elsewhere, and immediately set upon this prospect once he realized that he could not have Emma. Harriet must now realize how badly Mr. Elton treated her and how badly she treated Robert Martin, yet there is a crucial difference. The supposedly coarse Martins remain kind and cordial, honorable where Mr. Elton is cruel and deceptive. Nevertheless, despite how kind the Martins remain to Harriet Smith, Emma has not moved past her prejudice against them and is relieved that they are unlikely to have much contact with Harriet.

***Detailed Summary:***

Just as Mr. Knightley is about to give Emma some news, the Bateses arrive with Jane to thank the Woodhouses for the hindquarter of pork they have sent; they manage to precede Knightley in divulging that Mr. Elton is to marry a Miss Hawkins. Emma is caught off guard, and Mr. Knightley’s looks suggest he knows something of what has transpired between them. However, she soon regains enough composure to make another failed attempt to engage Jane in conversation. The company departs, and Harriet bursts in with news that she has run into Mr. Martin and his sister in town. She relates that after some awkwardness, the pair greeted her with kindness, leaving Harriet flustered. Emma is impressed by the Martins’ behavior and briefly second-guesses her judgment of them, but she concludes that their station in life is still too low for Harriet. She is only able to distract Harriet from the episode by sharing the news of Mr. Elton’s impending marriage. Mr. Knightley compliments Emma on how well she treated Jane Fairfax when they dined together. As Mr. Knightley tells Emma that he has news for her, Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax interrupt them. Jane thanks Emma for the hind-quarter of pork that she had sent to her, and tells Emma that Mr. Elton is to be married to a Miss Hawkins from Bath. Emma assumes that Mr. Elton's acquaintance with Miss Hawkins must not be very long. Later, Harriet comes to Highbury in the rain, with news that she saw Robert Martin and his sister while shopping at the Highbury linen shop. They were polite to each other, but Harriet was extremely embarrassed. Emma is relieved that Harriet has little opportunity for contact with the Martins.

***Detailed analysis (19-21):***

Miss Bates’s repetitious speeches, and the mileage she can get from a single letter or piece of news from someone outside of Highbury, strongly reinforce our sense of the claustrophobia of village life. Though the character of Miss Bates is considered a comic masterpiece, there is also a pathetic and even alarming quality to the narrowness of her experience. In contrast to more sophisticated and calculating characters such as Emma and Mr. Knightley, who conceal or reveal what they are thinking depending upon the appropriateness of the situation and the effect they wish to produce, Miss Bates narrates everything that passes through her head, all of it more or less harmless.

With a more developed sense of Miss Bates’s character, Austen provides some distinctly different views of women’s experience in Highbury. She makes an implicit statement about intelligence and its potential for creating hardship when she contrasts Emma and Miss Bates. For instance, Miss Bates speaks in absurdly long, digressive sentences, interrupting herself frequently and often forgetting her point. In one example, she says: *I was reading [Jane’s letter] to Mrs. Cole, and, since she went away, I was reading it again to my mother, for it is such a pleasure to her—a letter from Jane—that she can never hear it often enough; so I knew it could not be far off, and here it is, only just under my housewife—and since you are so kind as to wish to hear what she says—but, first of all, I really must, in justice to Jane, apologise for her writing so short a letter—only two pages, you see hardly two, and in general she fills the whole paper and crosses half.*

Forced to read these complex and boring details, we share Emma’s impatience with Miss Bates but suspect, with Mr. Knightley, that Emma should greet Miss Bates with greater charity and less irritation. Margaret Drabble, in an introductory essay on the novel, suggests that Miss Bates might be read as a stand-in for Austen herself. Single, middle-aged, dependent, caring for an elderly mother, Miss Bates’s situation in life is much closer to Austen’s at the time she was writing the novel than is Emma’s. Of course, Austen is much more intelligent than the character she creates, so perhaps Miss Bates exemplifies Austen’s imagination of what her life would be like without her intellect. The picture is somewhat alarming, because Miss Bates’s ignorance means that she is perfectly contented with the life she leads. Perhaps Austen means for us to understand that intelligence, at least for a woman in the early nineteenth century, can be as much a source of suffering as of solace.

Once she has sworn off her aggressive matchmaking, Emma compensates by reconstructing what she thinks must be the interesting and provocative circumstances that brought Jane to Highbury. While Emma has learned, at least for the time being, not to orchestrate the love lives of those around her, the restlessness of her mind ignites her imagination and endangers her ability to observe others accurately. She bases her suspicion that Jane and Mr. Dixon had an attachment before his marriage to Mrs. Campbell on the slightest circumstantial evidence, and this mistaken impression of Jane will have greater negative consequences. Though Austen must understand imagination to be a gift, in particular the gift that makes it possible for her to write, here she suggests that a careless exercise of the imagination can be dangerous.

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

***Summary part 1:***

[Mr. Knightley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/mr-george-knightley) visits the next morning to congratulate Emma on her improvement in manner towards [Jane](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/jane-fairfax), only to discover that her distaste remains intact. The [Bateses](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) bursts into the room to thank the [Woodhouses](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/mr-woodhouse) for a gift of pork and report that [Mr. Elton](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) is going to be married to a Miss Hawkins. They chatter for a while and then depart.

***Analysis part 1:***

Mr. Knightley’s constant challenging of Emma’s character reveals his attentive interest in her development; yet despite his critiques of Emma, he faithfully believes in her goodness and improvement.

***Summary part 2:***

[Emma](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) is pleased with this confirmation of the shallowness of [Mr. Elton](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters)’s professed love for her, but she is sorry for [Harriet](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters). Emma resolves to inform Harriet as soon as possible, to save her from hearing it from insensitive sources.

***Analysis part 2***

Despite the harm Emma has inadvertently done to Harriet, she possesses real feeling and concern for her friend’s welfare and attempts to be active in its protection.

***Summary part 3***:

A flustered Harriet arrives at Hartfield; she has just run into [Mr. Martin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) and his sister in town. Harriet felt very miserably trapped upon seeing them, but after the initial awkwardness both brother and sister approached her with great kindness. Harriet trembles with gratitude at the goodness of their behavior, which she points out with pleasure to [Emma](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse).

***Analysis part 3:***

In spite of her weakness and dependency upon Emma, Harriet has a grateful and humble heart that recognizes the Martins’s kindness and is wretched over wronging them. She is quick to admire the merits of others, with no inflated sense of her own.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Emma](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) is unsettled, as she considers the good-hearted [Martins](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters). She feels some discomfort at her own judgment of them. However, she concludes that the evils of their low connections are more important, that she was right to protect Harriet from them, and she dismisses the affair.

***Analysis Part 4:***

Emma’s good sense recognizes the Martins’s remarkable kindness, but she cannot move past her snobbish assessment of their unworthiness due to their class.

***Summary part 5:***

[Harriet](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters), however, cannot stop thinking about the [Martins](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters), so [Emma](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) finally shares the news regarding [Mr. Elton](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters)’s engagement to distract her. Harriet’s interest in Mr. Elton supersedes her turmoil over the Martins. Emma rests comforted by the fact that Harriet will now be forever safe from the Martins, altogether dismissing the significance of their enduring kindness towards her friend.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Emma easily manipulates the malleable Harriet, whose shifting attentions reveal a lack of conviction within her heart. However, Emma’s excessive self-assurance reveals that conviction—particularly when it is misplaced—may be an even greater evil, as she inadvertently harms the friend she professes to protect.