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| **Social Class**  **Theme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/marriage)**  [Marriage](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/marriage) |

*Emma*, like most of Austen’s novels, is a study in 18th Century English society and the significance of propriety. The rich and “well-bred” control the social situations, issuing and initiating invitations and friendships. Those of low social standing depend upon the charity and initiative of those in the higher class. When violations of this order occur, they are often met with great indignation by those of genteel-breeding, as when [**Emma**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) takes offense at [**Mrs. Elton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) presuming to nickname [**Mr. Knightley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/mr-george-knightley).

Social class also dictates the social obligations between the characters, and the way in which their actions respond to these obligations reveals their character. The novel, for instance, teases out the nuances of charity regarding class: Emma is charitable towards the poor, but shows little initiative in befriending the orphaned and talented [**Jane**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/jane-fairfax).

The characters’ use or abuse of their social standing reveals much about their kindness or cruelty. For instance, Emma’s exercise of wit at the expense of the silly, but low-standing [**Miss Bates**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) is condemned as cruel by Mr. Knightley because it is an abuse of her social clout. Humiliating the hapless Miss Bates sets a bad example for those in society who would follow her example. On the other hand, Mr. Knightley’s asking [**Harriet**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) to dance after she has been snubbed by [**Mr. Elton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) is an act of charity, graciousness, and chivalry because he is of a high social standing in comparison to both her and Mr. Elton. His act socially “saves” Harriet and reprimands the Eltons for their rudeness.

Social class also restricts the actions that characters are able to take in fulfilling their desires, as is most evidently seen in the novel’s drama regarding marriage matches. [**Frank**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/frank-churchill) must conceal his engagement with Jane because she is an orphan and regarded as an unsuitable social match by his family. Harriet rejects Robert Martin because Emma advises her that he is “beneath” her. Mr. Elton rejects Harriet by the same calculations, and so on.

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| **MarriageTheme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/gender-limitations)**  [Gender Limitations](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/gender-limitations) |

*Emma*deals with many visions of what marriage entails. Social acceptability, financial practicality, similar social standing, shared virtues, matching talents, comparable charm and beauty, and similar dispositions are all components that present themselves with different degrees of importance in the marriage calculations of different characters. For women, who were often barred from owning property and faced significant limitations in employment, marriage became particularly critical as both the expected social norm and the often necessary means of financial security. [**Harriet**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters)’s bewilderment as [**Emma**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse)’s decision to remain single and her own horror of the fate of spinsters illustrates the social stigma attached to those who were unable to marry, like the unfortunate and foolish [**Miss Bates**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters).

Emma believes herself to be a skilled matchmaker, and her pride in her discernment of good matches and her ultimate humbling in this regard highlights that she has much to learn in judging others characters, her own, and what makes a good marriage. While Austen in certain ways affirms the social conventions of marriage in pairing most of her characters with partners of equal social standing, she also complicates and critiques these conventions. Though Emma believes [**Mr. Martin**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) to be below Harriet, [**Mr. Knightley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/mr-george-knightley) argues that Harriet would be lucky to be with Mr. Martin on account of the latter’s virtue. Similarly, both Mr. Knightley and Emma come to agree that [**Frank**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/frank-churchill) is lucky to be accepted by Jane, even though she is considered of inferior social standing, because she surpasses him in virtue.

Marriage is also an agent of social change. Though certainly dictated by the characters’ social standing (as when characters reject or pursue matches to consolidate their social standing), it also *makes* characters’ social standing, as in the case with [**Mr. Weston**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters)’s first marriage to a wealthy and well-connected woman, which elevated his social standing in society.

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| **Gender LimitationsTheme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/misperception)**  [Misperception](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/misperception) |

Despite the strong-willed and confident female protagonist who is the novel’s namesake, *Emma* reveals the limited options of women in Austen’s era. Early in the novel, Emma decides to stay single: she views her situation as a financially self-sufficient single woman at the top of the social hierarchy to suit her preferences more than being a wife would. Yet Emma’s influence in society is for the most part limited to her attempts to arrange her friends’ marriage, and even this influence is revealed to be questionable. [**Mr. Knightley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/mr-george-knightley) counters Emma’s belief that she arranged Mr. Weston and Mrs. Weston’s marriage with the assertion that they would have found each other on their own terms and time without Emma’s “help.” Furthermore, Emma’s meddling more often than not proves mistaken and disastrous, as when she becomes responsible for [**Harriet**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters)’s heartbreak at the hands of [**Mr. Elton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters). Emma’s hobbies of charity, social calls, and the nice “female accomplishments” of music and art reflect a privileged but relatively limited sphere of activity.

[**Jane**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/jane-fairfax) represents a case in which the limitations of her gender, combined with her relative lack of social status and financial stability, threaten her freedom to live the life she desires. This becomes particularly clear when she no longer views marriage to [**Frank**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/frank-churchill) as a viable option, and finds herself forced to accept an undesirable position as a governess. In the case of other female characters and even finally Emma, marriage represents the most viable option for a woman to live a comfortable life. Women’s influence, in this sense, lies largely in their relation to men—to attract, reject, and accept their proposals of marriage.

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| **Misperception Theme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/pride-and-vanity)**  [Pride and Vanity](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/themes/pride-and-vanity) |

[**Emma**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse)’s initial perceptions of people and her own confidence in her abilities as matchmaker turn out to be very mistaken. Throughout the course of the novel, Emma repeatedly misreads signs of attention and attraction: she believes [**Mr. Elton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters) to be wooing [**Harriet**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters), when he is in fact interested only in her; she believes Harriet to be in love with [**Frank**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/frank-churchill), when she is in fact in love with [**Mr. Knightley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/mr-george-knightley), and so on. At the heart of Emma’s misperception is her vanity and pride. She sees what she wants to believe, and it is not until the disastrous consequences of her interference that she gradually comes to realize how misplaced her confidence in her abilities is.

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| **Pride and Vanity Theme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/quotes)**  [Quotes](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/quotes) |

[**Emma**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/emma-woodhouse) is described in the first chapter as an extremely well endowed young woman, who possesses “some of the best blessings of existence”: she is beautiful, intelligent, wealthy, and well bred with a father who loves her dearly. But she also possesses a critical flaw that threatens the success of her intentions to positively interfere with her friends’ lives—her somewhat spoiled nature, and vanity and pride about her abilities and perceptiveness. Because she believes herself to have great talent in discerning people’s natures and suitable love matches, she is slow to recognize that she is wrong. It takes many humiliating and hurtful mistakes before Emma is finally humbled into the realization that her interference is often misguided, and that she has much to learn both about the desires of others *and* her own heart.

As [**Mr. Knightley**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/emma/characters/mr-george-knightley) points out, Emma’s initial dislike of Jane stems in part from her jealousy of the latter, who threatens her sense of security in her own accomplishment, beauty, and character. Though she believes that her distaste for Jane stems from their different styles of temperament (vivacity vs. reserve) and beauty (robust vs. slender), she comes to realize that it is in fact their similarity that results in her discomfort—they occupy similar positions as accomplished females in their social circles, and they are also both greatly admired. It is not until Emma progresses beyond her initial pride that she comes to appreciate Jane’s quality and admire the very differences she once critiqued. Even more significantly, it is not until Emma is humbled by the revelation of her mistakes that she is able to know her own heart and recognize Mr. Knightley as her beloved.

**Characters**

**Miss Bates**

"[A] great talker upon little matters," Miss Bates is a comic but sympathetic character whose loquacious, hopelessly indiscrete ramblings are the source of much unspoken amusement and, for Emma in particular, some disgust. Taken together, her uncomplaining acceptance of her lot and her well-meant, kind attentions to her neighbors give her poverty some "elegance" and authority. Miss Bates lives with and cares for her aging mother, the two of them surviving by the charitable good graces of their neighbors in Highbury. She also is the loving and solicitous aunt to Jane Fairfax, another major female character in the novel. Miss Bates is important for several reasons. Along with Mrs. Perry, Mrs. Goddard, and Mrs. Cole, she belongs to the country village's mature female circle. Since, on the one hand, her constant chatter is repugnant, but, on the other hand, her morals and her cheerful, good temper are beyond reproach, she is a challenging personality for Emma. It is only when Emma can feel ashamed of her treatment of Miss Bates and learn real patience and charity toward her that Emma herself can take credit for the elegance and breeding she so admires. Miss Bates's position in Highbury society is instrumental to the plot since she provides a source of charity, empathy, and social decorum against which other characters are measured. Moreover, as an "old maid" without means she shares the predicament of certain genteel women in Austen's time (Austen herself had brothers who provided for her) who did not worked and had neither husband nor inheritance on which to rely.

**Mrs. Bates**

Mrs. Bates is the old and much-respected widow of a former vicar of Highbury and mother of Miss Bates. She rarely leaves her room but to have tea with Emma's father, Mr. Woodhouse, or with Mrs. Perry and Mrs. Goddard. Her principal importance to the novel is as a convenient companion to Mr. Woodhouse and as an example of elderly propriety within the community.

**Colonel Campbell**

The Campbells are mentioned only in relation to being the benefactors of Jane Fairfax, who is the orphaned niece of Miss Bates. Jane has grown up in the Campbell family and been treated on an equal footing to their own daughter. Their daughter's marriage to Mr. Dixon and the family's temporary removal to Ireland compels Jane to return to Highbury; it also signals the dreaded time of independence, when Jane must seek her living as a governess. So, at least, the good people of Highbury have been led to believe.

**Frank Churchill**

The mysterious young gallant of marrying age has not yet made his appearance in Highbury, but he is expected every day, for his biological father (Mr. Weston) has just married the elegant Miss Taylor, former governess to Emma. His own mother having died before his was three, Frank Churchill was adopted by his uncle, who was in a position to bestow upon him all of the privileges of rank and wealth that his father could not. Mr. and Mrs. Weston have received "handsome" letters announcing his intent to come and his excuses why he cannot. When he finally arrives, he is liked by all except Mr. Knightley, who finds him less forthright or perfect in his duties and intentions than he ought to be. As it turns out, Mr. Knightley has good reason for his suspicions. Frank is playing a game of deception with the good people of Highbury, and at least two women, Jane Fairfax and Emma Woodhouse, are in danger of falling prey to his manipulative charms. By artifice, Frank Churchill becomes one of Emma's three suitors. In that role readers are meant to judge his character alongside that of Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley. As importantly, though, he becomes the means by which Emma once again makes critical mistakes in both her assessment of character and in her own powers of reason and observation.

As with most of Austen's characters, Frank Churchill is more complicated than he appears. With Emma, readers learn that charm, good looks, and breeding may serve as a front for sly manipulations and selfish goals. Emma must see in Frank's actions a reflection of her own failings, and she must learn that appearances are not what they seem. With Mr. Knightley, readers must acknowledge that circumstances can sometimes deter good intentions and that although Frank Churchill's actions were not to be condoned, he can easily be forgiven for acting out of love.

**Mr. Churchill**

While he is never introduced in person, Mr. Churchill is one of the privileged, condescending members of society living outside Highbury whose influence on the story is felt mainly in his role as adopted father to Frank Churchill. Whether and when Frank Churchill will finally come to Highbury to visit his biological father, Mr. Weston, and his new wife, the former Miss Taylor, governess to Emma, is a matter of grave speculation among the neighbors. In fact, one of the key disputes between Mr. Knightley and Emma centers on whether Frank Churchill is being unduly ruled by his feelings of duty toward his adoptive parents and not enough by his filial duty to Mr. Weston. Mr. Churchill also is mentioned early on in the novel as disapproving of his sister's earlier marriage to Mr. Weston on the grounds that it was an unequal match. When that sister dies three years later, their child, Frank, becomes a means of reconciliation. The Churchills adopt him.

**Mrs. Churchill**

Mrs. Churchill is the sickly wife of Mr. Churchill and adopted mother to Frank. She is regarded by Emma and by the narrator as the chief obstacle to Frank's marrying Jane Fairfax. While, like her husband, Mrs. Churchill is never introduced except as a name associated with Frank's fate, she serves to illustrate the lure and the drawbacks of money and privilege. While Frank expects and needs his inheritance, he is unwilling to act on his own behalf in choosing a wife. Mrs. Campbell is not quite a stereotype. While she indeed appears to be the rich, domineering, condescending society snob that Emma takes her for, toward the end of the novel she actually does die of her illnesspoetic justice perhaps, but certainly a very handy plot device, for otherwise Frank and Jane would still be dissembling about their secret engagement.

**The Coles**

Mr. and Mrs. Cole do not figure largely in the novel except as representatives of a merchant class who have some pretensions to mix with the gentry. Emma grapples with whether she should attend a dinner party given at the Coles, first thinking it inappropriately beneath her, and later not wanting to be left "in solitary grandeur," she decides to accept the invitation. Austen's irony aims partially at a fixed society so blind in its class-consciousness that it cannot account for good character and breeding unless it is attained by lineage. More importantly, the Coles, like the Martins, serve as lessons in humility to Emma. Austen makes the point through the Coles that when the accepted hierarchies break down and judgments about class and character must be determined, Emma, more often then not, acts out of a desire to be treated as the first person of consequence.

**Mr. Dixon**

Mr. and Mrs. Dixon do not figure in the action except, as with the Campbells, through their acquainted with Jane Fairfax. However, Mr. Dixon, who has married Miss Campbell (a virtual sister to Jane), is important to the comedy and mystery of the novel. Emma reasons that Jane's sadness and eventual illness can be imputed to an unrequited or ill-fated love for Mr. Dixon. The romance that she imagines is all the more fixed in her mind when the pianoforte arrives for Jane from an anonymous source. She deduces that Jane's decision not to go to Ireland has everything to do with the love she cannot show for the former Miss Campbell's new husband.

**Mr. Elton**

Having been so successful (at least in her own mind) of having matched Miss Taylor to Mr. Weston, Emma determines to marry off Mr. Elton to her friend Harriet Smith. Mr. Elton, who is the new vicar of Highbury, is single and unhappily so. Readers know little about him except what Emma believes him to be: "most suitable, quite the gentleman himself, and without low connections." Readers have already been privy, though, to Emma's supercilious attitudes toward the Martins, her pride of place, and her vanity in manipulating marriages for her amusement. When it turns out that Emma mistakenly takes his courtship of herself for an attraction to Harriet, Mr. Elton is forever diminished in her eyes. Mr. Elton, to be sure, has her dowry in mind, and when his hopes are dashed, he acts the churl, all pretense of gentle behavior shed like a skin. He soon disappears and only returns to Highbury when he has found a new conquest in the person of Augusta Hawkins. After his marriage to Miss Hawkins, Mr. Elton is relegated to the role of husband and co-conspirator in the couple's haughty treatment of Emma and Harriet Smith.

**Mrs. Augusta Elton**

The former Miss Hawkins is coarse, arrogant, and interfering. She is embarrassingly familiar and at the same time unaware of social gaffes. Though orphaned and of dubious breeding, Mrs. Elton takes pride in her sister's having married extremely well, to a Mr. Suckling. Augusta makes odious comparisons between Mr. Suckling's "seat" at Maple Grove and Emma's estate at Hartfield, and her fondest wish is to explore the country in the her sister's barouche-landau, a fancy carriage. Mrs. Elton conspires with Mr. Elton to deliberately humiliate Harriet Smith at the Crown Ball, a social crime for which she is not to be forgiven. She also takes an immediate and therefore controlling interest in Jane Fairfax and her fate. It is Mrs. Elton's persistent haranguing of Jane to take a position as governess that nearly ends in disaster for Jane and Frank. Austen constantly forces Jane into Mrs. Elton's overbearing company to show how elegant Jane Fairfax is by contrast and, as importantly, how superior Harriet Smith appears despite her lack of breeding. Ironically, it might be the anti-heroic Mrs. Elton, so easy to criticize for her hauteur and disdain, who can be fairly compared to Emma at her worst.

**Jane Fairfax**

Jane Fairfax, orphaned at an early age, is raised in privileged circumstances by the Campbells. Of Emma's age and of fine sensibilities, she is beautiful, discrete, and refined. She is Emma's superior in her talent for music, and she is admired for her elegance. She comes to Highbury when the Campbells leave for Ireland and her friend and "sister," Miss Campbell, marries Mr. Dixon. It is expected that she will take a place as governess to a good family in order to support herself now that she is of age. At Highbury she is compelled to live with her chattering Aunt Bates and receive the attentions of the odious Mrs. Elton. While Emma could befriend her and has good intentions of doing so, she finds Jane's reserve and coolness anathema. For her peculiar reserve, indeed, "Emma could not forgive her."

Jane Fairfax can be considered the main female character around which romance and mystery revolve. Although Emma is mistaken in thinking her in love with Mr. Dixon, she is certainly in love. Jane's secret engagement to Frank Churchill, a man with whom Emma initially thought herself in love, is the cause for Jane's reserve and also her shame. While Jane Fairfax's virtue and intelligence are highly praised, the intrigue she is involved in, as David Lodge points out in his "Introduction" to *Emma*, leaves her "passive and enigmatic." Or as Mr. Knightley describes her, "She has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife."

Finally, however, she is redeemed by the same impulse the narrator feels for Frank Churchill. She could be forgiven because she was motivated by love and by a helpless sense of her own inability to choose her fate. She is infinitely finer than Frank Churchill, for in her dissembling, she hurt no one but herself, drew no one into the charade, took no enjoyment in others' ignorance of their secret but only wished for resolution and peace. Except that she lacks a spirit of animation and is not as fortunate in her circumstances of birth, she is Emma's equal or superior in every way. It is indeed necessary for her to leave Highbury soon after her plans to marry Frank are secure, for Highbury is only big enough for one heroine.

**Mrs. Goddard**

Mrs. Goddard runs a boarding school of high repute at which Harriet Smith is enrolled. She is an honest "plain, motherly kind of woman," a hard worker who is no longer young. She is one of the ladies whom Emma calls on to play cards with her father in the absence of Miss Taylor. She also is the one career woman in town who, by dint of her wholesome, old-fashioned establishment, and her great influence on generations of girls, Emma can accept as proper company for her father. She is one more example of the fluidity possible within a fixed society.

**Isabella Knightley**

Isabella Knightley is Emma's elder sister, the wife of John Knightley, Mr. George Knightley's brother. Isabella is the quintessential good mother and wife, deferring to her husband in all things, keeping an orderly household, and artlessly adoring her sister and father. Clearly Isabella provides a contrast to Emma, whose intelligence, wit, imagination, and lively projections of her own ego make it extremely unlikely that she will come to regard herself as a passive Victorian housewife.

**John Knightley**

Mr. John Knightley has, like his brother, a confident sense of self, an Enlightenment zeal for reason and logic, and a temper that does not easily suffer foolishness or inconvenience. His discernment is made evident when he warns Emma that Mr. Elton has designs on her. Austen uses John Knightley's visits to Hartfield to provide one more model of gentlemanly behavior against which to contrast Mr. George Knightley. In John's inability to be tactful in the face of Emma's father's eccentricities, he is found wanting. His sarcasm, as opposed to his brother's forbearance, adds to Emma's distress over her father's comforts. He also provides a comic, down-to-earth corrective to Mr. Woodhouse's peccadilloes and hobby horses.

However, there is room for education; if Emma must learn reason and gentility from him, he also must study to be more open and less decided in his opinions. He stubbornly clings to his assessments of Harriet and Frank Churchill before he has had a chance to really know them. His jealousy of the latter makes him immune to any of his charms, and his suspicions that the former can not be improved by Emma's attentions makes him distant and cool to the friendship.

Of all the male characters, Mr. Knightley is the only man whom Emma can marry without fear of discovering a lack of intelligence, compassion, or virtue. He combines all three as well as a promise that things will remain much as they are with the surprising but wonderful addition of marital love and security. Mr. Knightley's absolute steadiness and brotherly affection make it possible for Emma to come face to face with her own desire and sexuality, which until now she has only managed to express in the form of affection for her father, family, and friends.

**Mr. Knightley**

Mr. George Knightley surpasses all other gentlemen of Highbury for his discernment, reason, kindness, and virtue. He is the owner of Donwell, a large estate comparable only to Hartfield for its size and grandeur, which, if he does not marry, will be inherited by the eldest son of his brother John. While Emma busies herself naïvely making matches, carelessly starting rumors, and meddling in affairs that bring confusion to her friends, Mr. Knightley quietly helps his neighbors, not for his own amusement but out of a sense of responsibility for their well being. It is with his help that Harriet and Robert Martin are finally united, with his care that Mrs. and Miss Bates's needs are often met. With brotherly advice and a firm sense of justice and duty he guides Emma toward more mature behavior. He befriends Jane Fairfax and chides Emma into better intentions on her behalf. He is suspicious of Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill when everyone else is charmed by them, and he turns out to be right most of the time.

**Robert Martin**

Robert Martin is a tenant farmer of good character and intelligence who has a comfortable and increasingly promising living on Mr. Knightley's estate, Donwell. Harriet is introduced to him and to his sister Elizabeth and the Martin family during a summer recess from Mrs. Goddard's School. Mr. Martin later writes Harriet an eloquent and quite correct letter proposing marriage, which Harriet is inclined to accept until Emma talks her out of it. He is the source of great irritation between Emma and Mr. Knightley, for Emma does not yet know how to value anyone below her own class. She finds a "young farmer . . . the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. . . . precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do." While Robert Martin plays only a very minor role in the action of the novel, he is important to Emma's education. She finally learns how to value him, despite his station. And through the good offices of Mr. Knightley, Robert Martin finally marries Harriet to the delight of both.

**Harriet Smith**

Harriet Smith is a boarder at Mrs. Goddard's school, "daughter to someone" but no one knows who. Since Emma needs someone to amuse her after Miss Taylor moves to Randalls, she chooses Harriet, as someone whose sweet and guileless nature could be easily guided and to whom Emma "could be useful."

Harriet takes all her cues from Emma, flattered to be admitted to Emma's inner circle and presented as her special friend. In almost every respect, Harriet has more common sense than Emma, whose imagination leads her to believe that Harriet is of noble birth and therefore should be matched with a gentleman bachelor, the most eligible being Mr. Elton. Emma's misguided interference in Harriet's love affairs threatens to cost her the true happiness of Mr. Martin and loses for her the vague promise of Mr. Elton, who never liked her in the first place except as a friend of Emma's. Emma's "training" of Harriet, which consists of persuading her she is "superior" to anyone but a gentleman, ironically leads Harriet to think of Mr. Knightley as an appropriate and desirable match. It is only when Harriet begins to focus on Mr. Knightley that Emma herself realizes she is in love with him and that she truly has done Harriet great harm.

Harriet's simplicity and naïveté are transformed through Emma's agency to a confidence, maturity, and fuller sense of her own worth without the conceits and arrogance that might accompany such a change. It is to Harriet's credit that she does not judge Emma more harshly for her intrigues, even though they end up costing Harriet much heartache and disillusionment. In the end, it is her own good sense, and not Emma's wisdom, that leads Harriet to the altar and to an appropriate and fulfilling future.

**Mr. Weston**

Mr. Weston's importance has to do with his early alliance with the Churchills and his son, Frank. His rise in "gentility and property" makes him another example of upward mobility within the early nineteenth-century British class structure. He also presents another "type" of gentleman in Highbury society, who, though very amiable and cheerful of temperament, lacks the judgment and discipline that marks Mr. Knightley as the more reasonable and gentile.

**Mrs. Weston**

Mrs. Weston, formerly Miss Taylor, marries Mr. Weston at the beginning of the novel and leaves Hartfield where she has been Emma's governess for 16 years. It is her departure for Randalls, only a half-mile away, which occasions the miserable Emma to take on Harriet Smith as a respite to her loneliness. Mrs. Weston is Emma's best friend and confidante. As her governess, and indeed her surrogate mother, she has had a large share in Emma's education; she has also indulged and spoiled her and given her a great sense of her own importance. However, Mrs. Weston is an excellent creatureyoung, attractive, intelligent and always thinking of others' happiness before her own. Mrs. Weston is the second wife of Mr. Weston. Their marriage sets the stage for the appearance of Mr. Weston's son, Frank Churchill, who owes filial duty to his father and new mother to pay his respects.

Mrs. Weston's story ends almost before it begins with her happy marriage. However, her continuing friendship and devotion to Emma is one of the elevating themes of the novel. Her mistaken interpretations of events and scenes in the novel also endear her to readers. She keeps guessing with her own misguided detective work when she suggests to Emma that Mr. Knightley is really in love with Jane Fairfax, and she adds to the suspense in guessing that Frank Churchill means to propose to Emma. Like readers, Mrs. Weston is beguiled by double meanings and innuendo.

**Emma Woodhouse**

Emma is an unlikely heroine. She is haughty, immature, rash, overly imaginative, supercilious, and sometimes mean. She finds herself "superior" to almost everyone in her midst, and she is possessed of an undisciplined mind "delighted with its own ideas." Her pride and vanity seem to know no bounds, and her intrigues and manipulations harm or embarrass a number of her friends. But despite her questionable personal charm she is surprisingly able to remake and redeem herself. Where first there is blindness and conceit, later readers see self-awareness and humility. When one moment readers recoil at her arrogance, they are next cheered by her patience and forbearance. Readers almost dismiss her for her rude indiscretions but then are entertained by her candid, honest charm. Just when she is suspected of being ruthless, she is found to be capable of deep compassion and love. Indeed, Emma's very imperfections bind readers to her.

Austen infuses her heroine with such high spirit and determination that her youthful follies can be overlooked. She is motherless, after all, embarked on a project of self-education that begins only when her governess leaves. She is likeable because she refuses to be typical. She refuses to do what is expected of her. She determines never to marry, to continue to improve herself by her own means, and to reject the received wisdom of her times that a woman is nothing without a man. That she does marry in the end does not make her a hypocrite. On the contrary, it is only when she learns that she need not lose herself in a marriage, that her best moral guide and friend has all along been eager for her to make her own mistakes and to wonder in an unselfish way "what will become of her" that she relents.

**Mr. Woodhouse**

Austen clearly means to equate gentility with the amounts and types of foods one eats, and in his preference for the most abstemious amounts and the least volatile types, Mr. Woodhouse cannot be rivaled. Mr. Woodhouse is old and has a delicate constitution; he is constantly referring to the good advice of his esteemed apothecary, Mr. Perry. It is a source of comic relief when Mr. Woodhouse and his daughter, Isabella, converse about harmful weather conditions, the benefits of one seaside town over another, or the type of gruel that should be preferred on all occasions to avoid an unhealthy constitution. As a quintessential gentleman and undisputed member of the English gentry, Mr. Woodhouse is esteemed as the first citizen of Highbury. His neighbors are solicitous for his health, and he is always careful that people should do their duties toward one another, uphold customs and traditions, and by no means ever give in to excesses or haste. He deplores change and invariably refers to Mrs. Weston as "poor Miss Taylor" and to his own daughter as "poor Isabella," thereby projecting onto their happiness his own dread of their absence from his household.

Austen seems to measure her characters in relation to how they treat the eccentricities and hardships of the most difficult characters. Mr. Woodhouse is one of the characters whose trying personality must be suffered because of his position in society and because he has often been a benefactor to his neighbors. Emma's diligent and dedicated care of her father is perhaps one of her greatest strengths, and Mr. Knightley's unselfish decision to move to Hartfield and give up Donwell to marry Emma is a mark of his true superiority as a man.

**Objects/Places**

**Highbury**

The village where the story takes place. A quiet little place located about sixteen miles from London.

**Hartfield**

The Woodhouse Estate. The setting for much of the novel.

**Randalls**

The new home of the Westons. A very nice estate located near Hartfield.

**Donwell Abbey**

The home of Mr. Knightley. This estate will be inherited by Emma's nephew unless Mr. Knightley marries.

**Brunswick Square**

The home of Mr. And Mrs. John Knightley and their children. Located in London.

**London**

The home of Mr. And Mrs. John Knightley. Frequently mentioned as many residents of Highbury visit there often.

**Abbey Mill Farms**

The home of the Martin family.

**Richmond**

A small town located between Highbury and London.

**Maple Grove Farms**

A farm incessantly mentioned by Miss Hawkins. Located near Bath.

**Bath**

A popular vacation spot for many people in England. Miss Hawkins is formerly of Bath, and Mr. Elton visits. Previously both Miss Fairfax and Mr. Churchill visited there separately as well.

**Fords**

The popular store in Highbury. Very well thought of by all of the residents of Highbury.

**Mrs. Goddard's**

The boarding school where Harriet lives. A highly regarded school in Highbury.

**Box Hill**

A popular picnic spot, located near Highbury.

**Social Concerns**

The dominant social danger explored in Emma is the propensity exhibited by the heroine to control others by manipulating their social lives. While we have seen the same tendency in some of Jane Austen's calculating villains, Emma's manipulations are naive, although sometimes just as hurtful. For example, she influences the illegitimate daughter of a man whom we find out to be a tradesman at the novel's end, Harriet Smith, to reject an earnest and appropriate suitor, Robert Martin, for the socially unattainable and inappropriate Mr. Elton, risking the destruction of two and possibly three characters' chances for happiness. In addition to this incident Emma also manipulates the naive and gullible Harriet in other ways. Harriet is only seventeen and looks up to Emma for guidance and lessons in manners. As the single, attractive unmarried daughter of a well-to-do hypochondriac widower who has just lost his daughter's caregiver and governess to marriage, Emma has almost free rein to practice her wiles, and her efforts and their effects are measured against the built-in social injustices that we see in all of Austen's novels: unequal distribution of wealth, the compromised financial and social position of women, the guilt by association suffered by so-called natural children, parental neglect, and the snobbery and superficiality of the socially well-placed that compound the sufferings of all marginalized citizens.

Countering Emma's machinations and working vigilantly to make the best out of the imperfect social world of the novel is Mr. Knightley. His name reflects his actions in the book, so much so that critics have complained he is unrealistically drawn. It is when Harriet sets her sights on him (instead of Mr. Elton, Emma's second candidate for Harriet) that Emma realizes that she herself desires to marry Mr. Knightley, and she is taught a severe lesson—a lesson of which Mr. Knightley has been aware all along—about the danger of using people like chess pieces.

As in Austen's other novels, the social world depicted in Emma is narrow—the chief characters are upper class, and even the disenfranchised do no work or regard work with horror (Jane Fairfax is decidedly unhappy about the prospect of becoming a governess), yet there are reminders of what lies beyond the well-furnished rooms, welltended grounds of the country estates, and well-married and well-off people. One especially pointed example appears at the end when we learn that Mrs. Weston's turkeys have all been stolen from her poultry house, and other estates have been likewise robbed. The episode ironically undercuts the "perfect happiness" of the ending and shows once more how aware Jane Austen was of the contradictions and inconsistencies of the world she wrote about.

**Techniques**

Mary Lascelles points out that in Emma Jane Austen has perfected a narrative technique of "self-effacement" that allows her to control and direct the reader's attention entirely unobtrusively. We never suspect that "our attention is being manipulated" (Jane Austen and Her Art), and she uses the buildup of the strain in the relationship between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax as an example, noting how Frank misses the hint contained in her statement about people of strong character being able to rid themselves of deleterious acquaintances. As in her other novels, the artistry and precision in the creation of character and use of language are a delight. Another critic cites Emma as the novel which has the most prismatic treatment of character, calling it "the novel of character," with Emma of course being the chief character, and the object of the plot "the gradual humiliation of self-conceit" in Emma. People who bother to dislike Emma, he argues, are missing the point: She is "simply a figure of fun,.. . whom we both love and laugh at." Aided by Austen's masterful use of irony, we at once see Emma's follies and deficiencies and admire her outgoing spirit, warmth, and open nature, a quality which Knightley finds present in Emma and wanting in Jane Fairfax. Austen's brilliant use of foil characters and lesser characters to leak information about major ones add to our sense of the complex treatment of the main character. Walton Litz notes "three stages of development in Emma's movement toward self-recognition," noting that initially she is blind both to her own emotions and to the outside world, but that with the assistance of Knightley in successive roles of "father, brother and finally lover" she becomes disillusioned about Elton, but remains confident about her powers of insight, then after she is again deceived by Frank Churchill's word game into believing he has genuine feeling for her, she is secondly made to feel the limitations "of her judgment and her egoistic imagination."

Knightley's role in Emma's moral education is so obviously authorial as to at least deflect the arrows of feminist criticism that see him, like Henry Tilney as a condescending, slightly domineering male. Like Jane Fairfax, his distance and reserve, required by this role, tend to efface him when set against the Byronic Frank Churchill and the vibrant Emma. His two most decisive acts, and they are largely private, are to avoid Emma after the Box Hill episode and to reclaim her after the news of Jane's and Frank's engagement is out. He is the chief contributor to the masterful control of point of view mentioned by Lascelles and that A.

Walton Litz sees as primary achievement of Emma: "By allowing us to share Emma's inner life without being limited by it, Jane Austen has avoided that dichotomy between the sympathetic imagination and critical judgment which runs through the earlier novels." ("The Limits of Freedom: Emma."

**Thematic Overview**

As in Austen's other work, the marriage plot predominates, but the central themes are found in the characters' interactions with each other and the degree of intelligence, humanity, capacity for growth, and kindness they bring to their inherited social positions. Emma, who has so many gifts, abuses them for much of the novel by trying to rearrange other people's lives—she manipulates Harriet Smith's emotions, hurts those of Miss Bates, all the while not knowing where her own feelings really lie. It is her discovery, guided by Knightley, both of her shortcomings and her real feelings that in a sense earn her betrothal to Knightley.

Yet Emma's machinations, reprehensible as they may be, serve not just to expose her moral shortcomings, but the failings of others and of the social system itself. This exposure is particularly evident in the secret engagement between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax—subterfuge forced upon the couple by superficial considerations about money and propriety, and made especially painful for Jane when Churchill flirts with other women in her presence and then ignores her, all to conceal the engagement. Indeed, an encounter between Emma and Churchill toward the end of the novel (Chapter 18 of Volume 3) shows each admitting to the other the manipulative nature they share.

Adding to the sense of complexity of the social system is the capricious ease with which some characters fall into personal happiness and prosperity without themselves suffering very much, while others achieve happiness only after long and patient struggle. Jane suffers far more than Frank in the course of their secret union, and Knightley is overtly jealous of the twenty-three-year-old Frank Churchill being handed a fortune and marrying Jane, while he is to marry Emma, whom he has known since she was a child, only after a long, careful vigil (Chapter 13, Volume 3). Churchill, in a slight way, is socially stigmatized by his own passions in arranging the secret engagement (which Jane at one point calls off), but yet his youthful rashness is ultimately rewarded. The coincidental death of Mrs. Churchill, his aunt, has also played right into his hands: She would have opposed the marriage and refused any financial backing.

Breaches of propriety and abuses of language find expression here as in Austen's other novels, most dramatically in the famous Box Hill outing, reminding one of Austen's pervasive concern with propriety and decorum for the sake of human dignity and happiness. In addition to Churchill's blatant flirting with Emma and its repercussions on Knightley and Jane Fairfax, there is Emma's abuse of Miss Bates and the events that lead up to it. After annoying Mrs. Elton, the self-proclaimed chaperon of the party, by preempting a leadership role— a perhaps forgivable breach—Emma starts a conversation game in which each person may contribute "one thing very clever, ... or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed." Miss Bates takes the bait and offers "three things very dull indeed." Emma quips back, '"Pardon me, but you will be limited as to number—only three at once.'" Miss Bates is very hurt, and apologizes about her loquacity to Mr.

Knightley, yet she also notes Emma's rudeness. Later, Knightley confronts Emma with her cruelty, reaffirming the imperative that well-placed, intelligent people need to behave in a caring manner towards others, regardless of their perceived lack of intelligence. The Box Hill sequence suggests how polite behavior can mask many complex passions and motives, but also that, as often as not, there is a reason for masking them.

Gossip is a breach of decorum and abuse of language that apparently only becomes so when it is revealed to its subjects, but characters who gossip sink in the author's, the reader's, and magnanimous characters' estimations. Frank Church gossips about the Eltons having married on slight acquaintance right after they are out of earshot, preparing for a discussion of capricious vs. steady marriages, and Jane Fairfax counters that people of strong character pull away from any "unfortunate acquaintance," anticipating her own breaking of their engagement, and underscoring hers and Churchill's divergent ratings on Austen's character scale. (Still, there remains the ever-present possibility of Churchill's own moral growth as the husband of Jane Fairfax.) Knightley, by contrast to Churchill, is a man of few words—his summary of Frank Churchill's life is one of the few times he speaks at all negatively about another. The banter at Box Hill, and the flirtation between Churchill and Emma leave Knightley so upset that he leaves. The episode leaves him very conscious about how the language of love can be abused and this awareness makes it almost impossible for him to propose to Emma. Ironically, it is both his knowledge of Churchill's engagement to Jane as well as a visit to his brother's family that remind him of his own feelings for Emma. In the end, "perfect happiness," in the form of a decidedly modest wedding between Emma and Knightley, prevails. It is as though ceremonies, like language, must be kept appropriately in check to validate the expression.

**Themes**

**Love**

Love is a theme that pervades this novel and appears on practically every page. Austen wrote about nothing else and *Emma* is no exception. The characters are all in various stages of being in love, falling in love or wishing they were in love. Emma in particular seems to want to avoid love, but has no problem arranging it for other people.

When Emma thinks she has fallen in love she does her best to convince herself that this is not the case and ends up thinking herself right back out of love. This will come in handy later on to prevent more misfortune, but her friend may not be able to say the same.

As several characters fall in and out of love, it is interesting to watch the events transpire. Harriet in particular seems to be a victim of love as someone who is perpetually being set up with men who care nothing for her. Harriet forms strong attachments to each of these people and her association with Emma, who continues to try to form a match for her, seems to be doing her great emotional harm.

In the end, love prevails and everything is set right with all of the characters. No one is left unhappy and all past issues are resolved.

**Society**

Society is discussed at length throughout the book, in particular ones given station in life. During this time period it was looked down upon if you sought a relationship outside of your social standing. Although women were allowed to marry to better themselves, their prospective mates must not be too far in status above them.

At times, the pressures of society seem almost too much to bear and it is striking to see how things have changed since this time in history. Much less credence is given to social standing in general circles.

Emma in particular holds society as an impregnable fortress that must not be breached. She works at being very proper, and intends to hold everyone around her to this high standard. She is constantly comparing everyone to Mr. Knightley, who appears to be a paragon of societal virtue and as such must be admired and imitated by all who wish to succeed.

It is amazing to see how Emma continues to hold on to her idea of society, even if it means losing a friendship of someone she has worked so hard to improve. Instead of being happy with the regular virtues of a friend, Emma feels it is her duty to improve everyone around her, especially if they are lacking in manners and carriage.

This constant need for approval must have surely been a drain on anyone who did not enjoy a high position in society.

**Repression**

Women in this time period were extremely repressed, and it was not uncommon for someone to never say exactly what they were thinking. Even if you could not stand the person to whom you were speaking, it was imperative that you never let them know. This has changed to some extent in our time, but there is still some remaining vestige of a standard of politeness.

However, in the time period in which this novel is set, it was an unforgivable offense to speak your mind or to answer a question honestly if it meant the offense of another. Emma is a terrific example of the lengths that people went through to avoid speaking their mind.

There is a double edged sword to this repression. While it may be overlooked if a person of wealth made a social gaffe, if you were not of a wealthy family you were under much more scrutiny and less likely to be forgiven.

The theme of repression runs throughout the novel and one can guess that Austen uses this to illustrate not only her own situation, but the situation of thousands of women during this time.

**Age of Reason or Age of Enlightenment**

Jane Austen was well acquainted with eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers such as Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose classical ideals of common sense and moderation were revived during the so-called Age of Reason or Age of Enlightenment. Respect for scientific principles, including human nature, were applied to all aspects of life. While emotion, sentiment, and individual imagination were not absent from Enlightenment thinking, reason and rational thought were highly prized. Characters in Austen's works suffer from her lightly ironic and satirical pen when their wit is unconnected with their powers of reason. (Miss Bates, for example, is kind but "ridiculous"; Mr. Woodhouse is loveable but neurotic about health issues and eating habits; the Eltons' powers of reason are dwarfed by their meanness and pretensions.) But Austen's most heroic characters (Mr. Knightley; the Emma at the end of the novel) have found a balanced way to blend reason and compassion, intellect and virtue.

**Manners and Morals**

Self-control, decorum, and polite conduct are hallmarks of civilized society, and to be thought well of in society was a mark of good breeding in Jane Austen's privileged world. Although Austen has too keen a sense of humor and too deep a desire for good to triumph to be considered a slave to convention, she imposes limitations on her characters to act with gentility at all occasions. Much can be forgiven in the fictional world of *Emma* if one's manners are proper and if one acts out of a sense of propriety and decency. Hence Frank Churchill is chastised for having deceived the neighbors but escapes condemnation on account of his good manners, gentility, and well-intentioned heart.

**Neoclassicism and Wit**

Late eighteenth-century England saw a resurgence of classical forms in art (a period often referred to as Neoclassical)the comic, the tragic, the epic, and heroic genres in literature reflected the universal truths of human nature. Jane Austen was writing during the Regency period, toward the end of the eighteenth century, when writers of the Romantic Movement were reacting with more lyrical and emotional content to the constraints and limits imposed by neoclassicists. Although Austen was not much influenced by romanticism, her witty dialogue and satire focuses on human foibles within a specific social context that fuels emotion, deep feeling, and sentiment. Austen's wit shows most boldly in her comedy of manners and situations when rules of conduct are broken (Mrs. Elton referring to Mr. Knightley with contemptible familiarity as "Knightley"); when one person's play on words hits on a truth that is unsuspected (Frank Churchill's declaring to Emma that the gift of the pianoforte was certainly "an offer of love"); or when human folly is at fault for uncomfortable social situations ("how peculiarly unlucky poor Mr. Elton was in being in the same room at once with the woman he had just married, the woman he had wanted to marry, and the woman whom he had been expected to marry").

**The Novel and Realism**

The novel, as a recognized genre, was born in the eighteenth century and in its earliest forms is associated with the writings of Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and Daniel Defoe. However, the novel was as much a female creation springing from the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Burney, Ann Radcliffe, and, of course, Jane Austen. The novel was indeed original in that it took for its subject the experiences of ordinary people (rather than mythological, historical, or legendary figures) and based its story on individual expressions of truth common to current times and culture. Jane Austen took the novel to new heights in dramatizing the domestic concerns of her characters. She encompassed the full spectrum of human behavior through situational detail common to her characters and language particular to each character's psychology. The rise of realism and the novel had much to do with the rise of literacy and the middle class as well as the examination and scrutiny by women of their roles in both public and domestic spheres.

**Style**

**Point of View**

The story is told in the 3rd person, using a nameless narrator who is privy to all that is going on. At times, the narrator is not impartial, and positively drips with sarcasm or disdain when describing certain characters. This is particularly useful if you are curious to see what will happen later in the book. Instead of being confined to one person's view, you can begin to see the way that all of the characters are woven together from a distance.

This is an interesting way for a novel of this time period to be crafted. Austen was one of the few women during this time period that actively wrote novels. You get the impression that Austen herself is the narrator of the story and that she actually knew some of the people that appear as characters within.

The use of a narrator allows the reader to form many conclusions as you are reading the story through an observer's eyes, instead of through a single character. You are allowed to see the faults of not only secondary characters, but the heroine as well. This method works very well in Emma, especially since there are so many characters that frequently appear and disappear.

The point of view does not change throughout the novel, remaining constant to the end. Although you may be misled at times by the narrator, especially in regards to several sub-plots, it is easier to follow the story line this way.

**Setting**

The novel is set in England during the early 1800's. This is the time in which Austen herself lived, and her descriptions of the landscape are very vivid. The setting is quite pastoral in nature and covers life in a small country village outside of London.

Although other places are spoken of, at times in length, the entire novel takes place in one location, Highbury. This village is described as idyllic and a very peaceful place to live. You have the usual village vicar, stores, boarding houses and manors that dotted the English countryside during the 19th century.

You are placed in the midst of the well-to-do of Highbury and do not venture beyond these constraints during the novel. While some of the poorer places of Highbury are visited, the majority of the time is spent at the manors and houses of the rich society members.

Highbury is a very typical English country village, full of people that were common during this time. You have everyone in their proper place in society and the setting is defined by this society.

**Language and Meaning**

The language used throughout the novel is very formal. Many words that have been changed in spelling, but contain the same meaning. Typically, these words include chuse instead of choose, shew instead of show and other words that were commonly used in the 19th Century.

Other examples include the way that some words are spread out, instead of being combined into one word as they are today and words that have fallen out of daily use in our current time. Word lovers should enjoy this book greatly, as many words are included that have fallen by the wayside in the literature of today.

Although this novel was written in the 19th century and contains some words that may be considered strange, the language is very timeless in nature. It is very simple to pick up the meaning of most of the words.

The sentence structure is very formal and is a good example of what was considered to be proper English during this time. The grammar also follows this rule, and it is interesting to note how this has changed throughout the years.

Austen is well known for writing works that are almost satirical in nature. Her characters at times appear as caricatures of the common members of society during this time. At times, some of them are almost unbelievable as they go through the motions of society.

**Structure**

The novel is divided into three volumes. Volumes One and Two contain 18 chapters and Volume Three has 19 chapters. Each volume serves to divide the story into different phases of the growth of the main character, Emma.

The first volume introduces us to Emma, and reveals her faults and good points. Her charity to the poor is mentioned alongside her somewhat contrary snobbishness. We are bystanders, watching Emma grow and learn not only about herself but about the other characters. Many of Emma's preconceived notions turn out to be incorrect and by Volume Three, Emma has completed her transformation into a much nicer human being.

Emma's character is not the only own that goes through a growth process in the three volumes. Harriet begins as a sweet and humble girl in Volume One, and in Volume Two you can see the effect her relationship with Emma is having on her personality. As Emma grows, Harriet seems to be moving backwards and becoming a much less nicer person. By Volume Three Emma realizes that she has created a monster with Harriet, who has become more like Emma was in the previous volumes. However, this is set right before the end of Volume Three as Harriet realizes her folly.

**Bildungsroman**

A German term, bildungs, and a French one, roman, combine to form a term that describes the novel of development or formation. This is a story about Emma's formation as a gentile woman. The author intends to show us how a youthful life matures, is educated, and, finally, transformed. In *Emma*, the heroine's development coincides with her attachment to those people in the novel (in particular Mr. Knightley) whose sterling qualities she also must adopt and make her own.

**Comedy of Manners**

A comedy begins in difficulty and ends happily. At the outset of Austen's novel, Emma is distressed by the thought of her own loneliness that must follow in the wake of Miss Taylor's marriage. The novel ends in the most suitable of companionship and marriage to Mr. Knightley. The major character is often set a task that needs completion or a lesson that needs to be learned. Emma must learn the true nature of discernment of mind and nobility of character. The term, comedy, comes from the Greek (meaning to make merry), and while it is usually lighthearted, a comedy can be serious in intent, as *Emma* certainly is. Austen's novel is not merely a light-hearted romp; its message of compassion and transformation is carefully illustrated. The comedy is not crude; on the contrary, it is subtly ironic and satirical. It revolves around the conventions and manners of an artificial, sophisticated society and depends on small, domestic intrigues and character foibles to generate amusement. Universal truths, however, can be gleaned from the small and particular.

**Fatal Flaw**

While Emma's personality flaws are not fatal as are those, for example, that mark major characters in Shakespeare's tragedies, hers prevent her from full participation in the life she aspires tothat of a gentile lady. Emma's flaws are treatable; they stem from an excess of imagination, a tendency to think too well of herself, and an inbred bias based on class superiority. At bottom she is well intended and compassionate, animated, intelligent, cheerful and patient. Readers are meant to like her, despite her flaws, but they are also meant to delight in her reinvention of self and the smoothing over of her rough edges.

**Gender Issues**

Jane Austen is not usually considered a feminist, at least not an active proponent of women's rights such as Mary Wollstonecraft (a contemporary of Austen's who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*). But she did believe that women were intelligent, creative equals to men, just as capable of accomplishment and just as liable to shortcomings and, therefore, that they should be judged according to their intelligence and character, just as men were. Emma vows never to marry. It is not because she dislikes men, but because she judges that her life will be just as fulfilling if she remains single. She is well aware of her personal resources, does not behave coquettishly in order to attract men, and prefers to make her own decisions about her welfare, behavior, and attitudes. She is open to instruction from Mr. Knightley, but it is also clear that she will continue to be a forceful, enlightened partner in their marriage.

**Mystery**

Austen keeps us in suspense as to the nature of the romantic intentions and motives of several of her characters, especially in regard to the central mystery of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. She employs the usual strategies of mystery writing to do so: planting clues, creating dialogue and actions that may have multiple meanings; introducing red herrings to throw us off the trail; and supplying motives that offer possible keys to solving the mystery. Much of the enjoyment in reading is due to Austen's mastery of these techniques, which compels readers to join Emma in playing detective.

**Point of View**

In *Emma*, there are two perspectives from which to understand the story and the psychology of its characters: that of the author/narrator and that of the heroine, Emma. This limited omniscience provides insights into characters; motives and personalities, but (with the exception of Emma) it does not allow readers to know what characters are thinking. The strategy makes sense in this story since the plot revolves around Emma's process of maturation. Emma's insights are not to be trusted, and so the reliable narrator provides the full truth of the matter.

**Satire**

A literary strategy for revealing the follies and shortcomings of humankind, satire blends humor and wit with critical attitudes toward human nature and social institutions. Irony, which reveals an often-comic dual reality between what is true and what is illusion, is one of Austen's favorite techniques. She uses it freely to create intrigue and situational comedy. For example, it is ironic when Emma attributes the gift of the pianoforte to Mr. Dixon and Frank Churchill (knowing it is of course from himself) pretends to agree with her suspicions by saying, "I can see it in no other light than as an offering of love." Emma is none the wiser, but the reader sees the double meaning. The Eltons come in for their fair share of satire since they are the perfect pretenders to gentility, being themselves coarse, pretentious, and uneducated.

**Social Setting**

The novel is set in late eighteenth century England (during the Regency period), in a small countryside village, structured with a conventional hierarchical social ladder. At the top are the landowners (Mr. Knightley, Mr. Woodhouse, and their families); next come the respectable male professionalsthe career military officers (Captain Weston, Colonel Campbell), doctors (Mr. Perry), solicitors, and vicars (Mr. Elton). The tradesmen have become more mobile (Mr. Cole), moving up in class as they gain wealth during the Industrial Revolution. Women also can earn respectable wages as teachers and governesses. The tenant farmers (Robert Martin) are near the bottom, followed by the hired servants, and the truly poor (the gypsies). The hierarchy is important to the story since Emma must learn not to be deceived by class when judging a person's character.

**Subplot**

A secondary plot that develops alongside the main action involving the heroine and which usually influences the major character and the action as a whole is called the subplot. In this case, Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill are the major characters involved in the intrigue of a secret engagement that leads to mistaken motives and suspicions among the neighbors of Highbury. The mystery of the subplot allows the other characters to reveal their true natures as they interact with the two newcomers.

**Historical Context**

Jane Austen's *Emma* belongs to a period in English history known as the Regency (1811—1820), during which King George III was considered incompetent to rule and the Prince of Wales acted as Regent. But as a literary figure writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Austen can be considered a descendant of the Age of Enlightenment (alternately referred to as the Age of Reason, the neoclassical period, or the Augustan Age). It was a time of economic upheaval, political unrest, and great cultural industry and change.

During much of Austen's life, Europe and England were caught up in the Napoleonic Wars. While the novel itself makes no reference to war, nor is the plot in any way connected to it, military men do play a role as characters. Indeed, it is interesting to note that domestic country life could go on much as usual, despite the political turmoil. The Enlightenment philosophy that sustained the French Revolution and spurred the search for natural laws that would explain human behavior and social institutions did not alter Britain's tradition of monarchy. But it did inspire writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and William Godwin to pen classic essays on the rights of man, the defense of a just revolution, and the pernicious effects of unjust rule.

The Industrial Revolution grew out of Enlightenment thinking that placed faith in the rational individual and in human progress and science. New inventions such as James Watt's steam engine, Crompton's "mule" (for making yarn), and Jethro Tull's seed planting drill, led to a great increase in agricultural and manufacturing production. When combined with the Enclosure Acts, which radically reduced the number of tenant farmers and drove landless people to cities for jobs, this revolution also led to the spread of contagious disease, an increase in infant mortality, and terrible overcrowding and dangerous working conditions in cities. Social status became more mobile with the growth of the middle class, and confusion about rank and custom prevailed. The wealth and stature of the Coles, for example, comes from trade, and while they belong to a class of people with whom Emma initially does not think she should mix, she eventually accepts their importance to the community. In Mr. Woodhouse's obsession over food and health, we might read an eccentric but practical wish to stay removed from the evils spawned by urban life. (One of the wonderful discoveries of the time was the smallpox vaccine.) And, through Emma, Austen pokes fun at Mr. Knightley's recurring discussions of agricultural improvements and his need to be in constant communication with his estate's steward.

During Jane Austen's time, satire was a popular literary tool used to critique social institutions and human evils. Ironically, writers associated with the Age of Reason and characterized by Cartesian logic (the thinking of Descartes, as in "I think; therefore, I am.") were not hesitant to parody logical thinking when it came to addressing social ills. Jonathan Swift's great satire, *A Modest Proposal*, for example, uses rational arguments to suggest that the Irish could solve their famine by eating their children. Jane Austen's targets are moral, domestic ones. She satirizes the over-indulgent, supercilious, proud, and coarse whose actions and behaviors lead to crimes of the heart.

It makes sense that the rise of the novel should accompany the rise of the middle class during the eighteenth century. Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe, Anne Radcliffe, Fanny Burney, and Samuel Richardson were experimenting with realism, and Jane Austen was their literary heir. The Romantic poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, and Shelley among the most prominent) were also emerging, reacting against the cold and impersonal intellectuality of Cartesian logic with lyricism and exotica. Austen was more inclined to observe a unity of formher novels have a well-conceived beginning, middle, and end, and all parts are related in an organic whole. For example, the action of the novel takes place in the tidy confines of one calendar year.

An influential philosopher of a slightly earlier time was John Locke. His seminal idea that human understanding evolves solely from the experience of the senses had a remarkable influence on the thinking of the next two centuries. The novel, with its focus on social and public discourse, evolved from Locke's stunning postulation that there was a normal shared truth in the collective memory of man and that new ideas did not emerge from private inspiration but from new combinations of old material. If external experience was the measure of knowledge, then essentially, truth was transparent and available to all. The nature of man was knowable and uniform. From this position, it is easy to see why satire and social documentary, science and empirical research prevailed. The influence of Lockian psychology on Jane Austen is suggested in her fondness for characters who show an appropriate public face and her penchant for discovering the true patterns of human nature through interactions in social settings. Other influential social thinkers include John Wesley, who founded the Methodist Church during the eighteenth century; Jean Jacques Rousseau, a radical philosophical voice of the time who distrusted science and valued emotion and intuition; and Adam Smith, called the father of modern economics.

**Critical Overview**

A collection of responses to Austen's novel (that includes, in fact, all the writers quoted below) is available on the Jane Austen Web site hosted by Brooklyn CUNY. Perhaps the most influential critique of *Emma* written during Jane Austen's lifetime was Sir Walter Scott's in the March 1816 edition of *Quarterly Review,* which that Web site contains. Scott described her as writing "a class of fictions which has arisen almost in our own times, and which draws the characters and incidents . . . more immediately from the current of ordinary life than was permitted by the former rules of the novel." For Scott, Austen's brand of realism was striking and unique, setting it apart from the false sentiment of typical romances or the lurid phantasms of Gothic tales. He praised Austen for "copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him."

Despite Scott's praise, however, Austen's novels were not a commercial success during her lifetime. Indeed, she was no self-promoter; she published her works anonymously. Because her novels came to be canonized as classics of English literature and because she was so venerated throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, it is difficult to imagine that Jane Austen's art garnered so little notice in her own time. Part of her obscurity as an artist might lie in the fact that most of her books were only actually published at the end of her life. *Sense and Sensibility* was her first book to see publication in 1811. She died in 1817. In the early 2000s, she was probably best known as the author of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) because of that novel's popularity.

The central argument over her accomplishments tends to revolve around two notions: her narratives' lack of passion and their narrow focus. Some accused her of being blinded by conservative, upper-class views and Enlightenment philosophy. Others wondered how she could ignore the great events of her time. Two critics might serve to represent the critical divide. In the mid-nineteenth century, George Henry Lewes, English philosopher and companion of author George Eliot, heralded Austen as "the greatest artist that has ever written." Where Charlotte Brontë found reason for scorn"Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works. . . . The passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood"Lewes found plenty of room for praise. He wrote, "There are heights and depths in human nature Miss Austen has never scaled nor fathomed, there are worlds of passionate existence into which she has never set foot; but although this is obvious to every reader, it is equally obvious that she has risked no failures by attempting to delineate that which she has not seen. Her circle may be restricted, but it is complete. Her world is a perfect orb, and vital. Life, as it presents itself to an English gentlewoman peacefully yet actively engaged in her quiet village, is mirrored in her works with a purity and fidelity that must endow them with interest for all time."

Austen's reputation began to grow in the nineteenth century. Professor of English Lilia Melani notes how Victorian scholar and essayist Thomas B. Macaulay praised "the marvellous and subtle distinctive traits" of Austen's characters, and that novelist E. M. Forster preferred to read Austen's work with "the mouth open and the mind closed." Melani also reports, "In the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf rescued [Austen] from the vilification of feminists when she wrote that [Austen] was 'mistress of much deeper emotion than appears on the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there.'"

Indeed, devotion to Jane Austen became so commonplace that readers were even satirized for their sentimental devotion to her. The "Janeites" were so called after the title of a short story by Rudyard Kipling (1924), which tells of soldiers forming a secret society based on their admiration and understanding of Jane Austen's novels, a source of solace during the horrors of World War I. The Cult of Janeites originated with the 1870 *Memoir* written by her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh. Wanting to portray her as conforming to strict Victorian values, he softened her image, painting her as a kindly old spinster aunt. Anthony Trollope enhanced the image by writing that her novels were "full of excellent teaching, and free from an idea or word that can pollute."

As of the early 2000s, Austen's work was the subject of countless essays, commentaries, dissertations, and media remakes. She is considered one of the greatest novelists in the history of English literature. An American Society of Jane Austen scholars features essays, biographies, book reviews, and web links; scholars continue to discuss and scrutinize her life and work for what it can tell them about her literary style and genius as well as the history, culture, and domestic sensibilities of small-town England in the early 1800s.

**Criticism**

1. Critical Essay #1
2. Critical Essay #2

**Critical Essay #1**

*Smith has a Ph.D. in English literature and is a freelance writer, tutor, and non-profit administrator. In this essay, Smith discusses how the comedy of manners and the bildungsroman meet in the education of* Emma*.*

Austen's genius for combining elements of the comedy of manners with the "coming of age" story, or *bildungsroman*, helped legitimize the novel as a literary genre. When *Emma* was published in 1816, the novel was still young. In the early eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, often referred to originators of the modern form, wrote what were to become the first canonized novels in British literature. Gothic horror, sentimental romance, satire in the service of reform, and epistolary moralizing characterized the bulk of popular narratives between the 1720s and the 1740s. By the turn of the next century, Austen had teased the novel into maturity by filtering out the sentimental, the fantastic, and the puritanical. In their place, she substituted ordinary domestic conflict, natural dialogue, a plot that progresses causally in real time and in familiar settings. Moreover, she complicated her stories with recognizable human motives, liberally leavened with wit, a dose of light irony, and sprinkled for the most part with sympathetic humor.

In keeping with the conventions of classical drama, Austen provides both enjoyment and instruction as she carefully constructs the events and circumstances under which Emma's education is to take place. We are introduced to the heroine in the first paragraph by a narrator who is both in and above the action, freely commenting on the story and its individual characters, much like a reporter, while closely identifying with them, in particular with Emma. In "'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and Free Indirect Style in *Emma*," Casey Finch and Peter Bowen suggest that the effect of this "free indirect style" works on us the way gossip might. Each character's thoughts are "at once perfectly private and absolutely open to public scrutiny." We are "taken in" almost helplessly by our desire both to know what happens to the principles and to belong to the community around which the story unfolds. The narrative voice is comforting. It acts as a corrective to the characters' whims and opinions and also serves to exculpate them (or most of them) from the guilt of their social gaffes. As Frances Ferguson points out in "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form," Emma (and by extension, the reader) is allowed to make mistakes and to learn "by trial and error" since "sociological knowledge . . . can be learned only experimentally."

Austen drops a clue as to what Emma's trials might involve in the very first sentence: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her." Something, Austen implies, is about to change. Our sheltered, privileged but intellectually alive heroine is about to experience some vexation that calls into question the early formation of her character under seemingly fortunate circumstances. We soon find that the first problem to be solved in Emma's social education curriculum is how to cope with boredom. The problem is both serious (her loneliness and isolation are real) and trivial (in as much as she seeks mere amusement and diversion). Emma's fixation on Harriet as the object of *her* tutelage is the ostensible solution to her problem and the first great irony of the novel since it is really Emma who needs improvement. The classical pattern of comedy slowly emerges whereby the protagonist is confronted with a difficulty, undertakes to remedy the situation by self-prescribed methods, and by a naïve series of missteps and adjustments, achieves a reformation of character that is ultimately rewarded, in this case by a new experiential self-awareness and a marriage that seals her achievement of elegance.

The action of *Emma* turns on the domestic scene, on the manners and morals of a country village society designed to represent all that is artificial and sophisticated, ridiculous and honorable, condescending and humble; in short, all the vices and virtues that plague and bless the human condition. It is crucial that we identify with Emma by seeing and judging through her eyes, for as a heroine, she is central to the human portrait, embodying those human qualities and frailties so often at war.

Emma is a meddler. She is presumptuous, haughty, and proud. In the wake of Miss Taylor's loss, she feels compelled to intercede in Harriet Smith's life in a way that brings trouble and shame not only on them both but on their neighbors as well. Moreover, Emma seems happily unaware of her own rectitude; her condescending attitude toward Harriet's beau, Robert Martin, is based on the "rightness" of traditional class structure ("The yeomanry," says Emma, "are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do."), and seems completely just and rational to her. Upon first meeting Harriet, Emma thinks, "Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her." Emma herself would take Harriet's improvement in hand. "[S]he would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers."

In the abstract, it is difficult to imagine a more smug protagonist. And yet, by chapter three, when Emma reflects with self-satisfaction on the good she can do Harriet, we have already decided to like her, despite, or perhaps because of, her psychological warts. Of course, Emma's animated spirit and intelligence attract our attention. She also has the advantages of wealth and beauty, but what really intrigues us is the pleasure we derive from eavesdropping on her. Austen invites us to critique her and commiserate with her. We feel superior when she expresses ugly sentiments; we are relieved and glad for her when she gets it right. The more we identify with Emma and her predicaments, the more minutely we are obliged to examine our own moral codes. Like Mr. Knightley, we are curious to know "what will become of her!" precisely because she is, like ourselves, a work in progress.

Artlessly, Emma draws us into intrigues that are partly a manifestation of her own active imagination. We don't mind because, like Mrs. Weston, we want to believe that, "[w]here Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred times," and if Emma is manipulative, "she will never lead any one really wrong." Austen's narrator confirms Mrs. Weston's good opinion of Emma. If Emma possesses "a mind delighted with its own ideas" she is also full of "real good-will." If she is spoiled by always having been "first" with her father, she is also extraordinarily patient with his tiresome eccentricity. And if she is an intriguer, she is capable of self-criticism and compassion, qualities illustrated in self-reflection when her hopes for Harriet and Mr. Elton are dashed. By the time Emma has "taught" Harriet to be smitten with Mr. Elton, we have been given clues enough that Emma is the real object of Mr. Elton's desire. Of course we relish the situational irony of Emma's self-congratulatory pronouncement that her efforts for Harriet have paid off: "There does seem to be a something in the air of Hartfield which gives love exactly the right direction, and sends it into the very channel where it ought to flow." But by the same token, when the full horror of Mr. Elton's real intentions are revealed as he attempts to "make love" to Emma in the coach scene, her misery and admission of culpability redeem her in our eyes: "Every part of it brought pain and humiliation . . . but, compared with the evil to Harriet, all was light; and she would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistaken . . . more disgraced by mis-judgment . . . could the effects of her blunders have been confined to herself."

Lest Emma's journey toward true gentility become too didactic or moralistic, Austen introduces a romantic and mysterious subplot involving Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, which offers the theme of Emma's education more opportunities for wit and satire. Austen's humor expresses delight with the spectacle of imperfection; however, the tone is far from mocking, for we, like Emma, are still in the dark as to the nature of the mystery, and it is only by a succession of ambiguous hints that we ourselves discover the truth. Although we find little to admire in Emma's jealousy of Jane Fairfax, we do not like Jane's cool reserve any more than Emma does. (By now we are addicted to the gossip.) Moreover, Frank Churchill's deceptions are so clever, that we are able to forgive Emma her favorite new intuition that Miss Fairfax is secretly in love with Mr. Dixon. Despite her foolish mistake with Harriet, Emma has not yet learned the virtue of discretion, but in sharing her gossipy supposition with Frank she is led on deliberately. In fact, the entire community (both the village folk and the literary folk who read the book for the first time) is involved in guessing who has sent Jane the gift of the pianoforte. It is with an almost voyeuristic curiosity, then, that we watch the mystery unfold as the characters gather for a dinner party at the Coles' place.

Frank Churchill's cleverness and acute perception as contrasted with Emma's naïve conjectures set the scene for a comic display of wit during this episode when the major characters come together as a community. The dialogue concerning Jane and the pianoforte is a case in point. "I may not have convinced you perhaps," says Emma to Frank, "but I am perfectly convinced myself that Mr. Dixon is a principal in the business." She is looking for validation of her secret romance idea. Frank Churchill is only too willing to provide it. "Indeed you injure me if you suppose me unconvinced. Your reasonings carry my judgment along with them entirely. . . . And now I can see it in no other light than as an offering of love." The passage is at once ironic and witty because it is Emma's very lack of considered "reasonings" that allows Frank Churchill to deceive her, and because the pianoforte is indeed an offering of love, but from Frank himself. But wit is a double-edged sword. It can easily injure another (Emma "unwitting" use of wit at Box Hill hurts Miss Bates by implying that the spinster will not be able to limit herself to saying three dull things) as it forces the truth out into the open. Throughout the novel, Austen reveals when wit is appropriate precisely by gauging its effects on members of the community.

The comedy of manners "works" as an educational device only when we have wit enough to see that all in the community are subject to the petty foibles and peccadilloes to which flesh is heir. Even Mr. Elton, whom we hold in disdain both for his cruel treatment of Harriet at the Crown Inn ball and his irredeemable, supercilious behavior after his marriage to the equally ill bred Augusta Hawkins, requires a small measure of sympathy: "how peculiarly unlucky poor Mr. Elton was in being in the same room at once with the woman he had just married, the woman he had wanted to marry, and the woman whom he had been expected to marry."

Austen tends to forgive the improprieties of those who see their own shortcomings but finds little toleration for those who cannot. Frank Churchill is berated for his intrigues and deceptions, especially as they are perceived to compromise the health and future of Jane Fairfax, but his honest apologies, his true regard for Jane, and his loyalty to her friends overcome most objections to his frailties. Mrs. Elton, on the other hand, has no such loyalties and makes no such apologies. The fact that her character, especially, remains "unreclaimed" is important. In "Self-Deception and Superiority Complex: Derangement of Hierarchy in Jane Austen's *Emma*, Shinobu Minma points out what other critics have also noted: the character of Mrs. Elton is meant to "expose" Emma's own pretensions of superiority and her "self-righteous patronage." She is Emma's exaggerated and not so subtle alter ego. Shinobu argues that Austen's intent is to show how the arrival of the nouveau riche (here he includes the Woodhouses who, while well established, "are not a landowning family") tended to upset the traditional hierarchical structure with their need for acceptance into the upper echelons of society. I would argue that Mrs. Elton, unlike Emma, never fits, not merely because of her parvenu pertness, but because she is only superficially self-aware and lacks the talent to belong to any community. Emma's capacity to belong, ultimately, is the true measure of her gentility.

That belonging is finally crucial to Emma's happiness, for like most others in the village, "Not one of them had the power of removal, or of effecting any material change of society. They must encounter each other, and make the best of it." Mrs. Elton considers herself preeminent in Highbury society by connection to and by the trappings of wealth and position. While Emma also feels herself superior and wants to remain so, her social position as "first" is challenged on moral grounds. She submits to the tests of character and admits her vulnerability and failures. Her wedding (the simplicity of which Mrs. Elton finds "extremely shabby") promises, in fact, to make her "first" in social stature, for Mr. Knightley is a member of the true landed gentry. However, that union comes only after Emma realizes the poverty of her own class-based prejudice and rectifies her social behavior. She finds her place and her humility when she can be civil to Miss Bates, accepting of Robert Martin, sociable with the Coles, and intimate with Jane Fairfax. We are left to imagine that because her education has been successful, she will find her happiness among that "small band of true friends" who have vouchsafed her membership among them.

**Source:** Kathy Smith, Critical Essay on *Emma*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

**Critical Essay #2**

*Holm is a freelance writer, as well as a genre novel and short story author. In this essay, Holm discusses how the writing style of this novel differs from a modern fiction novel.*

Jane Austen's *Emma* was first published in 1816. Today's readers will note that conventions in written storytelling have changed dramatically since the early 1800s. But Austen's style of storytelling effectively captures the societal nuances that are such a big part of this story. While it may be difficult for modern readers to absorb an older style of writing, it is possible that the older style of writing reflects how people generally communicated during that period in history. In this way, writing is a reflection of the consciousness of society and the trends in communication in general, whether in the 1800s or the twenty-first century. The difference between writing in the 1800s and writing today does not mean that one type of writing is superior to the other, but it does lead to interesting observations about how communication changes over time and what these changes might imply.

A present-day reader will notice that Austen's book reads differently than a contemporary fiction novel, beginning with the first sentence. Modern fiction is required to "hook" readers right away. Within the first several pages of contemporary fiction (or even the first several paragraphs), there must be the sense of danger, urgency, or a problem (perhaps the central story problem) that the protagonist must deal with. Modern readers have come to expect this. This expectation may be influenced by today's fast-paced life, competing distractions, entertainment media that are short and to the point, or an evolution over time of storytelling methods which have come to be more popular than others.

For a modern-day reader, it may be difficult to discern *Emma*'s central conflict, or the premise of the story, given the first several pages. By contemporary standards, the book starts out quite gently with the following statement: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition seemed to invite some of the best blessings of existence; and had very little to distress or vex her."

Compare this to the beginning of the 2002 bestseller *The Lovely Bones*, by Alice Sebold, which plunges the reader right into the first-person experience of a horrible murder, and one can see how much the conventions of fiction writing have changed in two centuries. Little seems urgent during much of the beginning of *Emma*, which was perhaps typical of 1800s stories but not typical today. One of the first senses of real urgency in *Emma*, which involves the protagonist, does not come until more than a quarter of the way into the book (at least one hundred pages from the beginning) when Elton and Emma are alone in a carriage and Elton reveals his passionate feelings for Emma.

This is one of the first times in the story that emotions from any of the characters truly flare, and there is suddenly a sense of the larger problem at hand. Emma's astute skills of human observation and her attempts at matchmaking have backfired. In a modern novel, a problem like this, or at least some real emotion with something at stake, would have presented itself earlier in the story.

A contemporary reader might assume, after the first few pages of *Emma*, that the governess named Miss Taylor is to be an important character in the story, since much narrative is devoted to Emma's consternation when Miss Taylor moves away. Yet this does not turn out to be the case. Emma does start the novel, as she is mentioned in the first sentence, and the reader might correctly assume (based on contemporary storytelling conventions) that she will be important, even though the urgency to the story is very slow in coming, by modern-day standards. A number of other minor characters make an immediate appearance. Six characters are introduced or mentioned in the first three pages: Emma, Mr. Woodhouse, Miss Taylor, Mr. Weston, Isabella, and Isabella's husband. This convention marks another difference from today's toned down, streamlined fiction. It is impossible to know whether this implies that readers in the 1800s were more patient or could tolerate more narrative complexity, or whether readers today need communications to be as streamlined and concise as possible.

Prose style in a novel such as *Emma* differs from a contemporary fiction novel. Sentences are often much longer than what today's readers are accustomed to. Dialogue is presented in huge chunks, compared to today's standards. Again, the urgent scene between Emma and Elton in the carriage illustrates both the use of sentences and dialogue in this novel. The way the scene is presented is also quite different than it might be written in contemporary fiction. The beginning of this explosive moment is almost lost in the prose.

To restrain him as much as might be . . . she was immediately preparing to speak . . . but scarcely had she begun, scarcely had they passed the sweep-gate and joined the other carriage, than she found her subject cut upher hand seizedher attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her.

It is a very roundabout way of getting to the main point, which reveals itself at the end of this somewhat long sentence. Mr. Elton is "making violent love" to Emma. By contemporary standards, this scene might be written quite differently, possibly using more dialogue, shorter sentences, and immediately presenting the urgency of the problem at hand: Mr. Elton completely surprises Emma when he passionately displays his feelings for her.

By contemporary story-writing standards, the dialogue in *Emma* often has a character speaking for a long time, longer than may sound natural to contemporary readers. A good example of this, toward the beginning of the book, features Emma and her father discussing their servant James. Mr. Woodhouse goes on for longer than may be comfortable to the modern reader.

I am very glad I did think of her. It was very lucky. . . . I am sure she would be a very good servant; she is a civil, pretty-spoken girl; I have a great opinion of her. Whenever I see her, she always curtseys and asks me how I do, in a very pretty manner. . . . I am sure she will be an excellent servant; and it will be a great comfort to poor Miss Taylor. . . . Whenever James goes over to his daughter, you know, she will be hearing of us. He will be able to tell her how we all are.

This large chunk of dialogue (with words omitted) is devoted to a servant and his daughter who have little importance in the novel's entirety, or its plot. Contemporary novels often emphasize a pragmatic approach, and very little shows up in the prose that does not advance the plot or serve as an important cue for the reader in some way.

Contemporary literature teachers often advise aspiring writers to "show, don't tell." This phrase is a common denominator of the resources available to writers who want to improve their craft. The narrative style in *Emma* seems to favor the "telling" side of the spectrum, in many cases. This implies no judgment on the quality of the writing, but is another good example of how immensely storytelling craft has changed since the early 1800s. A good example of narrative that tells more than it shows occurs shortly after Emma and her father discuss their servant.

Emma spared no exertions to maintain this happier flow of ideas, and hoped, by the help of backgammon, to get her father tolerably through the evening, and be attacked by no regrets but her own. The backgammon-table was placed; but a visitor immediately afterwards walked in and made it unnecessary.

The narrative then goes on to describe the visitor at great length, including his age, location of his home, and his "cheerful manner."

Contemporary storytelling would likely handle this series of events quiet differently. Mr. Knightley's (the above mentioned guest) appearance might be worded to stand out more effectively and the reader might not feel like such an observer but instead feel closer to the action. The wording "a visitor immediately afterwards walked in," which is almost lost and hidden at the end of a paragraph, "tells" the reader what is going on but might distance a contemporary reader. A more active way to "show" this action would be to set apart Knightley's arrival with a paragraph break. Then, instead of telling the reader that "a visitor walked in," the contemporary author might say something like, "Emma turned at a rustling behind her, and saw Mr. Knightly coming through the doorway." The contemporary author might immediately follow with dialogue and nuances that would gradually reveal (and "show" the reader) Knightley's character, age, and other details about this new character.

There are moments in *Emma* where the prose stands out with insight and conciseness. During one of these moments, readers gain deep insight into Emma because her honest and blunt (but unspoken) thoughts contrast so effectively with what she has to say. The irony of the contrast highlights the excruciating importance that people (and these characters) placed on social conventions during this time in history.

'Yes, good man!' thought Emma, 'but what has all that to do with taking likenesses? You know nothing of drawing. Don't pretend to be in raptures about mine. Keep your raptures for Harriet's face.'

These thoughts are in direct contrast to Emma's polite, socially mannered response, which follows immediately: "Well, if you give me such kind encouragement, Mr. Elton, I believe I shall try what I can do."

Obviously, social conventions and consideration of social standing were extremely important in England's early 1800s. Austin's style of writing, purposefully or not, reflects these societal considerations. In *Emma*, characters spend a lot of time discussing proper behavior, as well as the importance of class and social standing. Emma goes to great lengths to steer Harriet from a romance with a lowly farmer. Emma distresses internally at some length over Churchill's decision to go to London for a haircut. Clearly, these characters pay attention to details, and the modern reader might find them obsessed with such details. There is a self-consciousness that runs throughout most of the book, particularly as characters worry about how to behave in social situations.

Some change of countenance was necessary for each gentleman as they walked into Mrs. Weston's drawing-room. Mr. Elton must compose his joyous looks, and Mr. John Knightley disperse his ill-humour. Mr. Elton must smile less, and Mr. John Knightley more, to fit them for the place.

But, this is a part of the fascination with *Emma*; it is not only a story but an in-depth experience of life in nineteenth-century England. The writing style reflects the social concerns and nuances of the time and might well be difficult to recreate using modern storytelling methods. Critic Frances Ferguson of *Modern Language Quarterly* describes this predicament another way: for the characters in this novel, "desire is always triangulated" because individual choice is always being aligned with larger societal choices, or "what 'everyone' thinks." In the same article by Ferguson, D. H. Lawrence is quoted as saying that Austen "creates a world of 'personality' that identifies characters in terms of their interests and evaluations. In this way, societal trends are reflected in *Emma* and in the way that it reads. Perhaps this can be said of all writing.

### Marriage and Social Status

*Emma* is structured around a number of marriages recently consummated or anticipated, and, in each case, the match solidifies the participant’s social status. In Austen’s time, social status was determined by a combination of family background, reputation, and wealth—marriage was one of the main ways in which one could raise one’s social status. This method of social advancement was especially crucial to women, who were denied the possibility of improving their status through hard work or personal achievement.

Yet, the novel suggests, marrying too far above oneself leads to strife. Mr. Weston’s first marriage to Miss Churchill had ostensibly been a good move for him, because she came from a wealthy and well-connected family (Mr. Weston is a tradesman), but the inequality of the relationship caused hardship to both. He marries Mrs. Weston just prior to the novel’s opening, and this second marriage is happier because their social statuses are more equal—Mrs. Weston is a governess, and thus very fortunate to be rescued from her need to work by her marriage. Emma’s attempt to match Harriet with Mr. Elton is also shunned by the other characters as inappropriate. Since Harriet’s parentage is unknown, Emma believes that Harriet may have noble blood and encourages her to reject what turns out to be a more appropriate match with Robert Martin. By the time it is revealed that Harriet is the daughter of a tradesman, Emma admits that Mr. Martin is more suitable for her friend.

The relationship between marriage and social status creates hardship for other characters. Frank Churchill must keep his engagement to the orphan Jane Fairfax secret because his wealthy aunt would disapprove. Jane, in the absence of a good match, is forced to consider taking the position of a governess. The unmarried Miss Bates is threatened with increasing poverty without a husband to take care of her and her mother. Finally, the match between Emma and Mr. Knightley is considered a good one not only because they are well matched in temperament but also because they are well matched in social class.

### The Confined Nature of Women’s Existence

The novel’s limited, almost claustrophobic scope of action gives us a strong sense of the confined nature of a woman’s existence in early-nineteenth-century rural England. Emma possesses a great deal of intelligence and energy, but the best use she can make of these is to attempt to guide the marital destinies of her friends, a project that gets her into trouble. The alternative pastimes depicted in the book—social visits, charity visits, music, artistic endeavors—seem relatively trivial, at times even monotonous. Isabella is the only mother focused on in the story, and her portrayal suggests that a mother’s life offers a woman little use of her intellect. Yet, when Jane compares the governess profession to the slave trade, she makes it clear that the life of a working woman is in no way preferable to the idleness of a woman of fortune. The novel focuses on marriage because marriage offers women a chance to exert their power, if only for a brief time, and to affect their own destinies without adopting the labors or efforts of the working class. Participating in the rituals of courtship and accepting or rejecting proposals is perhaps the most active role that women are permitted to play in Emma’s world.

### The Blinding Power of Imagination

The novel offers sharply critical illustrations of the ways in which personal biases or desires blind objective judgment. Emma cannot understand the motives that guide Mr. Elton’s behavior because she imagines that he is in love with Harriet. She later admits to herself that “[s]he had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it.” Meanwhile, Mr. Elton’s feelings for Emma cause him to mistake her behavior for encouragement. The generally infallible Mr. Knightley cannot form an unbiased judgment of Frank Churchill because he is jealous of Frank’s claim on Emma, and Emma speaks cruelly of Jane because her vanity makes her jealous of Jane’s accomplishments. Emma’s biases cause her to invent an attachment between Harriet and Frank and blind her to the fact that Harriet actually has feelings for Knightley. At the same time, Frank’s desire to use Emma as a screen for his real preference causes him to believe mistakenly that she is aware of the situation between him and Jane. The admirable, frequently ironic detachment of the narrator allows us to see many of these misunderstandings before the characters do, along with the humorous aspects of their behavior. And the plot is powered by a series of realizations that permit each character to make fuller, more objective judgments.

### The Obstacles to Open Expression

The misunderstandings that permeate the novel are created, in part, by the conventions of social propriety. To differing degrees, characters are unable to express their feelings directly and openly, and their feelings are therefore mistaken. While the novel by no means suggests that the manners and rituals of social interaction should be eliminated, Austen implies that the overly clever, complex speech of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and Emma deserves censure. She presents Mr. Martin’s natural, warm, and direct manner of expressing himself as preferable to Mr. Elton’s ostentatious and insincere style of complimenting people. Frank too possesses a talent for telling people exactly what they want to hear, and Knightley’s suspicions of Frank’s integrity are proven valid when it turns out that Frank has been misleading Highbury and hiding his true feelings for Jane. The cleverness of Frank’s and Emma’s banter gets them both into trouble by upsetting Jane, about whom Emma says indiscreet and unfair things. Emma and Frank’s flirting at the Box Hill party hurts both Knightley and Jane. Moreover, Emma forgets herself to the extent that she cruelly insults Miss Bates. Austen seems to prefer Knightley and Martin’s tactful tacitness to the sometimes overly gregarious commentary of Emma, Mr. Elton, and Frank, and, as a result, the author gives the latter characters’ contrived speech a misleading influence on the story as a whole.

### Visits

The main events of the novel take place during visits that the characters pay to each other. The frequency and length of visits between characters indicates the level of intimacy and attachment between them. Frank’s frequent visits to Hartfield show his relationship with Emma to be close, though in hindsight we recognize that Frank also continually finds excuses to visit Jane. Mr. Knightley’s constant presence at Hartfield indicates his affection and regard for Emma. Emma encourages Harriet to limit a visit with the Martin family to fifteen minutes, because such a short visit clearly indicates that any former interest has been lost. Emma is chastised for her failure to visit Miss Bates and Jane more often; when she takes steps to rectify this situation, she indicates a new concern for Miss Bates and a new regard for Jane.

### Parties

More formal than visits, parties are organized around social conventions more than around individual attachments—Emma’s hosting a dinner party for Mrs. Elton, a woman she dislikes, exemplifies this characteristic. There are six important parties in the novel: the Christmas Eve party at Randalls, the dinner party at the Coles’, the dinner party given for Mrs. Elton, the dance at the Crown Inn, the morning party at Donwell Abbey, and the picnic at Box Hill. Each occasion provides the opportunity for social intrigue and misunderstandings, and for vanities to be satisfied and connections formed. Parties also give characters the chance to observe other people’s interactions. Knightley observes Emma’s behavior toward Frank and Frank’s behavior toward Jane. Parties are microcosms of the social interactions that make up the novel as a whole.

### Conversational Subtexts

Much of the dialogue in *Emma* has double or even triple meanings, with different characters interpreting a single comment in different ways. Sometimes these double meanings are apparent to individual characters, and sometimes they are apparent only to the alert reader. For example, when Mr. Elton says of Emma’s portrait of Harriet, “I cannot keep my eyes from it,” he means to compliment Emma, but she thinks he is complimenting Harriet. When, during the scene in which Mr. Knightley proposes to Emma, Emma says, “I seem to have been doomed to blindness,” Knightley believes she speaks of her blindness to Frank’s love of Jane, but she actually refers to her blindness about her own feelings. One of our main tasks in reading the novel is to decode all of the subtexts underlying seemingly casual interactions, just as the main characters must. The novel concludes by unraveling the mystery behind who loves whom, which allows us to understand Austen’s subtext more fully.

### The Riddle

Also known as charades, riddles in the novel take the form of elaborate wordplay. They symbolize the pervasive subtexts that wait to be decoded in characters’ larger social interactions. In Chapter 9, Mr. Elton presents a riddle to Emma and Harriet. Emma decodes it immediately, as “courtship,” but she decodes it wrongly in the sense that she believes it is meant for Harriet rather than herself. This wordplay also makes an appearance during the Box Hill party, when Mr. Weston makes an acrostic for Emma.

### The Word Game

Similar to the riddle, a word game is played in Chapter 41 between Emma, Frank, and Jane. It functions as a metaphor for the partial understandings and misunderstandings that exist among Emma, Frank, Jane, and Mr. Knightley. As Mr. Knightley looks on, Frank uses child’s blocks to create words for the ladies to decode, though these words mean different things to each of them. Frank makes the word “blunder,” which Jane understands as referring to a mistake he has just made, but whose meaning is opaque to Emma and Knightley. He then makes the word “Dixon,” which Emma understands as a joke on Jane, and which baffles Knightley. In truth, everyone “blunders” in different ways that evening, because no one possesses complete enough information to interpret correctly everything that is going on.

### Tokens of Affection

A number of objects in the novel take on symbolic significance as tokens of affection. Mr. Elton frames Emma’s portrait of Harriet as a symbol of affection for her, though Emma misunderstands it as a symbol of affection for Harriet. Harriet keeps court plaster and a pencil stub as souvenirs of Mr. Elton. When the engagement between Jane and Frank is briefly called off, she returns his letters to symbolize her relinquishment of his affection.

## **About *Emma***

As has often been done, one can — and with truth — say that *Emma,*like Jane Austen's other novels, deals with the subject of young ladies finding proper husbands. On the surface this is what the story line of *Emma*is about, but the total subject matter of the book concerns much more than that. Within the chosen limits of upper-middle-class society and within the even more limited strict feminine point of view for telling the story (all the events are presented from within a domestic or social context, though not, as has

been claimed, merely from within a drawing room), Miss Austen is fervently preoccupied with the way people behave. And this is the broad area of the moralist. If the moralist chooses, as Miss Austen does, to focus on the common rather than the exceptional behavior of people, he is more likely to write comedy than tragedy. If he is furthermore, a serious moralist, perceptive and understanding enough to keep a part, but only a part, of himself disengaged from the contradictory entanglements of his subject matter, his comedy has a good chance of being realized in terms of ironic satire.

The purpose of satire is to point a humorous finger at what is wrong, thereby indicating by implication what is right. Irony, as a method of achieving satire, makes use of contradictory, and sometimes ambiguous, opposites. Throughout *Emma*a deeper theme than that of woman finding the appropriate man for herself pervades the action: Emma Woodhouse's story is a progression in self-deception. Having since childhood been obliged to manage her father, she still likes to manage things and, particularly, people. In fact, among her associates she feels confident to manage everyone except Mr. Knightley. In her long-term attempt to preside over the marriage-ability of Harriet Smith, the natural daughter of hitherto unknown persons, Emma pits herself against something in which she fundamentally believes, the eighteenth century belief in class status whereby one simply should stay in the class into which he is born. (She is also incidentally pitting herself against the process of natural selection of a mate.) She deludes herself that Harriet's parents *may*have been of importance and hence tries to marry her off to people above her station in life. With absolutely no foundation in fact, this delusion stems solely from Emma's willful imagination.

Mr. George Knightley, on the other hand, in his sedate and kindly way accepts the social status quo and governs himself accordingly, even cautioning Emma about what she is doing. On this major thematic point, then, Emma represents imagination and Mr. Knightley stands for realistic reasoning (some would say merely realistic acceptance), two human characteristics that are so often in opposition that a contrasting pairing of them leads to irony. The story, of course, belongs primarily to Emma, for her willfulness most readily lends itself to satire and it is the feminine point of view that Jane Austen knows best. Still, for contrast, Mr. Knightley is often enough on the scene to keep us reminded of the other side of the coin, and Mr. Woodhouse, Emma's father, is constantly before us as an extreme example of one who wants to keep things the way they are. Of the two men, it is Mr. Woodhouse, so fearful of the least change that he bemoans the very thought of marriage and urges reason of health for not leaving his fireside even in good weather, who is the main object of satire on this side of the opposition.

What Miss Austen has done is to take two human traits and put them in different characters in order to make her contrast highly effective. They of course belong to human nature in general and represent those ironical mixed qualities of humanity and human relationships. Throughout the story a reader feels that somehow these extremes ideally should be able to meet on common ground and be resolved into something right. From her realistic point of departure as a storyteller, however, Miss Austen knows that relationships are tangential: hence the irony in the fact that the willfully imaginative Emma is the closest of blood relatives to the sedentary and senilely reasoning Mr. Woodhouse. There is doubtless significance far beyond the surface plotting of a love story in the fact that Miss Austen finally marries Emma and Mr. Knightley — that is, marries imagination and reason. Having realized her self-deception to some degree, Emma, with Mr. Knightley beside her, may now develop a proper balance within herself. Mr. Knightley, with Emma beside him, now seems to stand a good chance of never ending up on that dead-end street of static, senile reasoning at which Mr. Woodhouse has arrived. It is a common-ground marriage of reason and imagination, of head and heart, of common sense and goodness.

The ending of the story is, then, what we call a happy one. Or is it? In consideration of the bulk of the story about human foibles, Miss Austen gives us reason only for hope. She concludes the book with a final sentence about "the perfect happiness of the union." But this is said with at least a certain amount of tongue-in-cheek. Emma will not marry without her father's consent, and that comes only after the robbery of a nearby turkey house one night convinces Mr. Woodhouse that Mr. Knightley's living with them will be a needed protection. The close juxtaposition of this small causative event and the closing statement of the book connects the ridiculous with the more sublime and should at least make a reader wonder. Based on a moralistic realism as Miss Austen's satiric comedy is, it is not untypical of her in one twinkling to see both a robbed turkey house that will doubtless be replenished and a human household which, while it encloses a "perfect happiness of . . . union," also includes Mr. Woodhouse and the displacement of Mr. Knightley, who will now forego the ease and security of his own finer home, Donwell Abbey, in order to placate Emma and Mr. Woodhouse. Miss Austen's satire ends with an indication of what *might*be right; but she only points, for her moralistic realism will not let her be certain. She has seen too much of life for that. After all, who can say that Emma will never again try to manage things and people? In spite of robbers (and bridegrooms) this world is still full of turkeys, and Miss Austen knows that.

A brief word remains to be said about the ambiguity of opposites as Miss Austen sees them, and perhaps the best example is Emma's willful imagination, which stands in contrast to the reason of someone like Mr. Knightley. The ambiguity lies in a further contrast which embodies a contradiction. A lively imagination, in its purity, is an admirable and interesting quality. Perhaps willfulness, too, has its good points. But imagination can be too unfounded upon reality, and willfulness is perhaps too often misdirected because of its tendency to become presumptuous if not arrogant. Thus, on any one side of Miss Austen's oppositions there is ambiguity in that that side contains both good and bad inextricably fused. For this reason we can like and even admire Emma for the lively energy of her imagination, for her readiness to make amends, her benevolence, her affirmative sense of direction, while we are also critical of what she is doing.

Similarly we may feel that Mr. Knightley's reasoning does not make allowance for an adequate degree of imagination. Miss Bates' interminable talkativeness, which so comically places the petty and the significant on the same level, never includes a merciful consideration for the listener in spite of the fact that she is one of the kindest and best intentioned people who ever lived on or off a page. In Miss Austen's world (and who can prove that her world is not ours?) no good quality seems to be without some negative alloy. For this reason her satire not only probes the contradictory nature of opposite human qualities (contradictory because they are of one world and one humanity), but also considers the ambiguous mixture of good and bad in any one of these opposites.

Just as she never presents an actual emotional love scene (the one exception is found in *Emma*when Mr. Knightley declares the passion of his love to Emma) because her interest is in discovering the *effects*of emotion, she seems never to question *why*contradictions and ambiguities exist because she is basically a realist rather than a theorist. Rather than write of man and his relation to God or politics or abstract ideas, she wrote of human relationships. This may be why, in a letter to her nephew, she once referred to her fiction as "the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour." Such a statement may, of course, be merely tongue-in-cheek modesty; but it is indicative of the fact that she deliberately limited her writing efforts not only to the provincial society which she knew and to the feminine point of view that was naturally hers but also to the mundane level of human behavior. Nonetheless, most readers of *Emma*find there the rich opacity, the delicacy, and the true polish of fine ivory, but few would agree that it is only two inches wide.

# Emma Money, Marriage, and the Women of "Emma"

Emma is the first of [Jane Austen](https://www.gradesaver.com/author/jane-austen)’s novels to feature a heroine who is free from financial concerns. While other Austen heroines view marriage as a financial necessity, Emma expresses no interest or desire to marry for the majority of the novel. Her fortune assures her of independence and security. In fact, her chief concern is that marriage will prevent her from maintaining that independence. Emma is also a unique Austen heroine because of her lack of romantic sensibilities. While Marianne Dashwood of “[Sense and Sensibility](https://www.gradesaver.com/sense-and-sensibility),” Anne Elliot of “Persuasion,” and Jane Bennet of “[Pride and Prejudice](https://www.gradesaver.com/pride-and-prejudice)” have each of their actions qualified by their love, Emma is remarkable self-possessed and views love only from a detached and almost masculine standpoint.

It is only after Emma discovers her true feelings for Mr. Knightley near the end of the novel that Emma transforms into a standard “romantic” heroine. The reader discovers that Emma’s detached view of love was nothing more than a naïve misconception. She was proud to play matchmaker in Highbury but served only to give proof of her poor understanding of the emotion. Significantly, once Emma discovers the meaning of love, she is more than happy to abandon her rule against marriage. Yet, even then, Austen assures the readers that Emma’s newfound love will not interfere with her independence: Mr. Knightley already has a fortune of his own and even agrees to move into Hartfield after the marriage.

Although Emma is clearly a departure from typical Austen heroines, the supporting female characters in the novel still highlight the difficulties facing women without financial independence. [Miss Bates](https://www.gradesaver.com/emma/study-guide/character-list#miss-bates), [Jane Fairfax](https://www.gradesaver.com/emma/study-guide/character-list#jane-fairfax), and [Harriet Smith](https://www.gradesaver.com/emma/study-guide/character-list#harriet-smith) exemplify three possible scenarios for women who lack Emma’s high social status. Miss Bates never married and is dependent on her mother’s minimal income. With each passing year, her poverty increases, as does the amount of derision that she must endure from those around her. Harriet is equally poor and dependent on those around her. The daughter of a tradesman, she has few prospects until [Robert Martin](https://www.gradesaver.com/emma/study-guide/character-list#robert-martin), and, thanks to Emma’s influence, is always in danger of stretching beyond her social capabilities. Jane Fairfax serves as a foil to Emma, and, in many ways, seems to be more appropriate as an Austen heroine. She possesses all of Emma’s grace, beauty, and intelligence but lacks the income of a gentleman’s daughter, a fact that seems to doom her to a life as a governess.

Through the characterization of Emma and her financially insecure counterparts, Austen offers a sharp critique of a society that gives so few options to women. Emma has the best opportunities and the brightest future as a result of her wealth and independence. Yet, despite all of her skills, she still only has two possible paths: marriage or spinsterhood. In the end, Austen gives her heroine the more appropriate choice but still ensures that Emma only marries a man who will allow her to maintain her independence.

Harriet and Jane Fairfax also receive their portion of contentment: Harriet marries Robert Martin, the male figure most suited to her, while Jane Fairfax ultimately marries [Frank Churchill](https://www.gradesaver.com/emma/study-guide/character-list#frank-churchill) and achieves the high social status that she deserved all along. For both of these characters, marriage is the only possible option to prevent poverty and social stigma. Whether or not the marriages end happily, Austen assures her readers that the characters will at least have some financial security.

Only Miss Bates remains the perpetual spinster, serving as a warning to those women who are unable to achieve matrimony during their youth. Ironically, this is the path that Austen herself was forced to follow. Neither she nor her sister ever married, and Austen was dependent on the charity of her brothers for most of her adult life. Because of Austen’s personal financial difficulties, it is not surprising that almost all of her heroines struggle with similar issues (all of which are typically resolved by marriage at the end of the novel). Emma then becomes a sort of idealized vision of the best possible scenario for an intelligent woman to maintain her independence. Yet, as Austen notes by the end of the book, even a woman like Emma cannot help but get married in the end.

## Marriage

The critic Ronald Blythe said that Emma "is really about marriage as an ordeal." Marriage is the linchpin of civilized society. The choice of a marriage partner is dictated by class, beauty, wealth, and affection, but it's hard to make right choices given the severity of social constraints and community obligations. The novel follows three couples who enter the marriage ordeal and emerge victorious.

Emma must go through some trials before she realizes that [Mr. Knightley](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Mr._Knightley) is essential to her happiness. Harriet wins the marriage lottery early on, when Mr. Martin proposes to her, but almost loses the prize because of her friend's meddling. [Jane Fairfax](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Jane_Fairfax) and [Frank Churchill](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Frank_Churchill) are in love, but they lack the courage and independent means to flout convention. Fate conspires to unite them after Frank's controlling aunt dies.

## Self-Knowledge

When people face up to their character flaws, they mature in their understanding of themselves and others and have a greater chance at happiness. Emma is a conceited young woman who overestimates her powers of observation and discernment. When Emma loses her friend and confidante, she quickly latches onto a young, inexperienced woman, [Harriet Smith](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Harriet_Smith). Emma takes it upon herself to find a match for Harriet who will raise her social standing. Emma claims she will never marry, but in fact she loves Mr. George Knightley. She does not realize the extent of her love, which is something she takes for granted because he has always been a part of her life. When Harriet claims she is in love with [Mr. Knightley](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Mr._Knightley) and that her feelings are returned, Emma realizes how much she loves her old friend.

Another way in which Emma grows in self-knowledge is through the instruction of Mr. Knightley, who is willing to point out her follies and flaws. After her attempt to match Harriet with [Mr. Elton](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Mr._Elton) fails disastrously, she realizes that her perceptions about other people are sometimes far off the mark. She also guesses incorrectly about the feelings and intentions of [Jane Fairfax](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Jane_Fairfax) and [Frank Churchill](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/character-analysis/#Frank_Churchill), misjudges Robert Martin, and fails to understand—until he tells her—that Mr. Knightley is in love with her. By the end of the story, Emma is willing to own her limitations and ready to follow the dictates of her heart.

## Class and Gender Oppression

In Emma, women's livelihood and ability to make choices are constrained by their obligation to marry well. The women of the Regency period in England had few legal rights and were essentially treated as children. Their own children did not legally belong to them, they could not inherit property, and any money possessed by their families would pass to their husbands upon marriage. Job opportunities for middle-class women were limited; the only work they could respectably do (so that they would not be shunned by members of their own class) was to serve as a lady's companion or teach the children of the upper-middle class or aristocracy. In both of these roles, the women in question were treated as servants, on a slightly higher level than the maids or the coachmen.

If a woman did not have any money (which essentially served as a dowry), she could not expect to marry well. If she was lucky—and especially if she was attractive—she might be able to marry someone in her class or even above her class. If she was plain and uneducated, she would likely remain a "burden" on her family members.

Often a woman in this position was not treated well. If she did have money, she had to be careful to avoid being forced into an unsuitable marriage by her relatives, who might want to improve their social class through her marriage. Love was often the last consideration in marriage. Yet, by [Austen](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Emma/author/)'s time, ideas about love and marriage were changing, and the marriageable women in Emma expect to—and do achieve—matches that are based on affection.