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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.