

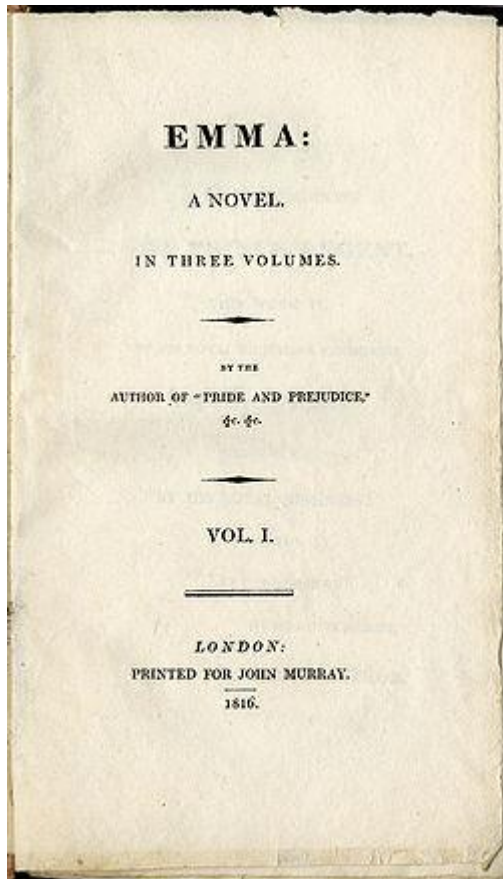
Emma

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Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)

This article is about the Jane Austen novel. For other uses, see [Emma \(disambiguation\)](#).

Emma



Frontispiece of first volume

Author(s)	Jane Austen
Country	United Kingdom
Language	English
Genre(s)	Novel
Publisher	John Murray
Publication date	December 1815 ; title page says 1816
Media type	Print
Preceded by	Mansfield Park
Followed by	Northanger Abbey

Emma, by [Jane Austen](#), is a novel about the perils of misconstrued romance. The novel was first published in December [1815](#). As in her other novels, Austen explores the concerns and

difficulties of genteel women living in [Georgian-Regency](#) England; she also creates a lively [comedy of manners](#) among her characters.

Before she began the novel, Austen wrote, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like."^[1] In the very first sentence she introduces the title character as "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich." Emma, however, is also rather spoiled; she greatly overestimates her own matchmaking abilities; and she is blind to the dangers of meddling in other people's lives and is often mistaken about the meanings of others' actions.

Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Plot summary](#)
- [2 Principal characters](#)
- [3 Criticism and themes](#)
 - [3.1 Criticism](#)
 - [3.2 Themes](#)
 - [3.3 Emma, or the banality of the real world](#)
- [4 Film, television and stage adaptations](#)
- [5 Popular culture](#)
- [6 See also](#)
- [7 Notes](#)
- [8 External links](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

Emma Woodhouse, aged 20 at the start of the novel, is a young, beautiful, witty, and privileged woman in [Regency England](#). She lives on the fictional estate of Hartfield in [Surrey](#) in the village of Highbury with her elderly widowed father, a [hypochondriac](#) who is excessively concerned for the health and safety of his loved ones. Emma's friend and only critic is the gentlemanly [George Knightley](#), her neighbour from the adjacent estate of Donwell, and the brother of her elder sister Isabella's husband. As the novel opens, Emma has just attended the wedding of Miss Taylor, her best friend and former [governess](#). Having introduced Miss Taylor to her future husband, Mr. Weston, Emma takes credit for their marriage, and decides that she rather likes [matchmaking](#).

Against Mr. Knightley's advice, Emma forges ahead with her new interest, and tries to match her new friend Harriet Smith, a sweet but none-too-bright [parlour boarder](#) of seventeen — described as "the [natural](#) daughter of somebody" — to Mr. Elton, the local [vicar](#). Emma becomes convinced that Mr. Elton's constant attentions are a result of his attraction and growing love for Harriet.

But before events can unfold as she plans, Emma must first persuade Harriet to refuse an advantageous marriage proposal. Her suitor is a respectable young gentleman farmer, Mr. Martin, but Emma snobbishly decides he isn't good enough for Harriet. Against her own wishes, the easily-influenced Harriet rejects Mr. Martin.

Emma's schemes go awry when Mr. Elton, a social climber, proposes to Emma herself. Emma's friends had understood that Mr. Elton's attentions were the result of his attraction to Emma and his ambition in marrying her, although she had not. Emma, rather shocked, tells Mr. Elton that she had thought him attached to Harriet; however Elton is outraged at the very idea of marrying the socially inferior Harriet. After Emma rejects Mr. Elton, he leaves for a while for a sojourn in [Bath](#), and Harriet fancies herself heartbroken. Emma now tries to convince Harriet that Mr. Elton is beneath her after all.

Mr. Elton, as Emma's misconceptions of his character melt away, reveals himself to be more and more arrogant and pompous. He soon returns from Bath with another newcomer, a vulgar but rich wife who becomes part of Emma's social circle, though the two women soon loathe each other. The Eltons treat the still lovestruck Harriet deplorably, culminating with Mr Elton very publicly snubbing Harriet at a dance. Mr Knightley, who had until this moment refrained from dancing, gallantly steps in to "save" Harriet, much to Emma's gratification.

An interesting development is the arrival in the neighbourhood of Frank Churchill, Mr. Weston's son who had been given to his deceased wife's relatives to bring up. Frank is now Mrs. Weston's stepson; Emma has never met him, but she has a long-standing interest in doing so.

A third new character is the orphaned Jane Fairfax, the reserved but beautiful and elegant niece of Emma's impoverished neighbour, the talkative Miss Bates who lives with her deaf, widowed mother. Miss Bates is an aging [spinster](#), well-meaning but increasingly poor; Emma strives to be polite and kind to her, but is irritated by her dull and incessant chattering. Jane, very accomplished musically, is Miss Bates' pride and joy; Emma envies her talent and initially dislikes her for her apparent coldness and reserve. Jane had lived with Miss Bates until she was nine, but Colonel Campbell, a friend indebted to her father for seeing him through a life-threatening illness, welcomed her into his own home where she became fast friends with his unfortunately plain daughter and received a first-rate education. On the marriage of Miss Campbell, Jane returned to her Bates relations, ostensibly to regain her health and prepare to earn her living as a governess.

In her eagerness to find some sort of fault with Jane — and also to find something to amuse her in her pleasant but dull village — Emma indulges in the fantasy, apparently shared by Frank, that Jane was an object of admiration for Miss Campbell's husband, Mr. Dixon, and that it is for this reason she has returned home instead of going to Ireland to visit them. This suspicion is further fueled by the arrival of a piano for Jane from a mysterious anonymous benefactor.

Emma tries to make herself fall in love with Frank largely because everyone says they make a handsome couple. Frank seems to everyone to have Emma as his object, and the two flirt together in public, at the evening piano and on a day-trip to [Box Hill](#), a local beauty spot. Emma ultimately decides, however, that Frank would suit Harriet better after an episode where Frank 'saves' Harriet from a band of [Gypsies](#). At this time, Mrs. Weston wonders if Emma's old friend Mr. Knightley might have taken a fancy to Jane. Emma promptly decides that she does not want Mr. Knightley to marry anyone, but rather than further explore these feelings, she claims that this is because she wants her little nephew Henry to inherit the family property.

When Mr. Knightley scolds her for a thoughtless insult to Miss Bates, Emma is privately ashamed and tries to atone by going to visit Miss Bates. Mr. Knightley is surprised but deeply impressed by Emma's recognition of her wrongdoing and attempt to make amends; this leads to a more meaningful affection for Emma. Meanwhile, Jane reportedly becomes ill, but refuses to see Emma or accept her gifts. Emma thinks Jane's behaviour stems from Emma's previous neglect of and coldness towards Jane. Jane also suddenly accepts an offer for a governess position from one of Mrs. Elton's friends.

Soon thereafter, Emma learns why Jane had behaved strangely: it's because Jane and Frank have been secretly engaged for almost a year. Why Frank pretended to admire Emma was to disguise his clandestine relationship with Jane. Jane's distress had been because she and Frank had quarrelled over his behaviour with Emma and his unguarded behaviour towards herself, something Jane believes could put them at risk of discovery. Then Frank's overbearing aunt, whose opposition to the engagement Frank had feared, dies, and so Frank and Jane's engagement becomes public.

When Harriet confides that she thinks Mr. Knightley is in love with her, jealousy makes Emma realize she loves him herself. Mr. Knightley has been in love with Emma all along, and after the engagement of Jane and Frank is revealed, he proposes to her, and she joyfully accepts.

Shortly thereafter, Harriet reconciles with her young farmer, Mr. Martin, and they marry. Jane and Emma reconcile before Jane and Frank go to live in [Yorkshire](#). Finally, Emma and Mr. Knightley decide that after their marriage they will spare Emma's father loneliness and distress by living with him at Hartfield, instead of settling at the Knightley estate, Donwell.

[\[edit\]](#) Principal characters

[Emma Woodhouse](#), the protagonist of the story, is a beautiful, high-spirited, intelligent, and 'slightly' spoiled young woman of the age of twenty. Her mother died when she was very young, and she has been mistress of the house ever since, certainly since her older sister got married. Although intelligent, she lacks the necessary discipline to practice or study anything in depth. She is portrayed as very compassionate to the poor, but at the same time has a strong sense of class. Her affection for and patience towards her hypochondriac father are also noteworthy. While she is in many ways mature for her age, Emma makes some serious mistakes, mainly due to her conviction that she is always right and her lack of real world experience. Although she has vowed she will never ever marry, she delights in making matches for others. She seems unable to fall in love, until jealousy makes her realise that she has loved Mr. Knightley all along.

[George Knightley](#), about thirty-seven years old, is a close friend of Emma, and her only critic, although he cares deeply for her. Mr. Knightley is the owner of the estate of Donwell Abbey, which includes extensive grounds and a farm. He is the elder brother of Mr. John Knightley, the husband of Emma's elder sister Isabella. Mr. Knightley is very annoyed with Emma for persuading Harriet to turn down Mr. Martin, thinking that the advantage is all on Harriet's side; he also warns Emma against matchmaking Harriet with Mr. Elton, correctly guessing that Mr. Elton has a much higher opinion of himself. He is suspicious of Frank Churchill and his motives; although his suspicion turns out to be based mainly on jealousy of

the younger man, his instincts are proven correct by the revelation that Frank Churchill is not all that he seems.

Mr. Frank Churchill, Mr. Weston's son by his previous marriage, is an amiable young man, who manages to be liked by everyone except Mr. Knightley, who considers him quite immature, although this partially results from his jealousy of Frank's supposed 'pursuit' of Emma. After his mother's death, he was raised by his wealthy aunt and uncle, whose last name he took. Frank enjoys dancing and music and living life to the fullest. Frank may be viewed as a careless but less villainous version of characters from other Austen novels, such as Mr. Wickham from [*Pride and Prejudice*](#) or Willoughby from [*Sense and Sensibility*](#).

Jane Fairfax, an orphan whose only family consists of an aunt, Miss Bates, and a grandmother, Mrs. Bates, is regarded as a very beautiful, clever, and elegant woman, with the best of manners, and is also very well-educated and exceptionally talented at singing and playing the piano; in fact, she is the sole person whom Emma envies. She has little fortune, however, and seems destined to become a governess – a prospect she dislikes.

Harriet Smith, a young friend of Emma's, is a very pretty but unsophisticated girl who is too easily led by others, especially Emma; she has been educated at a nearby school. The illegitimate daughter of initially unknown parents, she is revealed in the last chapter to be the daughter of a fairly rich and decent tradesman, although not a "[gentleman](#)". Emma takes Harriet under her wing early in the novel, and she becomes the subject of some of Emma's misguided matchmaking attempts. Harriet initially rebuffs a marriage proposal from farmer Robert Martin because of Emma's belief that he is beneath her, despite Harriet's own doubtful origins. She then develops a passion for Mr. Knightley, which is the catalyst for Emma realising her own feelings. Ultimately, Harriet and Mr. Martin are wed, despite Emma's initial meddling. The now wiser Emma approves of the match.

Philip Elton is a good-looking, well mannered, and ambitious young vicar. Emma wants him to marry Harriet; he wants to marry Emma. Mr. Elton displays his mercenary nature by quickly marrying another woman of means after Emma's rejection.

Augusta Elton, formerly Miss Hawkins, is Mr. Elton's wife. She is moneyed but lacks breeding and possesses moderately good manners, at best. She is a boasting, domineering, pretentious woman who likes to be the centre of attention and is generally disliked by Emma and her circle. She patronises Jane, which earns Jane the sympathy of others.

Mrs. Anne Weston, formerly Miss Taylor, was Emma's governess for sixteen years and remains her closest friend and confidante after she marries Mr. Weston in the opening chapter. She is a sensible woman who adores and idolises Emma. Mrs. Weston acts as a surrogate mother to her former charge and, occasionally, as a voice of moderation and reason, although she is the one to yield in arguments more often than not.

Mr. Weston, a recently wealthy man living in the vicinity of Hartfield, marries Emma's former governess, Miss Taylor, and by his first marriage is father to Frank Churchill, who was adopted and raised by his late wife's brother and sister-in-law. Mr. Weston is a sanguine, optimistic man, who enjoys socialising.

Miss Bates is a friendly, garrulous spinster whose mother, Mrs. Bates, is a friend of Mr. Woodhouse. Her accomplished niece, Jane Fairfax, is the light of her life. One day, Emma

humiliates her on a day out in the country, when she pointedly alludes to her tiresome prolixity. Afterward, Mr. Knightley sternly rebukes Emma. Shamed, Emma tries to make amends.

Mr. Henry Woodhouse, Emma's father, is always concerned for his own health and comfort, and to the extent that it does not interfere with his own, the health and comfort of his friends. He is a [valetudinarian](#) (i.e., similar to a [hypochondriac](#) but more likely to be genuinely ill). He assumes a great many things are hazardous to one's health, and is generally a difficult person to handle because he is always fussing about the trifling things which bother him and which he assumes must bother everyone else just the same, to the point of trying to convince his visitors to deny foods he considers too rich. He laments that "poor Isabella" and especially "poor Miss Taylor" have married and been taken away from him, because since he is unhappy about their being gone, he assumes they must be miserable as well; moreover, he dislikes change in general, and marriage is a form of change.

Isabella Knightley (née Woodhouse) is the elder sister of Emma and daughter of Henry. She is married to John Knightley, and spends much of her time at home caring for her five children (Henry, 'little' John, Bella, 'little' Emma, and George).

John Knightley is Isabella's husband and George's younger brother. He is an old acquaintance of Jane Fairfax. He indulges his family's desires for visits and vacations, although he would prefer to stay at home, especially if the weather is less than perfect.

[\[edit\]](#) Criticism and themes

[\[edit\]](#) Criticism

Early reviews of *Emma* were generally favourable, but there were some criticisms about the lack of story. John Murray remarked that it lacked "incident and Romance";^[2] [Maria Edgeworth](#), the author of [Belinda](#), to whom Austen had sent a complimentary copy, wrote:^[2]

there was no story in it, except that Miss Emma found that the man whom she designed for Harriet's lover was an admirer of her own – & he was affronted at being refused by Emma & Harriet wore the willow – and *smooth, thin water-gruel* is according to Emma's father's opinion a very good thing & it is very difficult to make a cook understand what you mean by *smooth, thin water-gruel*!!

[\[edit\]](#) Themes

Emma Woodhouse is the first Austen heroine with no financial concerns, which, she declares to the naïve Miss Smith, is the reason that she has no inducement to marry. This is a great departure from Austen's other novels, in which the quest for marriage and financial security are often important themes in the stories. Emma's ample financial resources put her in a much more privileged position than the heroines of Austen's earlier works, such as [Sense and Sensibility](#) and [Pride and Prejudice](#). Jane Fairfax's prospects, in contrast, are bleak.

In contrast to other Austen heroines Emma seems immune to romantic attraction. Unlike [Marianne Dashwood](#), who is attracted to the wrong man before she settles on the right one, Emma shows no romantic interest in the men she meets. She is genuinely surprised (and

somewhat disgusted) when Mr. Elton declares his love for her—much in the way [Elizabeth Bennet](#) singularly reacts to the obsequious Mr. Collins. Her fancy for Frank Churchill represents more of a longing for a little drama in her life than a longing for romantic love. Notably too, Emma utterly fails to understand the budding affection between Harriet Smith and Robert Martin; she interprets the prospective match solely in terms of financial settlements and social ambition. It is only after Harriet Smith reveals her interest in Mr. Knightley that Emma realises her own feelings for him.

While Emma differs strikingly from Austen's other heroines in these two respects, she resembles [Elizabeth Bennet](#) and [Anne Elliot](#), among others, in another way: she is an intelligent young woman with too little to do and no ability to change her location or everyday routine. Though her family is loving and her economic status secure, Emma's everyday life is dull indeed; she has few companions her own age when the novel begins. Her determined though inept matchmaking may represent a muted protest against the narrow scope of a wealthy woman's life, especially that of a woman who is single and childless.

[\[edit\]](#) Emma, or the banality of the real world

Populated by small "minute detail" (to borrow the term from Sir [Walter Scott](#)), very realistic but anodyne, the novel disoriented a number of Jane Austen's contemporaries by its immersion in the daily life of a small town, and with the corresponding absence of spectacle. We see, for example, Emma accompanying Harriet to Mr. Ford's boutique and, while her friend gets on with her shopping, she posts herself at the door to observe the spectacle of the street:

[...] the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread [...]^[3].

We find the centre of Highbury life in Mr. Ford's boutique. It's there, for example, that Harriet Smith meets her admirer, Robert Martin (volume II, chapter III). Also, convinced of the importance of the place, Frank Churchill declares:

that I may prove myself to belong to the place, to be a true citizen of Highbury, I must buy something at Ford's^[4] (volume II, chapter VI).

[\[edit\]](#) Film, television and stage adaptations

Emma has been the subject of many adaptations for film, TV, radio and the stage.

- Film adaptations:
 - 1995: [Clueless](#), a loose American modern adaptation of the novel, set in [Beverly Hills](#) and starring [Alicia Silverstone](#) as Cher Horowitz (Emma).
 - 1996: [Emma](#), an American comedy starring [Gwyneth Paltrow](#) as Emma.
 - 2010: [Aisha](#), an Indian modern adaptation of the novel, starring [Sonam Kapoor](#) as Aisha (Emma).
- TV adaptations:

- 1948: *Emma*, live [BBC](#) TV broadcast, starring [Judy Campbell](#) (who also wrote the screenplay) as Emma, and directed and produced by [Michael Barry](#).^[5]
- 1954: *Emma*, live [NBC](#) TV broadcast, starring [Felicia Montealegre](#) as Emma.^[5]
- 1957: *Emma*, another live [NBC](#) TV broadcast in their *[Matinee Theater](#)* series, starring [Sarah Churchill](#) as Emma.^[5]
- 1960: *Emma*, live [BBC](#) TV serial in six parts, starring [Diana Fairfax](#) as Emma and directed by [Campbell Logan](#).^[5]
- 1960: *Emma*, live [CBS](#) TV broadcast in their *[Camera Three](#)* series, starring [Nancy Wickwire](#) as Emma.^[5]
- 1972: *Emma*, a six-part [BBC](#) miniseries, starring [Doran Godwin](#) as Emma.
- 1996: *Emma*, an [ITV](#) TV film, starring [Kate Beckinsale](#) as Emma.
- 2009: *Emma*, a four-part [BBC](#) miniseries, starring [Romola Garai](#) as Emma.
- Recent stage adaptations:
 - 1991: *Emma*, a stage adaption by British playwright [Michael Fry](#), first produced by the [Cloucester Stage Company](#) in 1991, and since then produced by a number of theatre companies in Britain and the US.^{[6][7]}
 - 2000: *Emma*, a musical written by [Stephen Karam](#) and first showed by the [Brownbrokers](#) student theatre group at [Brown University](#) under the direction of Darius Pierce.^[8] In 2004 Karam's musical was played at the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#) under the direction of [Patricia Birch](#).^[9]
 - 2007: *Jane Austen's Emma – A Musical Romantic Comedy*, a musical written by [Paul Gordon](#), which premiered at [TheatreWorks](#) in [Menlo Park](#), California.^[10] This musical has since been performed at the [Cincinnati Playhouse](#), [The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis](#) and the [Old Globe Theatre](#) in San Diego.^[5]
 - 2007: *Emma*, a musical written by [Joel Adlen](#), and directed by [Terry Berliner](#) at the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#).^[11]
 - 2009: *Emma*, a stage adaption by Peter Mimmack for touring British theatre company Heartbreak Productions.^[12]
 - 2009: *Emma*, a stage adaption by Rachel Atkins for the [Book-It Repertory Theatre](#) in Seattle, directed by Marcus Goodwin with Sylvie Davidson in the title role.^{[13][5]}
 - 2010: *Emma*, a stage adaption by Michael Bloom, which played at the [Cleveland Play House](#), Ohio, in the spring of 2010.^[14]

[\[edit\]](#) Popular culture

- The novel *Emma* is featured in the 1993 film *[Naked](#)* by [Mike Leigh](#), in which the character Johnny (played by [David Thewlis](#)) confuses the title and the name of the author.
- [Joan Aiken](#) wrote a companion novel, *Jane Fairfax: The Secret Story of the Second Heroine in Jane Austen's Emma*.

[\[edit\]](#) See also





[Novels portal](#)


- [Illegitimacy in fiction](#)

[edit] Notes

1. [^] Austen-Leigh, James Edward. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. 1926. Ed. R. W. Chapman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967. p. 157
2. [^] ^a ^b Todd, Janet (2006). *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 94. [ISBN 978-0-521-85806-9](#).
3. [^] Quote from Adela Pinch, ([Jane Austen 2008](#), p. xxii), "Introduction"
4. [^] Quote Adela Pinch, ([Jane Austen 2008](#), p. xii), "Introduction"
5. [^] ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e ^f ^g [The Emma Adaptations Pages: Other Versions](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
6. [^] ["The Emma Adaptations Pages: Emma by Michael Fry"](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
7. [^] [Culturvulture November 2004: Emma at Aurora Theatre Company in Berkley](#)
8. [^] [The Providence, Phoenix, December 7, 2000: Emma Rewards](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
9. [^] [TheaterMania 2004: Emma \(NYMF\)](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
10. [^] [Broadway World, August 17, 2007: "World Premiere Emma Steps into TheatreWorks 8/22"](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
11. [^] [NYMTF: Emma 2007](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
12. [^] [Heartbreak Productions: Emma 2009](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
13. [^] [Seattle Times October 16, 2009: "Attention, Austen fans: Emma Comes to Book-It"](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011
14. [^] [Playbill 9 Feb 2010: "World Premiere of Emma Set to Bow at Cleveland Play House"](#). Retrieved 27 December 2011

[edit] External links

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[hide]

- [v](#)
- [t](#)
- [e](#)

Jane Austen

General

- Life**
- [Jane Austen](#)
 - [Timeline of Jane Austen](#)
 - [A Memoir of Jane Austen](#)

- Places**
- [Jane Austen Centre](#)
 - [Jane Austen's House Museum](#)
 - [Chawton House](#)
 - [Chawton House Library](#)

- People**
- [Cassandra Austen](#)
 - [Charles Austen](#)
 - [Francis Austen](#)
 - [Eliza Hancock](#)
 - [Catherine Hubback](#)
 - [Thomas Langlois Lefroy](#)



- Analysis**
- [Janeite](#)
 - [Jane Austen in popular culture](#)
 - [Styles and themes of Jane Austen](#)
 - [Georgian society in Jane Austen's novels](#)
 - [Reception history of Jane Austen](#)

Works

- Major**
- [Sense and Sensibility](#) (1811)
 - [Pride and Prejudice](#) (1813)
 - [Mansfield Park](#) (1814)
 - [Emma](#) (1815)
 - [Northanger Abbey](#) (1817)
 - [Persuasion](#) (1817)

- Minor**
- [Lady Susan](#)
 - [Sanditon](#) (unfinished)
 - [The Watsons](#) (unfinished)

- Juvenilia**
- [Love and Freindship](#)
 - [The Beautifull Cassandra](#)
 - [The History of England](#)

- Characters**
- [Elinor Dashwood](#)
 - [Edward Ferrars](#)



- [Marianne Dashwood](#)
- [John Willoughby](#)
- [Elizabeth Bennet](#)
- [Fitzwilliam Darcy](#)
- [Jane Bennet](#)
- [Lydia Bennet](#)
- [Charles Bingley](#)
- [Fanny Price](#)
- [Edmund Bertram](#)
- [Mary Crawford](#)
- [Henry Crawford](#)
- [Tom Bertram](#)
- [Maria Bertram](#)
- [Emma Woodhouse](#)
- [George Knightley](#)
- [Anne Elliot](#)
- [Captain Frederick Wentworth](#)
- [Catherine Morland](#)
- [Henry Tilney](#)

Adaptations

Sense and Sensibility

- [1981 TV miniseries](#)
- [1995 film](#)
- [2008 TV miniseries](#)
- [Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters](#) (2009 novel)
- [From Prada to Nada](#) (2011 film)

Pride and Prejudice

- [1940 film](#)
- [First Impressions](#) (1959 musical)
- [1980 TV miniseries](#)
- [1995 TV miniseries](#)
- [Darcy's Story](#)
- [Pride & Prejudice: A Latter-Day Comedy](#) (2003 film)
- [Mr. Darcy's Daughters](#) (2003 novel)
- [An Assembly Such as This](#) (2003 novel)
- [Duty and Desire](#) (2004 novel)
- [These Three Remain](#) (2005 novel)
- [Bride and Prejudice](#) (2004 film)
- [2005 film](#)
- [Pride and Prejudice and Zombies](#) (2009 parody novel)
- [Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls](#) (2010 parody novel)

Mansfield Park

- [1983 TV miniseries](#)
- [1999 film](#)
- [2007 TV miniseries](#)

Emma

- [1972 TV miniseries](#)

- [*Clueless*](#) (1995 film)
- [1996 film](#)
- [1996 TV miniseries](#)
- [2009 TV miniseries](#)
- [Aisha](#) (2009 film)

[*Northanger Abbey*](#)

- [1986 TV miniseries](#)
- [2007 TV miniseries](#)

[*Persuasion*](#)

- [1960 TV miniseries](#)
- [1971 TV miniseries](#)
- [1995 film](#)
- [2007 TV miniseries](#)