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Emma
by Jane Austen

About This Book

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. So begins Jane Austen's comic masterpiece *Emma*. In *Emma*, Austen's prose brilliantly elevates, in the words of Virginia Woolf, the trivialities of day-to-day existence, of parties, picnics, and country dances of early-nineteenth-century life in the English countryside to an unrivaled level of pleasure for the reader. At the center of this world is the inimitable Emma Woodhouse, a self-proclaimed matchmaker who, by the novel's conclusion, just may find herself the victim of her own best intentions.

This Modern Library Paperback Classics edition includes newly commissioned notes on the text.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the class and rank of various characters in the village of Highbury. Compare the positions of Mr. Weston, Mr. Elton, Miss Taylor, Harriet, and Emma with others in Highbury. How do matters of class affect the interaction of these characters, and would you describe class as being rigid or flexible as it is depicted by Jane Austen? To what extent can class be said to be of central importance to the development of the novel, since it is one of the most important considerations in marriage? Does class seem to be treated differently by those in Highbury than it does by outsiders, for example Frank Churchill and Mrs. Elton? Do you think it is significant that no woman in Highbury is of Emma's age and rank?

2. How does the relationship between Mr. Knightley and Emma change throughout the course of the novel? Although Austen does not directly tell us what their relationship was like during Emma's childhood, their long and intimate friendship is established at the novel's opening. In light of their occasional quarrels and Knightley's criticisms of Emma, for example, the criticism he made on Box Hill, how does Mr. Knightley feel about Emma? Do Mr. Knightley's feelings change as the novel progresses? If they do, what incidents account for the changes in his feelings?

3. Does Emma act as a good friend to Harriet Smith? Are Emma's concerns for Harriet's education and refinement born of an honest desire to help, or is it something less altruistic? Are Mr. Knightley's criticisms of Emma's interference with Mr. Martin's marriage proposal justified? Does Harriet ultimately benefit from Emma's friendship or her attempts to help her?
4. While matchmaking is the central device in Emma, both for the plot and as a backdrop to develop characters, not all of the matches made in the novel are good. Compare the matches made between Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor, Emma and Mr. Knightley, Harriet and Mr. Martin, Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, and Mr. Elton and Mrs. Elton. Which are good matches and which are bad? What character traits in the couples make them suited or unsuited for each other? Why are the mismatches so important to the story?

5. In the final analysis, is Emma a sympathetic character? Does she seem to have good intentions only marred by a slight desire to interfere with other people's lives, or is she thoughtless and unconcerned with the effects she has on others? In your estimation, is Emma ultimately moral or immoral? What specific incidents in the novel lead you to that conclusion?
Introduction

Though her novels are known for their relatively small scale and controlled emotion, few authors inspire such extremes of feeling as Jane Austen. Self-professed "Janeites" form societies in her honor, while detractors call her fiction insular and trivial. Because Austen's name and a general idea of the world of her fiction are common cultural currency, it is difficult for readers to approach her novels without preconceptions but essential that they do so to appreciate her art. *Emma* opens as if it will be a simple narrative about a young woman who is "handsome, clever, and rich" (p. 7), but it becomes instead a penetrating study of the human capacity for self-deception, self-knowledge, and love.

The novel is dominated by Emma Woodhouse, a young woman who possesses great social and personal advantages but no awareness of her limitations. We learn in the opening chapter that Emma has "lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (p. 7)—an indication that something soon will. The story's action begins when Isabella Taylor, Emma's former governess and current companion, leaves the household to marry. Long motherless, Emma is now left with only a well-meaning father who imposes no restraint on her.

One of the most important lessons Emma must learn is the folly of plotting the fates of others. She begins the novel determined to "improve" and make a brilliant marriage for Harriet Smith, the illegitimate young woman new to Highbury. Emma believes she is acting solely for Harriet's benefit, but the narrator makes clear Emma's unacknowledged motives. Emma declares matchmaking "the greatest amusement in the world!" (p. 13), and her failure to take seriously the marriage market's strictures leads to Harriet's humiliation and threatens her with permanent unhappiness. Emma cannot see the intentions of Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill, believing both are smitten with Harriet even as clues to their true feelings abound. Why is Harriet's future so important to Emma that she is blind to many of the realities of her world, even disregarding the warnings of her old friend Mr. Knightley?

If Emma represents a restless personality often impatient with social expectations, Mr. George Knightley embodies the rational embrace of those expectations. Sixteen years older than Emma, Mr. Knightley is the only character in the novel able to see Emma's faults and rebuke her for them. He warns Emma that her friendship with Harriet will harm both of them and predicts that Mr. Elton will never marry a woman who is not his social equal. When, despite Emma's efforts, Mr. Elton proposes to her rather than to Harriet and, rebuffed, goes on to marry the socially superior if personally odious Miss
Hawkins, Emma is shocked, but not enlightened. Mr. Knightley's coolness toward newcomer Frank Churchill, whose imperiousness and flirtatious manner attracts Emma, distances them further. Because the reader understands early on that it is Mr. Knightley who loves Emma and whom she loves, we wonder when she will realize this.

Austen never allows us to forget how high the stakes are for marriageable young women, whose only power in this society is consenting to or refusing the men they attract. A woman's social, economic, and emotional future is almost wholly determined by her marriage, as illustrated by the marriages of Mr. Elton and Miss Hawkins, Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, and Robert Martin and Harriet Smith. Emma's own development is revealed primarily through her reactions to her romantic prospects. In the course of the novel she receives a proposal from Mr. Elton, which she refuses; recognizes that she does not want to marry Frank Churchill if he asks her; and, at long last, realizes that it is Mr. Knightley she loves.

Emma's final realization is delayed until the last chapter, when a group outing to Box Hill leads her to reassess Frank, Knightley, and herself. Led on by Frank's flirtatiousness, Emma makes a joke at the expense of her old friend Miss Bates, an aging spinster whose prolix rambling irritates Emma. Despite Miss Bates's blushing embarrassment, Emma does not realize she has pained her friend until Mr. Knightley asks, "How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?" (p. 351). Mr. Knightley's rebuke awakens Emma to the reality of social status, and to her unthinking abuse of her advantages over Miss Bates. Emma can no longer ignore Mr. Knightley's advice; he has shown her where her attitudes lead.

Whether Austen's novels endorse or critique the class system that they depict has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley weds high social status to worth of character. Yet the novel also makes us aware of how often social class and true worth are not united. Mr. and Mrs. Elton, for example, are in every way but social status far inferior to Robert Martin and Harriet Smith. Does Austen's depiction of the range of worth within each social class imply criticism of the class system itself?

Emma also illustrates the potential conflicts between an ethical life and society's demands. Emma and Mr. Knightley's marriage unites the two, but the convoluted plot leading to it implies the unlikeness of such a pairing. The novel suggests that true communication and real connections between people are difficult to achieve. The misunderstandings that drive much of the plot, while superficially comic, also highlight the disasters that can result from miscommunication. To what extent misunderstandings are inevitable and to what extent they result from a society's way of organizing itself is a puzzle that lingers long after we lay the book aside.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Why is Emma so determined to "improve" Harriet Smith (p. 24)?
2. Why isn't Emma able to like Jane Fairfax?
3. Why does Emma remain opposed to Harriet marrying Robert Martin, even after the projected match with Mr. Elton falls through?

4. Why is Emma willing to overlook Frank Churchill's faults?

5. How different are the motives of Mrs. Elton in taking up Jane Fairfax and Emma in improving Harriet Smith?

6. What role does the visit to Donwell Abbey play in the development of Emma's feelings for Mr. Knightley?

7. Why does Emma insult Mrs. Bates during the Box Hill outing? Why does she realize how hurtful it was only after Mr. Knightley confronts her?

8. Why does it take Emma so long to realize she loves Mr. Knightley? Why is Emma's understanding so rapid once Harriet reveals her own love for him?

9. According to the novel, are Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill justified in keeping their engagement a secret? What are their prospects for a happy marriage?

10. Why does Mr. Knightley love Emma, even though he sees her faults so clearly?

11. According to the novel, does Mr. Knightley have any faults?

**For Further Reflection**

1. What might motivate someone to try to arrange the romantic relationships of another person?

2. Why are people sometimes unaware of their own feelings toward others?

3. How important are similar economic and social backgrounds to long-term romantic relationships?

**About Jane Austen**

Jane Austen was born in the Hampshire village of Steventon, England, on December 16, 1775, the youngest daughter of the village rector. She had six brothers and one sister, Cassandra; neither sister married and they remained close throughout their lives. The entire Austen family was fond of reading, writing, and staging theatrical performances. Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding were among the family's favorite authors. The two sisters were educated at home after a period of early tutoring at Oxford, and they learned about the larger world chiefly through letters and visits with their extensive circle of family and friends.

Little is known about Austen's romantic relationships. She apparently once agreed to marry the brother of family friends, only to end the engagement the next morning. Inconclusive evidence suggests that she may have been in love with a man who died early in their relationship. Whatever her experience of love and romance may have been, Austen was resolute in her belief that, as she wrote in one letter, "anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection."

Surviving notebooks indicate that Austen began writing by the age of twelve, and her early writing includes plays, short novels, and poetry. In 1795, Austen began writing the novel that would become Sense and Sensibility. Pride and Prejudice followed in 1797 and
Northanger Abbey in 1798 or 1799. In late 1797, Austen's father wrote to a London publisher about the possibility of publishing her work, but he received no answer.

Austen's life changed dramatically in 1801 when her father retired and moved the family to Bath. Austen never much liked Bath, and her writing life there was relatively unproductive. Her father died in 1805, and in 1809, her brother Edward invited his mother and sisters to live in a cottage on his property in Hampshire, close to Austen's birthplace. Rejuvenated, Austen began working on her earlier manuscripts with an eye toward publication. Sense and Sensibility appeared in 1811—annonymously, as was common at the time. The next five years saw the publication of Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, and Emma. Austen died on July 18, 1817, of a kidney ailment now believed to be Addison's disease. Northanger Abbey and Persuasion were published posthumously in 1818, with the author identified. Her work was well received during her lifetime, and she was buried in Winchester Cathedral.
Jane Austen, whom some critics consider England’s best novelist, was born in 1775 in Steventon, England. The seventh of eight children, Austen lived with her parents for her entire life, first in Steventon and later in Bath, Southampton, and Chawton. Her father was the parish rector in Steventon, and, though not wealthy, her family was well connected and well educated. Austen briefly attended boarding school in Reading but received the majority of her education at home. According to rumor, she had a brief love affair when she was twenty-five, but it did not lead to a marriage proposal. Two years later she accepted and then quickly rejected a proposal. She remained unmarried for the rest of her life. Austen died in 1817, at age forty-one, of Addison’s disease.

Austen began writing stories at a very young age and completed her first novel in her early twenties. However, she did not publish until 1811, when Sense and Sensibility appeared anonymously, followed by Pride and Prejudice (1813) and Mansfield Park (1814). Emma, which appeared in 1816, was the last novel published during Austen’s lifetime. (Northanger Abbey and Persuasion appeared posthumously.)

Austen’s novels received little critical or popular recognition during her lifetime, and her identity as a novelist was not revealed until after her death. As admired as Austen’s novels later became, critics have had a difficult time placing them within literary history. She is known for her gently satirical portraits of village life and of the rituals of courtship and marriage, but she wrote during the Romantic period, when most major writers were concerned with a very different set of interests and values. Romantic poets confronted the hopes and failures of the French Revolution and formulated new literary values centered on individual freedom, passion, and intensity. In comparison, Austen’s detailed examination of the rules of decorum that govern social relationships, and her insistence that reason and moderation are necessary checks on feeling, make her seem out of step with the literary times. One way to understand Austen’s place in literary history is to think of her as part of the earlier eighteenth century, the Age of Reason, when literature was associated with wit, poise, and propriety. Her novels certainly belong to an eighteenth-century genre, the comedy of manners, which examines the behavior of men and women of a single social class.

Rather than dismiss Austen as a writer who shuns the artistic and political movements of her time, it is perhaps more useful to think of her as an early feminist. Critics have pointed out that the Romantics, who were almost exclusively male, offered a poor model of literary fulfillment for the ambitious woman of the time. While male writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron possessed the freedom to promote their own individuality through wide travel and sexual and military adventurism, women were
largely denied these freedoms. For women, the penalty for sexual freedom was social ostracism, poverty, and worse. In Sense and Sensibility, Austen describes explicitly the danger that cultivating emotion posed for women of her time.

In this social context, Austen’s commitment to reason and moderation can be seen as feminist and progressive rather than conservative. The intelligence and resourcefulness of her heroines stand in constant contrast to the limits of the constricted world of courtship and marriage defining their sphere of action. While reading Emma it is interesting to consider to what extent Austen accepts or questions the idea that marriage represents a woman’s maturity and fulfillment.

Some consider Emma Austen’s best and most representative novel. It is also her longest novel, and by many accounts, her most difficult. Long praised for its rich domestic realism, Emma also presents puzzling questions: how can a character as intelligent as Emma be wrong so often? When does Austen expect us to sympathize with Emma, and when does she expect us to criticize her? Is the ending as genuinely happy as it is presented to be, or does Austen subtly inject a note of subversive irony into it? That these questions are on some level unanswerable ensures that Emma will be read again and again.

**Plot Overview**

Although convinced that she herself will never marry, Emma Woodhouse, a precocious twenty-year-old resident of the village of Highbury, imagines herself to be naturally gifted in conjuring love matches. After self-declared success at matchmaking between her governess and Mr. Weston, a village widower, Emma takes it upon herself to find an eligible match for her new friend, Harriet Smith. Though Harriet’s parentage is unknown, Emma is convinced that Harriet deserves to be a gentleman’s wife and sets her friend’s sights on Mr. Elton, the village vicar. Meanwhile, Emma persuades Harriet to reject the proposal of Robert Martin, a well-to-do farmer for whom Harriet clearly has feelings.

Harriet becomes infatuated with Mr. Elton under Emma’s encouragement, but Emma’s plans go awry when Elton makes it clear that his affection is for Emma, not Harriet. Emma realizes that her obsession with making a match for Harriet has blinded her to the true nature of the situation. Mr. Knightley, Emma’s brother-in-law and treasured friend, watches Emma’s matchmaking efforts with a critical eye. He believes that Mr. Martin is a worthy young man whom Harriet would be lucky to marry. He and Emma quarrel over Emma’s meddling, and, as usual, Mr. Knightley proves to be the wiser of the pair. Elton, spurned by Emma and offended by her insinuation that Harriet is his equal, leaves for the town of Bath and marries a girl there almost immediately.

Emma is left to comfort Harriet and to wonder about the character of a new visitor expected in Highbury—Mr. Weston’s son, Frank Churchill. Frank is set to visit his father in Highbury after having been raised by his aunt and uncle in London, who have taken him as their heir. Emma knows nothing about Frank, who has long been deterred from visiting his father by his aunt’s illnesses and complaints. Mr. Knightley is immediately suspicious of the young man, especially after Frank rushes back to London merely to
have his hair cut. Emma, however, finds Frank delightful and notices that his charms are directed mainly toward her. Though she plans to discourage these charms, she finds herself flattered and engaged in a flirtation with the young man. Emma greets Jane Fairfax, another addition to the Highbury set, with less enthusiasm. Jane is beautiful and accomplished, but Emma dislikes her because of her reserve and, the narrator insinuates, because she is jealous of Jane.

Suspicion, intrigue, and misunderstandings ensue. Mr. Knightley defends Jane, saying that she deserves compassion because, unlike Emma, she has no independent fortune and must soon leave home to work as a governess. Mrs. Weston suspects that the warmth of Mr. Knightley’s defense comes from romantic feelings, an implication Emma resists. Everyone assumes that Frank and Emma are forming an attachment, though Emma soon dismisses Frank as a potential suitor and imagines him as a match for Harriet. At a village ball, Knightley earns Emma’s approval by offering to dance with Harriet, who has just been humiliated by Mr. Elton and his new wife. The next day, Frank saves Harriet from Gypsy beggars. When Harriet tells Emma that she has fallen in love with a man above her social station, Emma believes that she means Frank. Knightley begins to suspect that Frank and Jane have a secret understanding, and he attempts to warn Emma. Emma laughs at Knightley’s suggestion and loses Knightley’s approval when she flirts with Frank and insults Miss Bates, a kindhearted spinster and Jane’s aunt, at a picnic. When Knightley reprimands Emma, she weeps.

News comes that Frank’s aunt has died, and this event paves the way for an unexpected revelation that slowly solves the mysteries. Frank and Jane have been secretly engaged; his attentions to Emma have been a screen to hide his true preference. With his aunt’s death and his uncle’s approval, Frank can now marry Jane, the woman he loves. Emma worries that Harriet will be crushed, but she soon discovers that it is Knightley, not Frank, who is the object of Harriet’s affection. Harriet believes that Knightley shares her feelings. Emma finds herself upset by Harriet’s revelation, and her distress forces her to realize that she is in love with Knightley. Emma expects Knightley to tell her he loves Harriet, but, to her delight, Knightley declares his love for Emma. Harriet is soon comforted by a second proposal from Robert Martin, which she accepts. The novel ends with the marriage of Harriet and Mr. Martin and that of Emma and Mr. Knightley, resolving the question of who loves whom after all.

**Character List**

**Emma Woodhouse** - The protagonist of the novel. In the well-known first sentence of the novel, the narrator describes Emma as “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition.” In some ways, the twenty-year-old Emma is mature for her age. Because her mother is dead and her older sister married, she is already the head of her father’s household. She cares for her father and oversees the social goings-on in the village of Highbury. Emma’s misplaced confidence in her abilities as a matchmaker and her prudish fear of love constitute the central focus of the novel, which traces Emma’s mistakes and growing self-understanding.
Mr. George Knightley - Emma’s brother-in-law and the Woodhouses’ trusted friend and advisor. Knightley is a respected landowner in his late thirties. He lives at Donwell Abbey and leases property to the Martins, a family of wealthy farmers whom he likes and counsels. Knightley is the only character who is openly critical of Emma, pointing out her flaws and foibles with frankness, out of genuine concern and care for her. In this respect, he acts as a stand-in for Austen’s and the reader’s judgments of Emma.

Mr. Woodhouse - Emma’s father and the patriarch of Hartfield, the Woodhouse estate. Though Mr. Woodhouse is nervous, frail, and prone to hypochondria, he is also known for his friendliness and his attachment to his daughter. He is very resistant to change, to the point that he is unhappy to see his daughters or Emma’s governess marry. In this sense, he impedes Emma’s growth and acceptance of her adult destiny. He is often foolish and clearly not Emma’s intellectual equal, but she comforts and entertains him with insight and affection.

Harriet Smith - A pretty but unremarkable seventeen-year-old woman of uncertain parentage, who lives at the local boarding school. Harriet becomes Emma’s protégé and the object of her matchmaking schemes.

Frank Churchill - Mr. Weston’s son and Mrs. Weston’s stepson. Frank Churchill lives at Enscombe with his aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Churchill. He is considered a potential suitor for Emma, but she learns that though Frank is attractive, charming, and clever, he is also irresponsible, deceitful, rash, and ultimately unsuited to her.

Jane Fairfax - Miss Bates’s niece, whose arrival in Highbury irritates Emma. Jane rivals Emma in accomplishment and beauty; she possesses a kind heart and a reserved temperament. Because Jane lacks Emma’s fortune, she must consider employment as a governess, but her marriage to Frank Churchill saves her from that fate.

Mrs. Weston - Formerly Miss Taylor, Emma’s beloved governess and companion. Known for her kind temperament and her devotion to Emma, Mrs. Weston lives at Randalls with her husband, Frank Churchill’s father.

Mr. Weston - The widower and proprietor of Randalls, who has just married Miss Taylor when the novel begins. Mr. Weston has a son, Frank, from his first marriage to Miss Churchill (Frank was raised by Miss Churchill’s sister and brother-in-law). Mr. Weston is warm, sociable, and perpetually optimistic.

Mr. Elton - The village vicar, a handsome and agreeable man considered a welcome addition to any social gathering. When he reveals his indifference to Harriet and his desire to marry Emma, only to take a bride at Bath shortly thereafter, he comes to seem proud, conceited, and superficial.

Mr. Robert Martin - A twenty-four-year-old farmer. Mr. Martin is industrious and good-hearted, though he lacks the refinements of a gentleman. He lives at Abbey-Mill Farm, a property owned by Knightley, with his mother and sisters.
Miss Bates - Friend of Mr. Woodhouse and aunt of Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates is a middle-aged spinster without beauty or cleverness but with universal goodwill and a gentle temperament. Emma’s impatient treatment of her reveals the less attractive parts of Emma’s character.

Isabella Knightley - Emma’s older sister, who lives in London with her husband, Mr. John Knightley, and their five children. Isabella is pretty, amiable, and completely devoted to her family, but slow and diffident compared to Emma. Her domesticity provides a contrast to the independent celibacy Emma imagines for herself.

Mr. John Knightley - Emma’s brother-in-law, and Mr. George Knightley’s brother. As a lawyer, John Knightley is clear-minded but somewhat sharp in temper, and Emma and her father are sometimes displeased with his severity.

Mrs. Elton - Formerly Augusta Hawkins, Mrs. Elton hails from Bristol and meets Mr. Elton in Bath. She is somewhat attractive and accomplished; she has some fortune and a well-married sister, but her vanity, superficiality, and vulgar overfamiliarity offset her admirable qualities.

Mrs. Churchill - Mr. Weston’s ailing former sister-in-law and Frank Churchill’s aunt and guardian. She is known to be capricious, ill-tempered, and extremely possessive of Frank. Frank is able to marry Jane Fairfax, as he desires, only after Mrs. Churchill’s death.

Colonel Campbell - A friend of Jane Fairfax’s father who lives in London and who takes charge of orphaned Jane when she is eight years old. Colonel Campbell feels great affection for Jane but is unable to provide her with an inheritance.

Mrs. Dixon - The Campbells’ daughter and Jane’s friend. Mrs. Dixon lacks beauty and lives with her husband in Ireland.

Mr. Dixon - Husband to the Campbells’ daughter. Emma suspects that Mr. Dixon had a romance with Jane Fairfax before his marriage.

Mrs. Goddard - Mistress of the local boarding school. Mrs. Goddard introduces Harriet Smith to the Woodhouses.

Mrs. Bates - Mother to Miss Bates and friend of Mr. Woodhouse. An elderly woman, Mrs. Bates is quiet, amiable, and somewhat deaf.

Mr. Perry - An apothecary and associate of Emma’s father. Mr. Perry is highly esteemed by Mr. Woodhouse for his medical advice even though he is not a proper physician, and Mr. Woodhouse argues with his daughter Isabella over Perry’s recommendations.
Elizabeth Martin - Mr. Martin’s kind sister, with whom Harriet was good friends before meeting Emma and turning down Mr. Martin’s marriage proposal. Harriet’s feelings of guilt and her desire to rekindle her relationship with Elizabeth pose a dilemma for Emma, who finds the Martins pleasant, worthy people, but worries that Harriet may be tempted to accept Mr. Martin’s offer if she again grows close with the family.

Mr. and Mrs. Cole - Tradespeople and longtime residents of Highbury whose good fortune of the past several years has led them to adopt a luxurious lifestyle that is only a notch below that of the Woodhouses. Offended by their attempt to transcend their “only moderately genteel” social status, Emma has long been preparing to turn down any dinner invitation from the Coles in order to teach them their folly in thinking they can interact socially with the likes of her family. Like the Martins, the Coles are the means through which Emma demonstrates her class-consciousness.

Analysis of Major Characters

Emma Woodhouse

The narrator introduces Emma to us by emphasizing her good fortune: “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition,” Emma “had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.” But, the narrator warns us, Emma possesses “the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself.” Emma’s stubbornness and vanity produce many of the novel’s conflicts, as Emma struggles to develop emotionally.

Emma makes three major mistakes. First, she attempts to make Harriet into the wife of a gentleman, when Harriet’s social position dictates that she would be better suited to the farmer who loves her. Then, she flirts with Frank Churchill even though she does not care for him, making unfair comments about Jane Fairfax along the way. Most important, she does not realize that, rather than being committed to staying single (as she always claims), she is in love with and wants to marry Mr. Knightley. Though these mistakes seriously threaten Harriet’s happiness, cause Emma embarrassment, and create obstacles to Emma’s own achievement of true love, none of them has lasting consequences. Throughout the novel, Knightley corrects and guides Emma; in marrying Knightley, Emma signals that her judgment has aligned with his.

Austen predicted that Emma would be “a character whom no one but me will much like.” Though most of Austen’s readers have proven her wrong, her narration creates many ambiguities. The novel is narrated using free indirect discourse, which means that, although the all-knowing narrator speaks in the third person, she often relates things from Emma’s point of view and describes things in language we might imagine Emma using. This style of narration creates a complex mixture of sympathy with Emma and ironic judgment on her behavior. It is not always clear when we are to share Emma’s perceptions and when we are to see through them. Nor do we know how harshly Austen expects us to judge Emma’s behavior. Though this narrative strategy creates problems of interpretation for the reader, it makes Emma a richly multidimensional character.
Emma does not have one specific foil, but the implicit distinctions made between her and the other women in the novel offer us a context within which to evaluate her character. Jane is similar to Emma in most ways, but she does not have Emma’s financial independence, so her difficulties underscore Emma’s privileged nature. Mrs. Elton, like Emma, is independent and imposes her will upon her friends, but her crudeness and vanity reinforce our sense of Emma’s refinement and fundamentally good heart. Emma’s sister, Isabella, is stereo-typically feminine—soft-hearted, completely devoted to her family, dependent, and not terribly bright. The novel implicitly prefers Emma’s independence and cleverness to her sister’s more traditional deportment, although we are still faced with the paradox that though Emma is clever, she is almost always mistaken.

Mr. Knightley
Mr. Knightley serves as the novel’s model of good sense. From his very first conversation with Emma and her father in Chapter 1, his purpose—to correct the excesses and missteps of those around him—is clear. He is unfailingly honest but tempers his honesty with tact and kindheartedness. Almost always, we can depend upon him to provide the correct evaluation of the other characters’ behavior and personal worth. He intuitively understands and kindly makes allowances for Mr. Woodhouse’s whims; he is sympathetic and protective of the women in the community, including Jane, Harriet, and Miss Bates; and, most of all, even though he frequently disapproves of her behavior, he dotes on Emma.

Knightley’s love for Emma—the one emotion he cannot govern fully—leads to his only lapses of judgment and self-control. Before even meeting Frank, Knightley decides that he does not like him. It gradually becomes clear that Knightley feels jealous—he does not welcome a rival. When Knightley believes Emma has become too attached to Frank, he acts with uncharacteristic impulsiveness in running away to London. His declaration of love on his return bursts out uncontrollably, unlike most of his prudent, well-planned actions. Yet Knightley’s loss of control humanizes him rather than making him seem like a failure.

Like Emma, Knightley stands out in comparison to his peers. His brother, Mr. John Knightley, shares his clear-sightedness but lacks his unfailing kindness and tact. Both Frank and Knightley are perceptive, warm-hearted, and dynamic; but whereas Frank uses his intelligence to conceal his real feelings and invent clever compliments to please those around him, Knightley uses his intelligence to discern right moral conduct. Knightley has little use for cleverness for its own sake; he rates propriety and concern for others more highly.

Frank Churchill
Frank epitomizes attractiveness in speech, manner, and appearance. He goes out of his way to please everyone, and, while the more perceptive characters question his seriousness, everyone except Knightley is charmed enough to be willing to indulge him. Frank is the character who most resembles Emma, a connection she points out at the novel’s close when she states that “destiny … connect[s] us with two characters so much
superior to our own.” Like Emma, Frank develops over the course of the novel by trading a somewhat vain and superficial perspective on the world for the seriousness brought on by the experience of genuine suffering and love. He is a complex character because though we know we should judge him harshly in moral terms, we cannot help but like him more than he deserves to be liked.

**Jane Fairfax**
Jane’s beauty and accomplishment immediately make her stand out, but we are likely to follow Emma’s lead at first and judge Jane uninteresting on account of her reserve. As Jane gradually betrays more personality and emotion, she indicates that she harbors some secret sorrow. Eventually, she and Emma push the cloudy confusion behind and become friends. The contrast between Jane’s delicate sense of propriety and morality and the passionate nature of her feelings is much more dramatic than any of the conflicts that Emma experiences. Jane’s situation too is much more dire than Emma’s: if Jane does not wed, she must become a governess, because she lacks any money of her own. The revelation of Jane’s secret engagement to Frank makes Jane seem more human, just as Knightley’s humanity is brought out by his love for Emma.

**Themes, Motifs & Symbols**

**Themes**
Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

**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.

Motifs
Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

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.

Symbols
Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

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.
Important Quotations Explained

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

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

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

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

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

3. She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed—almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, so mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! How could she have exposed herself to such ill
opinion in any one she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness!

This quotation comes at the end of Chapter 43. After being reprimanded by Mr. Knightley for insulting Miss Bates at the Box Hill picnic, a deluge of remorse comes over Emma as she realizes the cruelty of her behavior. This quotation marks the point at which Emma’s growing self-understanding, which helps her feel how wrongly she has treated Miss Bates, coincides with her growing attachment to Knightley. Her increasing self-knowledge is thus weighted, because it will bring her to or separate her from true love. This moment is also Emma’s most emotional in the novel, and it is narrated directly, unlike Mr. Elton’s proposal and Emma’s response to Mr. Knightley’s proposal. That the narrative so directly accesses Emma’s remorse underscores its seriousness—it is as if her thoughts have overpowered the narrator’s ability to relate them.

4. Emma’s eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress; she touched, she admitted, she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet’s having some hope of a return? It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!

This quotation, from Chapter 47, comes in the midst of Emma’s conversation with Harriet in which Harriet confesses her feelings for Mr. Knightley. For the majority of the novel, Emma’s suspicions and her attention have been misdirected, focusing on Harriet’s possible matches and on her speculations about Jane. Once her perceptiveness and ability to see beyond appearances are finally directed appropriately (after her realization that Frank and Jane are engaged), she makes a swift leap forward in her own self-understanding. However, Emma does not come to the realization that she loves Knightley on her own; only her jealousy of Harriet brings her there. The relationship between Emma and Knightley, though based on their private history together, takes shape only in the context of the surrounding web of social relationships.

5. Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material.

This quotation, which follows Emma and Mr. Knightley’s betrothal in Chapter 49, could be taken as the novel’s motto. The quotation says that although almost all human speech holds something back, or doesn’t tell the entire truth, as long as the speech is loyal to the speaker’s feelings, the fact that we talk without complete truth is not a big deal. The novel is filled with disguises and mistakes. Some are more reprehensible than others, and some are more avoidable than others. Though Elton’s insincerity and Frank’s conscious deception are critically portrayed—and Emma’s mistakes gently corrected—we are left
with the sense that, to some degree, misunderstandings are made inevitable by the social conventions that govern human intercourse, and by the imperfections of human communication itself. The remedy for such imperfect communication, according to this quotation, is the genuine emotion of the human heart.

Study Questions

1. Emma experiences several major revelations in the novel that fundamentally change her understanding of herself and those around her. Which revelation do you think is most important to Emma’s development, and why?

One way to answer this question would be to recognize that Emma undergoes her most decisive transformation when Mr. Elton proposes to her. At this point, she realizes that she has been completely misguided in her interpretation of Elton’s behavior, and she also realizes that she herself is implicated in the courtship games that she believed she was manipulating from the sidelines. Another possible answer would focus on Emma’s revelation when Mr. Knightley reprimands her after she has insulted Miss Bates. At this moment, Emma understands that her vain pleasure in Frank’s flirtations and her sense of superiority to others in the community have been wrong. She also realizes how much Knightley’s opinion means to her. One might also argue that Emma’s decisive transformation takes place when she realizes that she loves Knightley, or when she agrees to marry him. A successful answer would consider the intensity of Austen’s language together with plot developments. For example, the episode in which Knightley reprimands Emma for insulting Miss Bates seems relatively unimportant in terms of the plot, but this scene includes some of the most emotional and dramatic language in the book.

2. In what ways, if at all, might Emma be considered a feminist novel?

Emma may be considered a feminist novel because it focuses upon the struggles and development of a strong, intelligent woman. Though Emma’s activities—visits, parties, courtship, and marriage—are limited to the traditional sphere, the novel implicitly critiques these limitations, and implies that Emma deserves a wider stage on which to exercise her powers. Furthermore, the novel criticizes the fact that women must be financially dependent by sympathetically depicting the vulnerability of Jane and Miss Bates.

Alternatively, the novel could be considered antifeminist because it seems to suggest that Emma reaches the pinnacle of her development when she accepts the corrections of a man, Mr. Knightley. Not only does Emma give up her former vow of celibate independence, but she marries an older man who is a father figure.

3. Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley represent two different sets of values and two different understandings of manhood. Describe the values that each character represents, and explain how the novel judges these values.
Frank Churchill is seen by many of the characters as an ideal man because of his good looks, warmth, and charm. He focuses most of his attention on determining what will please each person, and he makes his compliments with wit and style. However, the novel demonstrates that Frank is also flighty, unstable, and able to put his own wishes above social and moral propriety. Mr. Knightley, conversely, is Frank’s opposite in many ways. Though also polite and affectionate with those he cares for, Knightley is dignified and reserved. When he expresses an opinion, it is always the correct one and is stated with simplicity and firmness. The novel clearly values Knightley’s qualities above Frank’s. But the fact that Frank is forgiven at the end and rewarded with the love of a superior woman suggests that the book cannot entirely renounce its infatuation with Frank’s charms.

**Suggested Essay Topics**

1. To what extent does the narrator express approval of Emma, and to what extent does the narrator criticize her? Choose a passage from the novel and analyze the sympathy and/or ironic judgment the narrator expresses in relation to the protagonist.

2. Emma is filled with dialogue in which characters misunderstand each other. Choose a scene from the novel and describe the mixture of knowledge and ignorance that each character possesses, and how their situations influence the way they interpret each other’s statements. To what extent are we positioned to correct the misunderstanding, and to what extent do we share the misunderstanding until we have more information?

3. How does humor work in the novel? Select a speech made by Mr. Woodhouse, Miss Bates, or Mrs. Elton and describe the techniques Austen uses to make these characters look foolish. What contradictions, hypocrisies, or absurdities are put in their mouths? To what extent do we judge these characters negatively when we see that they are laughable?

4. Emma both questions and upholds traditional class distinctions. What message do you think the novel ultimately conveys about class?

5. Emma is clever but continually mistaken, kindhearted but capable of callous behavior. Austen commented that Emma is a heroine “no one but myself will much like.” Do you find Emma likable? Why or why not?
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