

Emma

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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.

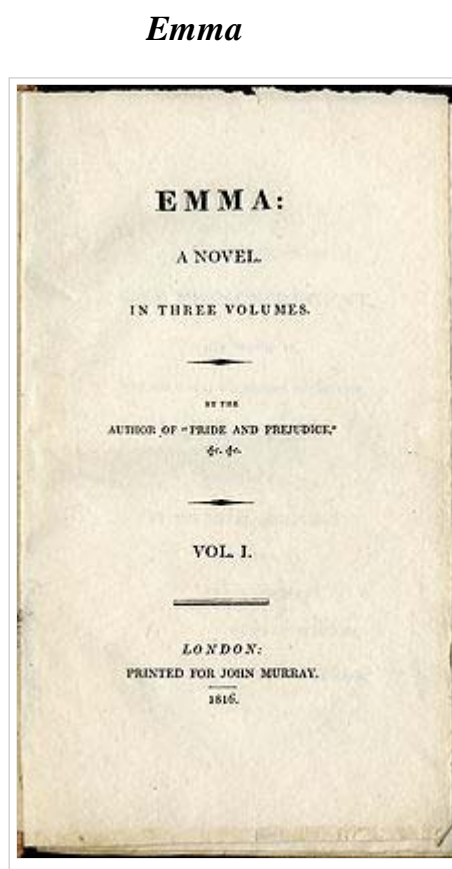
Contents

- 1 Plot summary
- 2 Principal characters
- 3 Criticism and themes
 - 3.1 Criticism
 - 3.2 Themes
- 4 Film and television adaptations
- 5 Emma in popular culture
- 6 See also
- 7 Notes
- 8 External links

Plot summary

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



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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 young woman 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 also adopted 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 engages 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.

Principal characters

Emma Woodhouse, the protagonist of the story, is a beautiful, high-spirited, intelligent, and 'slightly' spoiled young woman of 21. 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. 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 realize that she has loved Mr Knightley all along.

George Knightley, about 37. He is a close friend of Emma, and her only critic, though he cares deeply for her. Mr Knightley is the owner of the neighbouring 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, 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. She 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 that 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 meddling.

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 moneyed but obnoxious wife. 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 patronizes 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 Emma. Mrs Weston acts as a surrogate mother to her former charge and, occasionally, as a voice of moderation and reason.

Mr Weston, a recently wealthy man living in the vicinity of Hartfield. He 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 socializing.

Miss Bates, 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, she tries to make amends.

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 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 deny his visitors foods he thinks 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.

Isabella 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 (including Henry, 'little' John, Bella and 'little' Emma).

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, though he would prefer to stay at home, especially if the weather is less than perfect.

Criticism and themes

Criticism

Early reviews of *Emma* were generally favorable, 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*!!

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 are one of the factors that make this novel much lighter than 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 realizes 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.

Film and television adaptations

Emma has been the subject of many adaptations:^[3]

- 1948: *Emma*
- 1972: *Emma* (BBC television), starring Doran Godwin as Emma.
- 1995: *Clueless* (a loose modern adaptation), starring Alicia Silverstone as Cher Horowitz (Emma).
- 1996: *Emma*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Emma.
- 1996: *Emma*, starring Kate Beckinsale as Emma.
- 2009: *Emma* (BBC television), starring Romola Garai as Emma.
- 2010: *Aisha*, starring Sonam Kapoor as Aisha (*Emma* – Hindi language Version), produced by Rhea Kapoor^[4]
- 2010: *Emma*, starring Sarah Cotton as Emma.

Emma in popular culture

- The novel *Emma* is featured in the film *Naked* (1993) by Mike Leigh, in which the character Johnny (played by David Thewlis) confuses the title and the name of the author.
- *Emma* provides the basis for the plot of *Clueless* (1995) by Amy Heckerling. The role is performed by Alicia Silverstone.
- *Emma* was the correct answer to the £1,000 question in an episode of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* in the UK in January 1999. John Davidson, a dog holder from Northumberland, was asked which of the girls' names was the subject of a Jane Austen novel, out of Emily, Jane, Emma and Sophie (Davidson incorrectly guessed Jane, costing him £500 and therefore became the first contestant to win nothing).
- Joan Aiken wrote a companion novel, *Jane Fairfax: The Secret Story of the Second Heroine in Jane Austen's Emma*.
- Reginald Hill wrote a 1987 short story "Poor Emma" (included in the 2007 paperback *There are no Ghosts in the Soviet Union*) in which finances and security play the central role.
- *The Importance of Being Emma*, a novel by Juliet Archer, is a modern version of *Emma*.
- *Emma and the Werewolves: Jane Austen and Adam Rann*, a mashup novel by Adam Rann. A mashup novel appropriates text and the author's name from an original source that is no longer protected by copyright, integrating new narrative into the original to create a new (mashup) story on the back of the original. Typically, the mashup story is a sendup of the original story. Also typical, the mashup publisher prints the original author's name in a manner that falsely represents the original as a joint author or collaborator in the mashup novel.
- Gwyneth Paltrow played Emma in the 1996 movie.
- Romola Garai played Emma in the 2009 BBC Series based on the book.
- Andrew Trees' novel "Academy X," about an unnamed prep school in New York City, utilizes "Emma" throughout the plot. The main character, John, is head of the English department and teaches "Emma" to his senior literature class. The character of Caitlin is often compared to the eponymous heroine because of her looks, money, and high-standing position in the social hierarchy of the school.
- The Bollywood film *Aisha* (2010) is an adaptation of *Emma*.

See also

- Illegitimacy in fiction

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 12 978-0-521-85806-9.
3. ^ Jane Austen (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000807/>) at the Internet Movie Database
4. ^ "Casting announced for BBC One's *Emma* this Autumn" (http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/04_april/04/emma.shtml) at BBC One (4 April 2009)

External links

- *Emma* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/158>) at Project Gutenberg
- Chronology/Calendar for *Emma* (<http://www.jimandellen.org/austen/emma.calendar.html>)
- *Emma* (<http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/jane-austen/emma.html>) study guide, quotes, themes, teaching guide
- *Emma* (<http://publicliterature.org/books/emma/xaa.php>) , complete text and audio
- *Emma* audio book (http://www.archive.org/details/emma_version_5_1002_librivox) , public domain solo recording by Moira Fogarty at Internet Archive
- *Emma* (<http://librivox.org/emma-by-jane-austen-solo/>) , free audio book at LibriVox (<http://www.librivox.org>)
- *Emma* (<http://emma-by-jane-austen.blogspot.com>) , Easy to read text.

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