



SHREE H.N.SHUKLA GROUP OF COLLEGES, RAJKOT

B.A. DEPARTMENT

MATERIAL

CLASS NAME: S.Y.B.A. SEM 3

SUBJECT NAME: - ENGLISH

PAPER 6

Emma by Jane Austen

Emma, fourth novel by Jane Austen, published in three volumes in 1815. Set in Highbury, England, in the early 19th century, the novel centres on Emma Woodhouse, a precocious young woman whose misplaced confidence in her matchmaking abilities occasions several romantic misadventures.

Plot Summary

Emma's introduction of the character Emma Woodhouse is among the most famous in the history of fiction. According to the narrator:

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.

The force of the verb seemed is pointed. Emma is indeed beautiful, wealthy, and smart. However, she is also spoiled, meddlesome, and self-deluded. Although she is convinced she will never marry, Emma believes she is an excellent matchmaker. As she tells her father and her dear friend Mr. Knightley, she practically arranged the recent marriage between her former governess, Miss Taylor, and the widower Mr. Weston. (She did, after all, introduce them.) After such a clear "success," Emma is determined to make another match. This time, she has set her sights on the village vicar, Mr. Elton. Both Emma's father and Mr. Knightley caution her against interfering, but they ultimately fail to dissuade her.

Shortly thereafter, Emma befriends Harriet Smith, a 17-year-old student at a local boarding school. Harriet's parentage is unknown; she is "the natural daughter of somebody" who many years ago placed her in the care of the school's headmistress, Mrs. Goddard. Despite the obscurity of her birth and her perceived inferior social status, Emma decides that Harriet is a perfect match for Mr. Elton. Emma sets about improving her friend, first, by discouraging her interest in Robert Martin, a young farmer whose family is renting land from Mr. Knightley. Harriet clearly has feelings for Robert (and Robert for her). Emma convinces her otherwise; she tells Harriet that Robert is beneath her. When Robert writes a letter asking for her hand in marriage, Harriet, with Emma's counsel, refuses him.



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When Mr. Knightley visits Emma, he excitedly tells her about Robert's intent to marry Harriet. After Emma informs him that Harriet has already rejected Robert's proposal (with her help), Mr. Knightley is furious. He criticizes Emma for interfering, claiming Robert is a respectable man and a good match for Harriet. Mr. Knightley storms out. He does not visit Emma again for some time. In his absence, Emma continues to push Harriet and Mr. Elton together. With Robert out of the way, and Harriet and Mr. Elton spending more and more time together, Emma begins to celebrate the success of her endeavour. All seems to be going well until Christmas Eve, when Mr. Elton reveals to Emma that he is in love with her, not Harriet, and has been spending time with Harriet only to please her. Humiliated by her attempt to pair him with Harriet, Mr. Elton resolves to retire to Bath. Emma is forced to tell Harriet about Mr. Elton and spends the next several days consoling her.

Meanwhile, two new visitors arrive in Highbury: Jane Fairfax, the beautiful orphaned niece of Emma's neighbour Miss Bates, and Frank Churchill, the dashing young son of Mr. Weston. Initially, Emma dislikes Jane. She condemns her for being too "cold" and too "cautious." (The narrator suggests that Emma is in fact jealous of Jane, because Jane had previously met Frank, whom Emma has taken a liking to.) Mr. Knightley defends Jane, reminding Emma that, whereas she is privileged, Jane has no fortune and must soon leave to work as a governess. Mrs. Weston suspects that Mr. Knightley harbours some romantic feelings for Jane. Emma adamantly denies this.

Emma's initial interest in Frank does not last. After a while, she begins to imagine him as a potential match for Harriet, and, when Harriet confesses her love for a man of a higher social status, Emma assumes she means Frank. As it turns out, Harriet is in love with Mr. Knightley, who, at a recent village ball, saved her from the embarrassment of being snubbed by Mr. Elton and his new wife. Suddenly, Emma realizes that she, too, loves Mr. Knightley. She realizes that if she had let Harriet marry Robert, she might have avoided this whole mess. And thus the denouement begins.

Not long after Harriet's confession, Frank makes a hasty departure from Highbury. As he later explains in a letter to Emma, he and Jane have secretly been engaged all along. His flirtation with Emma was just a ruse—a way to buy time until his relatives agreed to his marriage with Jane. Emma and Mr. Knightley discuss this surprise turn of events. To Mr. Knightley's surprise, Emma confesses that she never loved Frank. Mr. Knightley, in response, professes his love for Emma. She is overjoyed, and they implicitly agree to be married.



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Emma briefly worries about Harriet and how she will receive the news of their engagement. Emma is pleased to learn that Harriet has decided to marry Robert after all. The novel thus concludes with three marriages: Jane and Frank, Harriet and Robert, and Emma and Mr. Knightley.

Analysis And Interpretation

Marriage and social status are the two foci of Emma. Most of the drama in Austen's novel revolves around who loves whom and what that means, given their social station. Social status in 19th-century England was determined by a confluence of factors, including, but not limited to, family name, sex, birthright, reputation, and wealth, and it dictated much about the course of a person's life. Members of the higher social classes were not expected to intermarry, let alone interact, with members of a lower class. In fact, in some cases, such marriages were considered inappropriate.

Through Emma, Austen subtly satirizes her society's obsession with social distinctions. At the beginning of the novel, Austen's heroine is confident she knows who "the chosen and the best" are in Highbury and who constitutes the "second set." Keeping with her social code, Emma discourages Harriet from pursuing a relationship with Robert. As Emma explains, Robert is not a "gentleman." He is therefore destined to become "a completely gross, vulgar farmer, totally inattentive to appearances, and thinking of nothing but profit and loss." Emma is similarly appalled when Mrs. Elton presumes to call Mr. Elton and Mr. Knightley "Mr. E" and "Knightley."

Mr. Knightley challenges Emma's notions of class distinction, pushing her to contemplate whether such distinctions truly matter. When Emma criticizes Robert for his ungentlemanly demeanour, Mr. Knightley impassionedly defends Robert, claiming that he "has more true gentility than Harriet Smith could ever understand." After all her attempts to make suitable matches fail, Emma finally begins to realize that social distinction does not equate to a constitutional difference in character. By the end of the novel, Emma has learned her lesson, and she decides that "[i]t would be a great pleasure to know Robert Martin."

In terms of its subject matter, Emma was by no means revolutionary: Austen herself described the novel's subject ("Three or four families in a country village") as an ideal subject for any novel. However, Emma was revolutionary in terms of its form and style. Before Austen, novelists generally used either first- or third-person narration to tell their stories. Austen combined the two styles, first in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and then again in *Emma*. From the



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outset, Austen characterizes Emma as a self-deluded young woman. Austen's style of narration allows the reader to share in Emma's delusions:

The longer she considered it, the greater was her sense of expediency. Mr. Elton's situation was most suitable, quite the gentleman himself, and without low connections; at the same time not of any family that could fairly object to the doubtful birth of Harriet. He had a comfortable home for her, and Emma imagined a very sufficient income; for though the vicarage of Highbury was not large, he was known to have some independent property; and she thought very highly of him as a good-humoured, well-meaning, respectable young man, without any deficiency of useful understanding or knowledge of the world.

Here Austen distinguishes the voice of the third-person narrator from that of the heroine. Using phrases like "quite the gentleman himself" and "a comfortable home for her," Austen evokes Emma's consciousness through a type of subjective narration called free indirect discourse. Its intended effect is to close the distance between the reader and the character, thereby helping the reader to see through the character's eyes. In this passage (and throughout *Emma*), Austen passes between Emma's own thought processes and a more straightforward, traditionally third-person narrative voice ("she considered it," "Emma imagined").

Emma was one of the first novels—if not the first novel—to employ sustained free indirect discourse. As such, some critics locate it among novels such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) as one of the great experimental novels of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Publication And Reception

Austen began writing *Emma* in January 1814. She finished the novel a little over a year later, in March 1815. In the fall of 1815, Austen submitted *Emma* to London-based publisher John Murray. Murray offered Austen £450 in return for the copyrights of *Emma* and two of her previous novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Mansfield Park* (1814). Upon receiving his offer, Austen called Murray a "Rogue" and resolved to retain the copyright herself. Murray eventually published *Emma* on commission, with Austen herself paying for advertising and an initial print run of 2,000 copies. First editions of the three-volume novel hit bookshop shelves in December 1815. Like her previous novels, *Emma* was published anonymously.



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Austen's novel was received by friends and family members with mixed reviews. In general, they criticized the plot for its lack of action and romantic drama. Contemporary critics expressed more favourable views, praising the authenticity of Austen's characters and, especially, her heroine. Critics also appreciated Austen's "amusing" sense of humour. An anonymous reviewer for the Quarterly Review—long believed to be Sir Walter Scott—said of Austen and Emma:

The author's knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.

Irish poet Thomas Moore wrote in a similar vein. He described Emma as "the very perfection of novel-writing."

Legacy

Austen did not expect readers to like the protagonist of Emma. About her, Austen famously said, "I'm going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." Generations of readers have proved Austen wrong. "Handsome, clever and rich," Emma is undoubtedly one of Austen's most beloved characters. Modern readers have by and large embraced Emma and her flaws. Feminist critics have identified her as an archetype of the modern woman, whose prospects and future happiness do not depend on marriage.

Austen's novel continues to be tremendously popular with modern audiences. Emma has been adapted for the stage and screen several times. Notably, in 1995, Clueless was released, a contemporary take starring Alicia Silverstone as Cher (Emma), Paul Rudd as Josh (Mr. Knightley), Brittany Murphy as Tai (Harriet), and Jeremy Sisto as Elton (Mr. Elton). Unlike the original novel, Clueless is set in Beverly Hills, California, in the mid-1990s. The film achieved cult status in the 21st century. Other notable screen adaptations of Emma were released in 1996 and 2009.