

Emma by Jane Austen Discussion Questions

Emma was written between January 1814 and March 1815, published in 1815. The title character, Emma Woodhouse, is queen of her little community. She is lovely and wealthy. She has no mother; her fussy, fragile father imposes no curbs on either her behavior or her self-satisfaction. Everyone else in the village is deferentially lower in social standing. Only Mr. Knightley, an old family friend, ever suggests she needs improvement.

Emma has a taste for matchmaking. When she meets pretty Harriet Smith, “the natural daughter of somebody,” Emma takes her up as both a friend and a cause. Under Emma’s direction, Harriet refuses a proposal from a local farmer, Robert Martin, so that Emma can engineer one from Mr. Elton, the vicar. Unluckily, Mr. Elton misunderstands the intrigues and believes Emma is interested in him for herself. He cannot be lowered to consider Harriet Smith.

Things are further shaken by the return to the village by Jane Fairfax, niece to the garrulous Miss Bates; and by a visit from Frank Churchill, stepson of Emma’s ex-governess. He and Jane are secretly engaged, but as no one knows this, it has no impact on the matchmaking frenzy.

The couples are eventually sorted out, if not according to Emma’s plan, at least to her satisfaction. Uninterested in marriage at the book’s beginning, she happily engages herself to Mr. Knightley before its end.

ABOUT JANE AUSTEN

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775 at Steventon near Basingstoke, the seventh child of the rector of the parish. She lived with her family at Steventon until they moved to Bath when her father retired in 1801. After his death in 1805, she moved around with her mother; in 1809, they settled in Chawton, near Alton, Hampshire. Here she remained, except for a few visits to London, until in May 1817 she moved to Winchester to be near her doctor. There she died on July 18, 1817. As a girl Jane Austen wrote stories, including burlesques of popular romances. Her works were only published after much revision, four novels being published in her lifetime. These are *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816). Two other novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, were published posthumously in 1818 with a biographical notice by her brother, Henry Austen, the first formal announcement of her authorship. *Persuasion* was written in a race against failing health in 1815-16. She also left two earlier compositions, a

short epistolary novel, *Lady Susan*, and an unfinished novel, *The Watsons*. At the time of her death, she was working on a new novel, *Sanditon*, a fragmentary draft of which survives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. About Emma, Jane Austen famously said, “I’m going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.” Do you like Emma? Why or why not?
2. Austen makes an unusual choice by selecting as her main character the most privileged woman in the book, the woman with “little to distress or vex her.” The Jane Fairfax story line (which W.J. Harvey has called the “shadow novel-within-the-novel”) has more traditional elements of tension and drama than Emma’s story. Austen’s own publisher traitorously said of *Emma*, “it wants incident and romance.” Do you agree? Would you have rather read about Jane?
3. Early in the book, Emma tells Harriet she doesn’t plan to marry. But the other women all embody, in one way or another, the serious economic consequences of staying single. The book is filled with women at risk. Discuss with reference to: Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, Mrs. Elton, Harriet Smith, Miss Taylor.
4. Class issues run through every plot line in *Emma*. How would you describe Mr. Knightley’s views on class and privilege? Harriet Smith is “the natural daughter of nobody knows whom.” Which fact—her illegitimacy or her undetermined class standing—is more important in effecting her marital prospects? How do you feel about Emma’s hopes to see Harriet married above her expectations? How does Emma’s relationship to Harriet change over the course of the book?
5. Two characters, Mrs. Elton and Frank Churchill, come into Highbury from the outside and threaten the little community with change. Mr. Knightley likes neither of them. How do you feel about them?
6. One effect of the hidden (Jane Fairfax/Frank Churchill) story is to undermine the omniscience of the narrator. Some critics have suggested that the narrator controls the reader less in *Emma* than in most Austen books. Because of this, Reginald Ferrar has suggested the book improves on rereading. “Only when the story has been thoroughly assimilated can the infinite delights and subtleties of its workmanship begin to be appreciated.” He suggests that rereading *Pride and Prejudice* allows you to repeat the pleasure you had at the first reading, while rereading *Emma* always provides new pleasures. (He also says that “until you know the story, you are apt to

find the movement dense and slow and obscure, difficult to follow, and not very obviously worth the following.”) Do you agree with any of this? Do you like a book in which the writer’s intentions are not always clear and there is space for the reader to take charge or do you like to know what the writer wants you to be feeling and noticing? How do you feel about the idea of a book that has to be reread in order to be enjoyed? Is Emma such a book?