

Content Issues

Emma is a novel about matchmaking and marriage. The novel begins with a wedding having taken place and ends with multiple weddings. There is a lot of discussion about the differences males and females expect when looking for a spouse. Much is made of physical appearance, but it seems to always be balanced by the importance of there being substance behind the looks. One's true character is deemed of great importance. Although the characters do not consistently observe this, it is worth noting. In the Bible, 1 Samuel 16:7 tells us that God looks beyond appearances. Emma must learn this when she realizes the true nature of Mr. Elton was the opposite of what she believed (Chapter 16).

In Chapter 26, Emma begins to suspect an inappropriate relationship or at least a past relationship between Mr. Dixon and Miss Jane Fairfax prior to Dixon marrying. There is no evidence for it and it later becomes clear that Emma concocted the entire thing and was wrong to do so. Frank Churchill & Emma discuss this rumor several times. There is a lot of whispering regarding a gifted pianoforte. In Chapter 41, when the friends are all playing a word game Frank & Emma really push the rumor. This is an uncomfortable moment in the novel. We have seen that Emma dislikes Jane with no real reason and now she has started a rumor about her. This is a cruel act on Emma's part and it seems to be without explanation. Emma's desire to meddle and speak without thinking causes those around her to become hurt. A helpful Scripture passage to consider here is, James 3:5-7. Emma doesn't think about the power she holds with what she says. Knightley reminds her of this in Chapter 43 when he reprimands her for speaking against Miss Bates as she does. Emma later realizes she was wrong on both counts. In Chapter 45, she tries to make amends to Jane Fairfax.

Emma shows a superior attitude to several characters. She convinces Harriet to reject a marriage proposal because she thinks Mr. Martin is not good enough (Chapter 7). She dislikes Jane Fairfax for no given reason (Chapter 10). Some of Emma's attitude seems to be socially acceptable prejudices based on class distinctions. It is interesting to have a heroine who is somewhat difficult to admire. Another important passage from James is applicable here. Scripture warning us about showing partiality can be found at James 2:1-26

Most people surrounding Emma tell her how wonderful she is. She usually appreciates that Mr. Knightley will point out her faults. Emma is very much blind to her own faults. This is often the case with all of us. In Chapter 1, we see two comments by Emma about Mr. Knightley recognizing her faults. "Mr. Knightley loves to find fault with me, you know - in a joke - it is all a joke (for her father's benefit). We always say what we like to one another." Knightley is described as, "one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them." Knightley says of himself, "Emma knows I never flatter her." Knightley attempts to be a true friend to Emma. He admires her and compliments her, but always tries to be honest with her. Proverbs 27:5-6 speaks highly of rebuke from a friend.

In Chapter 15, Elton proposes marriage and Emma thinks he must be drunk. In describing how passionately he expresses his feelings, the text says "he violently made love". This wording may be a little confusing. It's only talking about how he spoke.

Chapter 46 reveals a secret. The reasons behind this are revealed in a letter Frank writes to apologize for his secrecy. We learn that after his aunt dies (Chapter 45) he felt he had more freedom. This seems to be understood by the characters. However, his flirtation with Emma as part of his keeping up the secret is an uncomfortable scenario. As the novel concludes, all is forgiven.

Mood

The majority of Emma is considered in a very lighthearted mood with a story full of wit and irony. The fact that Emma can entertain herself with her matchmaking attempts implies a carefree life right from the start of the novel. Emma is at liberty to marry or not marry. She is under no immediate threat of being destitute if she never marries at all (Chapter 10).

Emma appears to be well-intentioned in her desire to find matches for her friends. Her misunderstandings and her mistakes lead to choices that are not malicious in their intention, but people do get hurt. Much of Emma's self-realization comes at the cost of hurt feelings around her. This can seem quite harsh when reading through as Emma's selfishness seems to be an unintended result of her upbringing. There is a thoughtlessness behind her words and actions that does not come from a lack of feeling for those around her. It comes from a literal lack of thought for the end results of her attempts to make things happen how she believes they should happen.

Descriptive Writing & Poetic Language

Austen uses descriptive language to create a picture of each location in the novel. She also uses this type of language to describe her characters. Much of who the characters are is revealed in dialogue.

The opening lines of the novel give a description of Emma which carries the reader through all of the satire and irony awaiting us. Emma has everything she could want and lives a pretty stress-free life. As the novel moves forward, we see that Emma has blinded herself to what she wants and creates unnecessary stress with her meddling.

Knightley says of Emma, "Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it; her vanity lies another way" (Chapter 5).

As narrator, Austen moves in and out of the minds of her characters. This is particularly the case with Emma. It is difficult to tell when we are hearing from the narrator or from a character's thoughts. This form of "free indirect discourse" really allows Austen to use irony in creating the world of Emma.

Chapter 9 - Mr. Elton's use of a poetic charade to reveal his feelings

Chapter 43 – Mr. Knightley reprimands Emma for how she treats Miss Bates at Box Hill. "...Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honor - to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her - and before her niece, too - and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*) would be entirely guided by *your* treatment of her. This is not pleasant for you, Emma - and it is far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will - I will tell you the

truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now”

Chapter 48 – “The evening of this day was very long, and melancholy, at Hartfield. The weather added what it could of gloom. A cold stormy rain set in, and nothing of July appeared but in the trees and shrubs, which the wind was despoiling, and the length of the day, which only made such cruel sights the longer visible.”

Word Play

Chapter 9 - Harriet was interested in transcribing riddles. Emma tried to get Mr. Elton to contribute. Elton brings a charade that he claims a friend wrote for a woman he admires. He tells Emma maybe she could look at it privately. Emma tells Harriet it must be for her. Harriet doesn't understand it. Emma interprets it to mean he is asking to pursue a courtship with Harriet.

Chapter 14 – “Compliments, charades, and horrible blunders; and it was not to be supposed that poor Harriet should not be recollecting too; but she behaved very well, and was only rather pale and silent.”

Chapter 41 – Literal example of word play as the characters play the time period's variation of the game, Scrabble. The word “blunder” appears here and repeatedly throughout the book.

Irony & Satire

Irony is demonstrated with many things characters say. Often the reader is not aware of the irony until completing the novel.

Chapter 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.”

Chapter 7 – Emma influences Harriet's decision to reject Mr. Martin's proposal. “. . . though Emma continued to protest against any assistance being wanted, it was in fact given in the formation of every sentence.”

Chapter 10 – Emma spends time discussing her unprovoked dislike of Jane Fairfax and then the reader gets a description of Emma as “very compassionate” as she's visiting the poor.

Chapter 13 – John Knightley suggests that Mr. Elton may be in love with Emma. Emma finds the idea ridiculous and, “amusing herself in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are for ever falling into”

Chapter 22 – “Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of.”

Chapter 26 - When Mrs. Weston says that she believes Jane Fairfax and Mr. Knightley would be a good match, Emma's response is, "My dear Mrs. Weston, do not take to match-making. You do it very ill."

Chapter 30 - "Oh! Miss. Woodhouse, why are you always so right?" – Frank Churchill

Morals/wisdom/advice

Chapter 8 – Knightley warns Emma about what she may be doing to Harriet. "She had no sense of superiority then. If she has it now, you have given it. You have been no friend to Harriet Smith, Emma." And later, "You will puff her up with such ideas of her own beauty, and of what she has a claim to, that, in a little while, nobody within her reach will be good enough for her. Vanity working on a weak head, produces every sort of mischief. Nothing so easy as for a young lady to raise her expectation too high."

Chapter 18 - "There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chooses, and that is, his duty; not by maneuvering and finessing, but by vigor and resolution."

Connection To Current Events

Manners & Etiquette

Traditional rules of etiquette should be taken into consideration to understand some of the interactions between the characters. It may be helpful to spend some time researching social customs during the Regency era in England.

Chapter 25 - Emma does not want to attend a party with the Coles. There is a discussion that she could go and then leave early. If she leaves too early it will be offensive, especially because of who Miss Woodhouse is in society.

Mrs. Elton is often highlighted as a character not using proper manners. In Chapter 32, we see her make several noticeable mistakes. She refers to Mr. Knightley too informally. She tries to push her way into a high standing among the people at Hartfield. Mrs. Elton doesn't seem to know her proper place.

Emma defends Mrs. Weston against Mrs. Elton by saying Mrs. Weston's manners, "were always particularly good. Their propriety, simplicity, and elegance would make them the safest model for any young woman".

Marriage

Marriage was seen as an important business matter in much of this society because of how it secured finances for the couple and the families.

Chapter 3 – Miss Bates was not considered very pretty or smart. She is described as older and her age has resigned her to taking care of her mother as an unmarried woman. The use of "and yet" shows us that her situation in life should be looked upon sadly. Even with her "terrible" situation, she is considered a loving and kind person.

Social Standing

A class system was in place during this time period which would make certain associations improper or impossible. Marrying too far above or too low beneath one's own station in life was seen as problematic. A person's family was very instrumental in approving of their spouse. It was not unusual to be financially "cut off" or to live a life of conflict if a proper marriage did not take place.

Chapter 1 – Emma's long time governess (Miss Taylor) marries. Miss Taylor had become part of the Woodhouse family. Emma had played a crucial role in finding her a match and as Mrs. Weston, she still has a place in the Woodhouse family.

Chapter 2 - There is a great deal of focus on the story of Mr. Weston's first marriage and the problems he encountered with his disapproving in-laws. Those problems are carried over into how his son, Frank Churchill, chooses to pursue his own engagement and marriage. We see some of this in Chapter 14 when Frank explains his secret engagement. It is only after Mrs. Churchill passes away that he can begin to act on his feelings.

Chapter 20 –As for the future of Jane Fairfax, we see a much more dreary look at the life of a governess. The role of governess was important for the family whose children were being assisted, but for the governess herself this was sometimes her only financial option.

Chapter 25 - The Cole family was able to move upward socially, but Emma is not as accepting of them. The Cole's represent the idea of "nouveau-riche" as they created their own financial status through working as tradespeople as opposed to inheriting their wealth from a long history.

Thank you to Rebecca Wire for reading *Emma* and writing up all of this insightful information for us!