EMMA: STUDY GUIDE

Is Emma partially or totally cured of her flaws—e.g., her egotism, her manipulativeness or desire to control, her snobbery, and her preferring imagination (fancy) over reason?

Is there a breakdown in the social harmony and cohesiveness of society? If so, why? are they restored? and if restored, how?

Does the most serious threat to the social world in Emma come from outside (e.g., Frank Churchill), from within (e.g., Emma), from a combination of sources (e.g., the secret engagement of Frank and Jane, the egoism and social irresponsibility of the Eltons and Emma, the self-importance of Harriet which Emma encourages), or from some other source?

Is Jane Fairfax superior to Emma?

Which is preferable: the romantic, passionate love of Jane and Frank or the intelligent, companionate love of Emma and Mr. Knightley? (You may want to consider this question from Austen’s point of view and your own.) Are the partners in each relationship equals in personal qualities, moral nature, intelligence, understanding, social status, etc.? Does one of these relationships seem more likely to produce a happier, more stable marriage than the other?

Is mutual understanding necessary to live in harmony? Thank of various relationships, e.g., Emma and her father, Emma and Mr. Knightley, Emma and Miss Bates, Jane and Frank, Jane and Emma.

Are there necessarily or inevitably constraints on freedom? If not, can society allow total freedom or are some constraints or limitations on the individual’s behavior necessary?

Are Emma’s choices conformity to society and acceptance of the inherited order versus expressing her individuality (her Self) and spontaneity?

Is Austen uncritically accepting of her society, or is she concerned with the social responsibility of the privileged (that is, idealizing their responsibilities and showing the consequences of not fulfilling them)? Or both?

Is Austen, as a prisoner of her society (if she is), free to say what she likes about it?

CRITICS’ VIEWS

Please think about the following interpretations by various critics. Do you find them valid as statements about Emma? Or, to what extent do you find them valid? Why or why not?

Walter Allen:
  “Dickens recognizes no limits at all; the art of Jane Austen is made possible precisely by the recognition of limits.”
  “She is never for one moment soft in any way; indeed, there is no more intransigent, ruthless novelist in the world.”

Nina Auerbach:
  “… the ultimate prison is acquiescence, even when acquiescence seems all life has to offer.”
Emma “is both queen and slave, prime mover and victim, of the confinements of Highbury and of her father’s house.”

John Bayley:
"She uses the rigidity of society as a means of liberating her fancy and her creative joy..."

Wayne C. Booth:
“Though Emma’s faults are comic, they constantly threaten to produce serious harm, yet Emma must remain sympathetic or the reader won’t wish for or delight in her reform.”

A.C. Bradley:
“In all her novels, though in varying degrees, Jane Austen regards the characters, good and bad alike, with ironical amusement, because they never see the situation as it really is and as she sees it.... We constantly share her point of view, and are aware of the amusing difference between the fact and its appearance to the actors.”

Charlotte Brontë:
“Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works: all such demonstrations the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as outré or extravagant. She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy, in the painting. She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him with nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood ... What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study: but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death–this Miss Austen ignores.”

Julia Prewitt Brown:
Austen “insists on the necessity and finally the benevolence of social cooperation; because it alone protects the Harriets and the Miss Bateses of the world, cares for, tolerates, and loves them.”

J.F. Burrows:
Mr. Knightley is “one fallible creature among others”; certainly, he is not Austen’s “spokesman and chief guardian of her values.”

Marilyn Butler:
“Jane Austen depicts even the best minds as continually fallible, under the pressure of new evidence, and potentially undermined form within by selfishness. Her only constants are abstract qualities–directness, honesty, sincerity, humility–the characteristics striven for by people who care about truth. She sees perfectibility as a condition of human life, but not perfection.”

Lord David Cecil:
“Emma is universal just because it is narrow; because it confines itself to the range of Jane Austen's profoundest vision.
"For it is a profound vision. There are other views of life and more extensive; concerned as it is exclusively with personal relationships, it leaves out several important aspects of experience. But on her own ground Jane Austen gets to the heart of the matter; her graceful unpretentious philosophy, founded as it is on an unwavering recognition of fact, directed by an unerring perception of moral quality, is as impressive as those of the most majestic novelists."
Alistair M. Duckworth:
“Emma in the end chose society rather than self, an inherited order rather than a spontaneous and improvised existence.”

*Gentleman’s Magazine* (anonymous review, September 1816):
“...it delineates with great accuracy the habits and the manners of a middle class of gentry; and of the inhabitants of a country village at one degree of rank and gentility beneath them. Every character throughout the work, from the heroine to the most subordinate, it s portrait which comes home to the heart and feelings of the Reader; who becomes familiarly acquainted with each of them, nor loses sight of a single individual till the completion of the work. The unites of time and place are well preserved; the language is chaste and correct; and if *Emma* be not allowed to rank in the very highest class of modern Novels, it certainly may claim at least a distinguished degree of eminence in that species of composition.”

Arnold Kettle:
"...after Jane Austen, the great novels of the nineteenth century are all, in their different ways, novels of revolt. The task of the novelists was the same as it had always been—to achieve realism, to express (with whatever innovations of form and structure they needs must discover) the truth about life as it faced them. But to do this, to cut through the whole complex structure of inhumanity and false feeling that ate into the consciousness of the capitalist world, it was necessary to become a rebel...

"The great novelists were rebels, and the measure of their greatness is found in the last analysis to correspond with the degree and consistency of their rebellion. It was not of course always a conscious, intellectualized rebellion; very seldom was it based on anything like a sociological analysis. It was, rather, a rebellion of the spirit, of the total consciousness, and it was only indirectly reflected in the lives the writers led. Emily Brontë, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, outwardly, appearing to conform to the accepted standards of their day, sensed no less profoundly than the radicals Dickens and George Eliot and Samuel Butler the degradation of human existence in Victorian society."

"Human happiness not abstract principle is her concern."

Marvin Mudrich:
Emma is “a confirmed exploiter”; therefore, the ending is ironic.

Robert M. Polhemus:
Austen’s comedy depends on her heroines; the wittiest are Elizabeth Bennett and Emma, “characters whose largeness and consequence match the greatest comic figures in literature.”

Martin Price:
The larger irony that informs all of Jane Austen’s comic art is a sense of human limitations.”

Sir Walter Scott:
“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 to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader…

“Her merits consist much in the force of a narrative conducted with much neatness and point, and a quiet yet comic dialogue, in which the characters of the speakers evolve themselves with dramatic effect. The faults arise from the minute detail which the author’s plan comprehends. Characters of folly or simplicity, such as those of old Woodhouse and Miss Bates, are ridiculous
when first presented, but if too often brought forward or too long dwelt upon, their prosing is apt
to become as tiresome in fiction as in real society.”

**Lionel Trilling** finds “intelligent love” to be Austen’s ideal (he adopted this phrase from an anonymous
reviewer in *The North Briton Review*, 1879):

“I have no apologies to make for the spinster Jane, even though she may never show us her lovers
in bed. In the fullest sense she understood love, and made sure her best men and women come to
do so too.”

Austen’s social world is one of “terror with a capital ‘T.’”

**Horace Walpole** said, “Life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel.” Building on
this comment, Ian Watt suggests that Austen’s novels, which are comedies, “have little appeal to those who
believe thought inferior to feeling.”

**Ian Watt:**

“In the case of Jane Austen it is still difficult to reconcile the apparently trivial nature of her subject
matter with the absolute command of experience implied by the way it is presented.”

**Joseph Wiesenfarth:**

“Once Emma knows herself and others, she is ready to accept the responsibility of the bride of
George Knightley” (i.e., she is worthy of him and able to fulfill the social responsibilities of the
wife of a man in his social position).

Mr. Woodhouse is “an example of a radical detachment from reality... who spins out a world of
his won... he is the most gentle and egocentric character in *Emma*. His daughter is in no
immediate danger of absorbing her father’s gentleness, but he represents the danger of detachment
form reality by way of egotism that she is liable to. Certainly Mr. Woodhouse has everything his
way. Indeed, he is the only character in the novel who continuously has Emma under his control.”

**John Wiltshire:**

“Frank presents the possibility of seeing things another way–one that allows much more to
impetuosity and surprise, to passion and risk-taking. In this view Mr. Woodhouse would be seen as
blocking the way, a man whose depressive fussiness inhibits and shuts down opportunities and
possibilities of life, and Mr. Knightley’s masculine rationality and rule-giving an attempt to contain
and organize a world that is actually much more volatile.”

**Angus Wilson:**

Highbury is “a neighborhood of voluntary spies” and hatreds.

**Virginia Woolf:**

“Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears on the surface. She stimulates
us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something
that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are
outwardly trivial. Always the stress is laid upon character.”