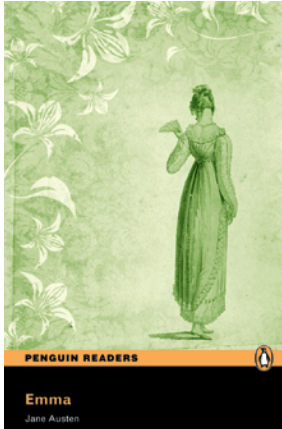




Emma

Jane Austen



About the author

Jane Austen's literary genius is universally acknowledged. Her novels, written in the early part of the nineteenth century, are considered masterpieces. Essentially romances, the novels are sharply observed, beautifully constructed, and have tremendous realism and wit. Of these, *Emma* (1816) is generally agreed to be Austen's most accomplished work. A film of *Emma* was released in 1996.

Jane Austen was born in 1775 in the Hampshire countryside; she had five brothers and one sister. Her father was a clergyman and his wife was an energetic woman who also had some literary talent. Recent biographies reveal that the family had constant financial difficulties. The family was lively and affectionate, with many relatives.

Austen started writing as a teenager. Even at that age her works were incisive and elegantly expressed. The few letters that remain reveal her lively if rather acid wit! Of her appearance, her brother wrote, 'In person she was very attractive; her figure was rather tall and slender ... She was a clear brunette with a rich colour.' Austen received several proposals of marriage but rejected them. She fell in love with a young man who reciprocated her feelings – but since both were penniless they were not allowed to marry. By her mid-twenties, Austen regarded herself as a spinster, drawing ever closer to her beloved elder sister Cassandra, who after Austen's death, described her as 'the sun of my life'.

Austen wrote six major novels. *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816) which were published during her lifetime. *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published

in 1818 after her death. The books were popular. Highly placed public figures admired her novels greatly. The Prince Regent (heir to the throne) kept a set of her novels in each of his homes.

In 1800, when Jane was 25, her parents moved from the family home, and did not settle until 1810. During this period Austen wrote very little – an indication of how disturbed she was by the move. Austen died in 1817, at the age of 41, possibly of a form of cancer.

Summary

Emma, the 21-year-old heroine of the book, is beautiful, clever and rich. Her mother died when she was very young, so her governess played the part of her mother. Another old friend is Mr Knightley, a man in his late thirties who treats Emma like a younger sister. Although Emma is charming, she is rather spoilt. She befriends a young woman, Harriet, who is of a lower social class. Emma amuses herself by matchmaking, convinced of her own superiority and knowledge of people's hearts. She makes several attempts to pair off Harriet with men she considers suitable. But, unbeknown to Emma, Harriet has fallen in love with Mr Knightley, who appears to return her affection. When Harriet reveals her feelings to Emma, our heroine realises with horror, that while claiming to know others' hearts, she has neglected to know her own – and she is desperately in love with Mr Knightley.

Chapters 1–3: The story begins with Emma's old governess, and companion's, marriage to Mr Weston. Soon afterwards Emma befriends Harriet and begins to match-make on her behalf. Her first target is Mr Elton, the vicar. She advises Harriet to refuse an offer of marriage from a local farmer, Mr Martin, as she believes Harriet can make a better match.

Much to Emma's surprise, Mr Elton proposes to her, but she refuses. Harriet is upset to learn that she is not the object of Mr Elton's affections. Mr Elton leaves town for a short break. Emma learns that Jane Fairfax, a lady with whom she is acquainted, is to return to Highbury for an extended visit with her aunt, Miss Bates. News comes of Mr Elton's impending marriage to a lady of fortune, only four weeks after leaving Highbury.

Chapters 4–6: Emma learns that Frank Churchill, Mr Weston's son, who was adopted by the Churchill's, is coming to Highbury for a long awaited visit. Mr Churchill and Emma meet and form an immediate friendship.



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Emma does not form a good opinion of Mr Elton's new wife. Mr Churchill and Emma start to plan a ball but he is called away. Emma, upon reflection, decides that she is not in love with Mr Churchill after all. Soon afterwards Mr Churchill returns and the ball takes place.

Chapters 7–9: Harriet is harassed by some gypsies and Frank Churchill saves her. Emma supposes her to be in love with him and thinks it is a good match. A trip is arranged to Box Hill but it is not a success and Emma behaves rudely towards Miss Bates. Emma's behaviour angers Mr Knightley.

Emma feels ashamed and goes to see Miss Bates where she learns Miss Fairfax is to take a position as a governess to three children. After an illness, old Mrs Churchill dies which means that Frank Churchill is free to marry whom he chooses. It comes to light that Frank Churchill and Miss Fairfax are secretly engaged. Harriet reveals to Emma that she is in love with Mr Knightley. Emma is jolted by this news as she is also in love with him.

Much to Emma's joy Mr Knightley proposes to her. Harriet visits London with Isabella, Emma's sister, where she meets Mr Martin, who again proposes to her, this time she accepts. The story ends happily with three weddings.

Background and themes

Austen's works are satirical comedies about the middle and upper-middle classes. The plots are variations on a theme: a young woman's courtship and eventual marriage. By the end of every one of Austen's novels, the heroine has found a husband. The world Austen describes is not large: she describes small social groups in provincial environments. But within this narrow focus Austen explores universal themes: money and its effect on the human psyche; romance and its illusions and the necessary progression towards more realistic relationships, as the courting couples discover each other's true natures.

Love, courtship and marriage: Love, courtship and marriage are central themes in *Emma*, and are the prevalent theme throughout. The story is structured around this theme. In each marriage, the match solidifies the couple's social status. For a young woman of this period, marriage was the surest route to independence and freedom. Marriage to a wealthy man of good birth was the most desirable position as this could raise one's social status. Unmarried women living in their parents' home (as Austen was) were considered second-class citizens.

Character development: The heroine is self-assured but makes many mistakes. She is a snob and with her well-intentioned interference, almost ruins the life of her friend Harriet. Yet, with all these faults, Emma remains lovable, as she painfully progresses from youthful insensitivity to a deeper honesty and maturity. At the end of the story, Mr Knightley is waiting for her, perceptive, intelligent and dependable as only an Austen character can be.

Moral integrity: There is a range of characters in *Emma*, from the flighty Frank Churchill and the outrageously smug Mrs Elton to the self-absorbed Mr Woodhouse. Underpinning these characters and the sparkling, witty dialogue, is a practical sense of what is important in life: honesty, sensitivity, integrity, a certain amount of money, and humour.

Discussion activities

Introduction

Before reading

- 1 Ask students to read the introduction. The first line of the introduction (and the story) begins, '*Emma Woodhouse was beautiful, clever and rich*'. Each student writes down which they would rather be: beautiful/good looking, clever, or rich. Then put the students into groups and ask them to compare their answers giving reasons for their choice. Put the three choices up on the board. As each student gives their choice, write their names on the board under the appropriate column. Then add up the number of students in each column. Discuss the result.

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- 2 **Discuss:** Ask the students to think about why Chapter 1 is called 'An Offer of Marriage'. *What does the title mean? What is marriage? Who usually asks who – the man or the woman? Do you think marriage is important? Why/why not? Do you think marriage has changed since Austen wrote Emma? In what ways? If not, why not? Would you like to get married? Why/why not?*

After reading

- 3 **Pair work:** Put students into pairs, and ask them to answer these questions:
 - a What signs does Mr Elton give of his interest in Emma before he asks her to marry him?
 - b Do you think Emma was stupid not to realise? Give reasons for your opinion.
 - c What is your opinion of Emma so far? Would you like her to be your friend? Why/why not?



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Chapters 3–4

After reading

- 4 **Guess:** Write these names on the board.
Harriet, Mr Knightley, Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill, Emma.
Put students into groups, and ask them to discuss the following question:
By the end of the book, all these people are married. From your knowledge so far, who do you think they will marry? Give reasons for your choice.
Tell the students that they will be asked this question again at the end of the book so they must keep a note of their answers to see if their ideas have changed.
- 5 **Write:** Ask the students to pretend they are Harriet. Ask them to write a short diary about what has happened and how upset they may be feeling.

Chapters 5–6

After reading

- 6 **Discuss:** In groups, students discuss the following questions: *Mrs Elton describes Mrs Weston as a 'lady' and Mr Knightley as a 'gentleman'.*
What do you think she means by these words?
Who in this story do you think is a real 'lady' or 'gentleman'?
Do you think that we can still use these words about people?
- 7 **Read carefully:** In pairs, ask the students to re-read pages 27 and 28 and write down how Emma's feelings for Frank Churchill change over these two pages. Ask one pair for feedback and see if others in the class agree. In pairs, ask the students to answer the following questions. *Who does Emma think would be a good match for Frank Churchill now that she is no longer in love with him? Do you think this would be a good match for Frank and Harriet? Can you think of a better match for Harriet or for Frank Churchill?*
Compare answers with the rest of the class.

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

- 8 **Guess:** In pairs, ask the students to look at the title of Chapter 8, 'A Secret Engagement'. *Who do they think is engaged? Why do they think that the engagement has been kept a secret? Why do they think it has been revealed now? Do they think all the characters will be happy with the news of the engagement? Who will be happy/unhappy? Why will they be happy/unhappy?*

After reading

- 9 **Role play:** Put the students into groups of five. They play the characters of Emma, Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill, Mr Knightley and Harriet as the situation is at the end of Chapter 8. Tell them to take on the role of these characters and ask them to consider how they are feeling and what they are saying to each other.

- 10 **Artwork:** In pairs, ask the students to draw a detailed picture depicting an event that has happened in the last two chapters. When completed, ask each student to describe their picture to the class who can then guess which event has been drawn.

Chapter 9

Before reading

- 11 **Guess:** Put the students into pairs. The title of this chapter is: 'Three Weddings'. Ask the students to briefly discuss who will be the bride and groom at each of the three weddings in the chapter title. Why do they think this?

After reading

- 12 **Check:** After reading Chapter 9, check to see if the the students' predictions were correct about which characters would marry each other.
- 13 **Discuss:** Put the students into small groups. Ask them to discuss what advice they would give each of these characters: *Emma, Mr Knightley, Harriet, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax, Mr Elton, Mrs Elton, Emma's father, Miss Bates.* Each group can discuss their answers with the rest of the class.
- 14 **Discuss:** Explain the word 'snob' to students. Put students into small groups, and ask them to discuss the following question: *Which of these characters do you think is a snob, Emma, Mr Knightley, Mr and Mrs Elton, Harriet?*
Who do you think is not a snob? Give reasons for your opinion.
Do you think Jane Austen liked snobs?
- 15 **Write:** In pairs, ask students to write a letter from Emma to Harriet in which she apologises for her matchmaking. They give this letter to another pair and this pair then reads it and writes Harriet's reply before giving it back to the original pair. As a class, read and discuss some of the letters.
- 16 **Pair work:** In pairs ask the students to discuss how Emma's character has changed, grown and developed by the end of the book. *Is she a better person? What has she found out about herself? Does she think she made any mistakes? Is she a happier person? Will she continue to try to match make? Can you find any evidence in the book to support your answers?*
Report back to the rest of the class.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.