

EMMA

by Jane Austen

is a novel about youthful hubris and romantic misunderstandings. It is set in the fictional country village of Highbury and the surrounding estates of Hartfield, Randalls, and Donwell Abbey and involves the relationships among people from a small number of families.^[2] The novel was first published in December 1815, with its title page listing a publication date of 1816. As in her other novels, Austen explores the concerns and difficulties of genteel women living in Georgian–Regency England. Emma is a comedy of manners, and depicts issues of marriage, sex, age, and social status.

Before she began the novel, Austen wrote, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like."^[3] In the first sentence, she introduces the title character as "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition... and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her."^[4] Emma is spoiled, headstrong, and self-satisfied; she greatly overestimates her own matchmaking abilities; she is blind to the dangers of meddling in other people's lives; and her imagination and perceptions often lead her astray.

Emma, written after Austen's move to Chawton, was her last novel to be published during her life,^[5] while *Persuasion*, the last novel Austen wrote, was published posthumously.

This novel has been adapted for several films, many television programmes, and a long list of stage plays. It is also the inspiration for several novels.

Plot summary

Emma Woodhouse has just attended the wedding of Miss Taylor, her lovely friend and former governess, to Mr. Weston. Having introduced them, Emma takes credit for their marriage and decides that she likes matchmaking. After she returns home to Hartfield with her father, Emma forges ahead with her new interest against the advice of her sister's brother-in-law, Mr. Knightley, and tries to match her new friend Harriet Smith to Mr. Elton, the local vicar. First, Emma must persuade Harriet to refuse the marriage proposal from Robert Martin, a respectable, educated, and well-spoken young farmer, which Harriet does against her own wishes. But Mr. Elton, a social climber, thinks that Emma is in love with him and proposes to her. When Emma tells him that she had thought him attached to Harriet, he is outraged. After Emma rejects him, Mr. Elton leaves for a stay at Bath and returns with a pretentious, nouveau-riche wife, as Mr. Knightley expected. Harriet is heartbroken, and Emma feels ashamed about misleading her.

Frank Churchill, Mr. Weston's son, arrives for a two-week visit to his father and makes many friends. Frank was adopted by his wealthy and domineering aunt, and he has had very few opportunities to visit before. Mr. Knightley suggests to Emma that, while Frank is intelligent and engaging, he is also a shallow character. Jane Fairfax also comes home to see her aunt, Miss Bates, and grandmother, Mrs. Bates, for a few months, before she must go out on her own as a governess due to her family's financial situation. She is the same age as Emma and has been given an excellent education by her father's friend, Colonel Campbell. Emma has not been as friendly with her as she might because she envies Jane's talent and is annoyed to find all, including Mrs Weston and Mr. Knightley, praising her. The patronizing Mrs. Elton takes Jane under her wing and announces that she will find her the ideal governess post before it is wanted. Emma begins to feel some sympathy for Jane's predicament.

Emma decides that Jane and Mr. Dixon, Colonel Campbell's new son-in-law, are mutually attracted, and that is why she has come home earlier than expected. She shares her suspicions with Frank, who met Jane and the Campbells at a vacation spot a year earlier, and he apparently agrees with her. Suspicions are further fueled when a piano, sent by an anonymous benefactor, arrives for Jane. Emma feels herself falling in love with Frank, but it does not last to his second visit. The Eltons treat Harriet poorly, culminating with Mr. Elton publicly snubbing Harriet at the ball given by the Westons in May. Mr. Knightley, who had long refrained from dancing, gallantly steps in to dance with Harriet. The day after the ball, Frank brings Harriet to Hartfield; she had fainted after a rough encounter with local gypsies. Harriet is grateful, and Emma thinks this is love, not gratitude. Meanwhile, Mrs. Weston wonders if Mr. Knightley has taken a fancy to Jane, but Emma dismisses that idea. When Mr. Knightley mentions the link he sees between Jane and Frank, Emma denies them, while Frank appears to be courting her instead. He arrives late to the gathering at Donwell in June, while Jane leaves early. Next day at Box Hill, a local beauty spot, Frank and Emma continue to banter together and Emma, in jest, thoughtlessly insults Miss Bates.

1898 illustration of Mr. Knightley and Emma Woodhouse, Volume III chapter XIII

When Mr. Knightley scolds Emma for the insult to Miss Bates, she is ashamed and tries to atone with a morning visit to Miss Bates, which impresses Mr. Knightley. On the visit, Emma learns that Jane had accepted the position of governess from one of Mrs. Elton's friends after the outing. Jane now becomes ill and refuses to see Emma or receive her gifts. Meanwhile, Frank was visiting his aunt, who dies soon after he arrives. Now he and Jane reveal to the Westons that they have been secretly engaged since the autumn, but Frank knew that his aunt would disapprove. The strain of the secrecy on the conscientious Jane had caused the two to quarrel, and Jane ended the engagement. Frank's easygoing uncle readily gives his blessing to the match, and the engagement becomes public, leaving Emma chagrined to discover that she had been so wrong.

Emma is confident that Frank's engagement will devastate Harriet, but instead, Harriet tells her that she loves Mr. Knightley, although she knows the match is too unequal, Emma's

encouragement and Mr. Knightley's kindness have given her hope. Emma is startled and realizes that she is the one who wants to marry Mr. Knightley. Mr. Knightley returns to console Emma from Frank and Jane's engagement thinking her heartbroken. When she admits her foolishness, he proposes, and she accepts. Now Harriet accepts Robert Martin's second proposal, and they are the first couple to marry. Jane and Emma reconcile, and Frank and Jane visit the Westons. Once the period of deep mourning ends, they will marry. Before the end of November, Emma and Mr. Knightley are married with the prospect of "perfect happiness".

Main characters

Emma Woodhouse, The narrator introduces Emma to us by emphasizing her good fortune: "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition," Emma "had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her." But, the narrator warns us, Emma possesses "the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself." Emma's stubbornness and vanity produce many of the novel's conflicts, as Emma struggles to develop emotionally.

Emma makes three major mistakes. First, she attempts to make Harriet into the wife of a gentleman, when Harriet's social position dictates that she would be better suited to the farmer who loves her. Then, she flirts with Frank Churchill even though she does not care for him, making unfair comments about Jane Fairfax along the way. Most important, she does not realize that, rather than being committed to staying single (as she always claims), she is in love with and wants to marry Mr. Knightley. Though these mistakes seriously threaten Harriet's happiness, cause Emma embarrassment, and create obstacles to Emma's own achievement of true love, none of them has lasting consequences. Throughout the novel, Knightley corrects and guides Emma; in marrying Knightley, Emma signals that her judgment has aligned with his.

Austen predicted that Emma would be "a character whom no one but me will much like." Though most of Austen's readers have proven her wrong, her narration creates many ambiguities. The novel is narrated using free indirect discourse, which means that, although the all-knowing narrator speaks in the third person, she often relates things from Emma's point of view and describes things in language we might imagine Emma using. This style of narration creates a complex mixture of sympathy with Emma and ironic judgment on her behavior. It is not always clear when we are to share Emma's perceptions and when we are to see through them. Nor do we know how harshly Austen expects us to judge Emma's behavior. Though this narrative strategy creates problems of interpretation for the reader, it makes Emma a richly multidimensional character.

Emma does not have one specific foil, but the implicit distinctions made between her and the other women in the novel offer us a context within which to evaluate her character. Jane is similar to Emma in most ways, but she does not have Emma's financial independence, so her difficulties

underscore Emma's privileged nature. Mrs. Elton, like Emma, is independent and imposes her will upon her friends, but her crudeness and vanity reinforce our sense of Emma's refinement and fundamentally good heart. Emma's sister, Isabella, is stereo-typically feminine—soft-hearted, completely devoted to her family, dependent, and not terribly bright. The novel implicitly prefers Emma's independence and cleverness to her sister's more traditional deportment, although we are still faced with the paradox that though Emma is clever, she is almost always mistaken.

the protagonist of the story, is a beautiful, high-spirited, intelligent, and 'slightly' spoiled young woman from the landed gentry. She is twenty when the story opens. Her mother died when she was young. She has been mistress of the house (Hartfield) since her older sister got married. Although intelligent, she lacks the discipline to practice or study anything in depth. She is portrayed as compassionate to the poor, but at the same time has a strong sense of class status. Her affection for and patience towards her valetudinarian father are also noteworthy. While she is in many ways mature, Emma makes some serious mistakes, mainly due to her lack of experience and her conviction that she is always right. Although she has vowed she will never marry, she delights in making matches for others. She has a brief flirtation with Frank Churchill; however, she realises at the end of the novel that she loves Mr. Knightley.

George Knightley is a neighbour and close friend of Emma, aged 37 years (16 years older than Emma). He is her only critic. Mr. Knightley is the owner of the estate of Donwell Abbey, which includes extensive grounds and farms. He is the elder brother of Mr. John Knightley, the husband of Emma's elder sister Isabella. He is very considerate, aware of the feelings of the other characters and his behaviour and judgement is extremely good. Mr. Knightley is furious with Emma for persuading Harriet to turn down Mr. Martin, a farmer on the Donwell estate; he warns Emma against pushing Harriet towards Mr. Elton, knowing that Mr. Elton seeks a bride with money. He is suspicious of Frank Churchill and his motives; he suspects that Frank has a secret understanding with Jane Fairfax. Mr. Knightley serves as the novel's model of good sense. From his very first conversation with Emma and her father in Chapter 1, his purpose—to correct the excesses and missteps of those around him—is clear. He is unfailingly honest but tempers his honesty with tact and kindheartedness. Almost always, we can depend upon him to provide the correct evaluation of the other characters' behavior and personal worth. He intuitively understands and kindly makes allowances for Mr. Woodhouse's whims; he is sympathetic and protective of the women in the community, including Jane, Harriet, and Miss Bates; and, most of all, even though he frequently disapproves of her behavior, he dotes on Emma.

Knightley's love for Emma—the one emotion he cannot govern fully—leads to his only lapses of judgment and self-control. Before even meeting Frank, Knightley decides that he does not like him. It gradually becomes clear that Knightley feels jealous—he does not welcome a rival. When Knightley believes Emma has become too attached to Frank, he acts with uncharacteristic impulsiveness in running away to London. His declaration of love on his return bursts out

uncontrollably, unlike most of his prudent, well-planned actions. Yet Knightley's loss of control humanizes him rather than making him seem like a failure.

Like Emma, Knightley stands out in comparison to his peers. His brother, Mr. John Knightley, shares his clear-sightedness but lacks his unfailing kindness and tact. Both Frank and Knightley are perceptive, warm-hearted, and dynamic; but whereas Frank uses his intelligence to conceal his real feelings and invent clever compliments to please those around him, Knightley uses his intelligence to discern right moral conduct. Knightley has little use for cleverness for its own sake; he rates propriety and concern for others more highly.

Frank Churchill, Mr. Weston's son by his first marriage, is an amiable young man, who at age 23 is liked by almost everyone, although Mr. Knightley sees him as immature and selfish for failing to visit his father after his father's wedding. After his mother's death, he was raised by his wealthy aunt and uncle, the Churchills, at the family estate Enscombe. His uncle was his mother's brother. By his aunt's decree, he assumed the name Churchill on his majority. Frank is given to dancing and living a carefree existence, and is secretly engaged to Miss Fairfax at Weymouth, although he fears his aunt will forbid the match because Jane is not wealthy. He manipulates and plays games with the other characters to ensure his engagement to Jane remains concealed.

Frank epitomizes attractiveness in speech, manner, and appearance. He goes out of his way to please everyone, and, while the more perceptive characters question his seriousness, everyone except Knightley is charmed enough to be willing to indulge him. Frank is the character who most resembles Emma, a connection she points out at the novel's close when she states that "destiny ... connect[s] us with two characters so much superior to our own." Like Emma, Frank develops over the course of the novel by trading a somewhat vain and superficial perspective on the world for the seriousness brought on by the experience of genuine suffering and love. He is a complex character because though we know we should judge him harshly in moral terms, we cannot help but like him more than he deserves to be liked.

Jane Fairfax is an orphan whose only family consists of her aunt, Miss Bates, and her grandmother, Mrs. Bates. She is a beautiful, bright, and elegant woman, with the best of manners. She is the same age as Emma. She is extraordinarily well-educated and talented at singing and playing the piano; she is the sole person whom Emma envies. An army friend of her late father, Colonel Campbell, felt responsible for her, and has provided her with an excellent education, sharing his home and family with her since she was nine years old. She has little fortune, however, and is destined to become a governess – a prospect she dislikes. The secret engagement goes against her principles and distresses her greatly. Jane's beauty and accomplishment immediately make her stand out, but we are likely to follow Emma's lead at first and judge Jane uninteresting

on account of her reserve. As Jane gradually betrays more personality and emotion, she indicates that she harbors some secret sorrow. Eventually, she and Emma push the cloudy confusion behind and become friends. The contrast between Jane's delicate sense of propriety and morality and the passionate nature of her feelings is much more dramatic than any of the conflicts that Emma experiences. Jane's situation too is much more dire than Emma's: if Jane does not wed, she must become a governess, because she lacks any money of her own. The revelation of Jane's secret engagement to Frank makes Jane seem more human, just as Knightley's humanity is brought out by his love for Emma.

Harriet Smith, a young friend of Emma, just seventeen when the story opens, is a beautiful but unsophisticated girl. She has been a parlour boarder at a nearby school, where she met the sisters of Mr. Martin. Emma takes Harriet under her wing early on, and she becomes the subject of Emma's misguided matchmaking attempts. She is revealed in the last chapter to be the natural daughter of a decent tradesman, although not a gentleman. Harriet and Mr. Martin are wed. The now wiser Emma approves of the match.

Robert Martin is a well-to-do, 24-year-old farmer who, though not a gentleman, is a friendly, amiable and diligent young man, well esteemed by Mr. George Knightley. He becomes acquainted and subsequently smitten with Harriet during her 2-month stay at Abbey Mill Farm, which was arranged at the invitation of his sister, Elizabeth Martin, a school friend of Harriet's. His first marriage proposal, in a letter, is rejected by Harriet under the direction and influence of Emma, (an incident which puts Mr. Knightley and Emma in a disagreement with one another), who had convinced herself that Harriet's class and breeding were above associating with the Martins, much less marrying one. His second proposal of marriage is later accepted by a contented Harriet and approved by a wiser Emma; their joining marks the first out of the three happy couples to marry in the end.

Philip Elton is a good-looking, initially well-mannered, and ambitious young vicar, 27 years old and unmarried when the story opens. Emma wants him to marry Harriet; however, he aspires to secure Emma's hand in marriage to gain her dowry of £30,000. Mr. Elton displays his mercenary nature by quickly marrying another woman of lesser means after Emma rejects him.

Augusta Elton, formerly Miss Hawkins, is Mr. Elton's wife. She has 10,000 pounds, but lacks good manners, committing common vulgarities such as using people's names too intimately (as in "Jane", not "Miss Fairfax"; "Knightley", not "Mr. Knightley"). She is a boasting, pretentious woman who expects her due as a new bride in the village. Emma is polite to her but does not like her. She patronises Jane, which earns Jane the sympathy of others. Her lack of social graces shows the good breeding of the other characters, particularly Miss Fairfax and Mrs. Weston, and shows the difference between gentility and money.

Mrs. Weston was Emma's governess for sixteen years as Miss Anne Taylor and remains her closest friend and confidante after she marries Mr. Weston. She is a sensible woman who loves Emma. Mrs. Weston acts as a surrogate mother to her former charge and, occasionally, as a voice of moderation and reason. The Westons and the Woodhouses visit almost daily. Near the end of the story, the Westons' baby Anna is born.

Mr. Weston is a widower and a business man living in Highbury who marries Miss Taylor in his early 40s, after he bought the home called Randalls. By his first marriage, he is father to Frank Weston Churchill, who was adopted and raised by his late wife's brother and his wife. He sees his son in London each year. He married his first wife, Miss Churchill, when he was a Captain in the militia, posted near her home. Mr. Weston is a sanguine, optimistic man, who enjoys socialising, making friends quickly in business and among his neighbours.

Miss Bates is a friendly, garrulous spinster whose mother, Mrs. Bates, is a friend of Mr. Woodhouse. Her niece is Jane Fairfax, daughter of her late sister. She was raised in better circumstances in her younger days as the vicar's daughter; now she and her mother rent rooms in the home of another in Highbury. One day, Emma humiliates her on a day out in the country, when she alludes to her tiresome prolixity.

Mr. Henry Woodhouse, Emma's father, is always concerned for his health, and to the extent that it does not interfere with his own, the health and comfort of his friends. He is a valetudinarian (i.e., similar to a hypochondriac but more likely to be genuinely ill). He assumes a great many things are hazardous to his health. His daughter Emma gets along with him well, and he loves both his daughters. He laments that "poor Isabella" and especially "poor Miss Taylor" have married and live away from him. He is a fond father and fond grandfather who did not remarry when his wife died; instead he brought in Miss Taylor to educate his daughters and become part of the family. Because he is generous and well-mannered, his neighbors accommodate him when they can.

Isabella Knightley (née Woodhouse) is the elder sister of Emma, by seven years, and daughter of Henry. She is married to John Knightley. She lives in London with her husband and their five children (Henry, 'little' John, Bella, 'little' Emma, and George). She is similar in disposition to her father and her relationship to Mr. Wingfield, (her and her family's physician) mirrors that of her father's to Mr. Perry.

John Knightley is Isabella's husband and George's younger brother, 31 years old (10 years older than Jane Fairfax and Emma). He is an attorney by profession. Like the others raised in the area, he is a friend of Jane Fairfax. He greatly enjoys the company of his family, including his brother and his Woodhouse in-laws, but is not the very sociable sort of man who enjoys dining out frequently. He is forthright with Emma, his sister-in-law, and close to his brother.

Minor characters[\[edit\]](#)

Mr. Perry is the apothecary in Highbury who spends a significant amount of time responding to the health issues of Mr. Woodhouse. He and Mrs. Perry have several children. He is also the subject of a discussion between Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax that is relayed in a letter to Mr. Frank Churchill that he inadvertently discloses to Emma. He is described as an "...intelligent, gentlemanlike man, whose frequent visits were one of the comforts of Mr. Woodhouse's life.^[6]"

Mrs. Bates is the widow of the former vicar of Highbury, the mother of Miss Bates and the grandmother of Jane Fairfax. She is old and hard of hearing, but is a frequent companion to Mr. Woodhouse when Emma attends social activities without him.

Mr. & Mrs. Cole have been residents of Highbury who had been there for several years, but have recently benefited from a significant increase in their income that has allowed them to increase the size of their house, number of servants and other expenses. In spite of their "low origin" in trade, their income and style of living has made them the second most prominent family in Highbury, the most senior being the Woodhouses at Hartfield. They host a dinner party that is a significant plot element.

Mrs. Churchill was the wife of the brother of Mr. Weston's first wife. She and her husband, Mr. Churchill, live at Enscombe and raised Mr. Weston's son, Mr. Frank Churchill. Although never seen directly, she makes demands on Frank Churchill's time and attention that prevent him from visiting his father. Her disapproval is the reason that the engagement between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax is kept secret. Her death provides the opportunity for the secret to be revealed.

Colonel and Mrs. Campbell were friends of Jane Fairfax's late father. After a period of time when Jane was their guest for extended visits, they offered to take over her education in preparation for potentially serving as a governess when she grew up. They provided her every advantage possible, short of adopting, and were very fond of her.

Mrs. Goddard is the mistress of a boarding school for girls in which Harriet Smith is one of the students. She is also a frequent companion to Mr. Woodhouse along with Mrs. Bates.

Mr. William Larkins is an employee on the Donwell Abbey estate of Mr. Knightley. He frequently visits the Bateses, bringing them gifts, such as apples, from Mr. Knightley.

THEMES

Marriage and Social Status

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determined by a combination of family background, reputation, and wealth—marriage was one of the main ways in which one could raise one's social status. This method of social advancement was especially crucial to women, who were denied the possibility of improving their status through hard work or personal achievement.

Yet, the novel suggests, marrying too far above oneself leads to strife. Mr. Weston's first marriage to Miss Churchill had ostensibly been a good move for him, because she came from a wealthy and well-connected family (Mr. Weston is a tradesman), but the inequality of the relationship caused hardship to both. He marries Mrs. Weston just prior to the novel's opening, and this second marriage is happier because their social statuses are more equal—Mrs. Weston is a governess, and thus very fortunate to be rescued from her need to work by her marriage. Emma's attempt to match Harriet with Mr. Elton is also shunned by the other characters as inappropriate. Since Harriet's parentage is unknown, Emma believes that Harriet may have noble blood and encourages her to reject what turns out to be a more appropriate match with Robert Martin. By the time it is revealed that Harriet is the daughter of a tradesman, Emma admits that Mr. Martin is more suitable for her friend.

The relationship between marriage and social status creates hardship for other characters. Frank Churchill must keep his engagement to the orphan Jane Fairfax secret because his wealthy aunt would disapprove. Jane, in the absence of a good match, is forced to consider taking the position of a governess. The unmarried Miss Bates is threatened with increasing poverty without a husband to take care of her and her mother. Finally, the match between Emma and Mr. Knightley is considered a good one not only because they are well matched in temperament but also because they are well matched in social class.

The Confined Nature of Women's Existence

The novel's limited, almost claustrophobic scope of action gives us a strong sense of the confined nature of a woman's existence in early-nineteenth-century rural England. Emma possesses a great deal of intelligence and energy, but the best use she can make of these is to attempt to guide the marital destinies of her friends, a project that gets her into trouble. The alternative pastimes depicted in the book—social visits, charity visits, music, artistic endeavors—seem relatively trivial, at times even monotonous. Isabella is the only mother focused on in the story, and her portrayal suggests that a mother's life offers a woman little use of her intellect. Yet, when Jane compares the governess profession to the slave trade, she makes it clear that the life of a working woman is in no way preferable to the idleness of a woman of fortune. The novel focuses on marriage because marriage offers women a chance to exert their power, if only for a brief time, and to affect their own destinies without adopting the labors or efforts of the working class. Participating in the rituals of courtship and accepting or rejecting proposals is perhaps the most active role that women are permitted to play in Emma's world.

The Blinding Power of Imagination

The novel offers sharply critical illustrations of the ways in which personal biases or desires blind objective judgment. Emma cannot understand the motives that guide Mr. Elton's behavior because she imagines that he is in love with Harriet. She later admits to herself that "[s]he had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it." Meanwhile, Mr. Elton's feelings for Emma cause him to mistake her behavior for encouragement. The generally infallible Mr. Knightley cannot form an unbiased judgment of Frank Churchill because he is jealous of Frank's claim on Emma, and Emma speaks cruelly of Jane because her vanity makes her jealous of Jane's accomplishments. Emma's biases cause her to invent an attachment between Harriet and Frank and blind her to the fact that Harriet actually has feelings for Knightley. At the same time, Frank's desire to use Emma as a screen for his real preference causes him to believe mistakenly that she is aware of the situation between him and Jane. The admirable, frequently ironic detachment of the narrator allows us to see many of these misunderstandings before the characters do, along with the humorous aspects of their behavior. And the plot is powered by a series of realizations that permit each character to make fuller, more objective judgments.

The Obstacles to Open Expression

The misunderstandings that permeate the novel are created, in part, by the conventions of social propriety. To differing degrees, characters are unable to express their feelings directly and openly, and their feelings are therefore mistaken. While the novel by no means suggests that the manners and rituals of social interaction should be eliminated, Austen implies that the overly clever, complex speech of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and Emma deserves censure. She presents Mr. Martin's natural, warm, and direct manner of expressing himself as preferable to Mr. Elton's ostentatious and insincere style of complimenting people. Frank too possesses a talent for telling people exactly what they want to hear, and Knightley's suspicions of Frank's integrity are proven valid when it turns out that Frank has been misleading Highbury and hiding his true feelings for Jane. The cleverness of Frank's and Emma's banter gets them both into trouble by upsetting Jane, about whom Emma says indiscreet and unfair things. Emma and Frank's flirting at the Box Hill party hurts both Knightley and Jane. Moreover, Emma forgets herself to the extent that she cruelly insults Miss Bates. Austen seems to prefer Knightley and Martin's tactful tacitness to the sometimes overly gregarious commentary of Emma, Mr. Elton, and Frank, and, as a result, the author gives the latter characters' contrived speech a misleading influence on the story as a whole.

MOTIFS

Visits

The main events of the novel take place during visits that the characters pay to each other. The frequency and length of visits between characters indicates the level of intimacy and attachment between them. Frank's frequent visits to Hartfield show his relationship with Emma to be close,

though in hindsight we recognize that Frank also continually finds excuses to visit Jane. Mr. Knightley's constant presence at Hartfield indicates his affection and regard for Emma. Emma encourages Harriet to limit a visit with the Martin family to fifteen minutes, because such a short visit clearly indicates that any former interest has been lost. Emma is chastised for her failure to visit Miss Bates and Jane more often; when she takes steps to rectify this situation, she indicates a new concern for Miss Bates and a new regard for Jane.

Parties

More formal than visits, parties are organized around social conventions more than around individual attachments—Emma's hosting a dinner party for Mrs. Elton, a woman she dislikes, exemplifies this characteristic. There are six important parties in the novel: the Christmas Eve party at Randalls, the dinner party at the Coles', the dinner party given for Mrs. Elton, the dance at the Crown Inn, the morning party at Donwell Abbey, and the picnic at Box Hill. Each occasion provides the opportunity for social intrigue and misunderstandings, and for vanities to be satisfied and connections formed. Parties also give characters the chance to observe other people's interactions. Knightley observes Emma's behavior toward Frank and Frank's behavior toward Jane. Parties are microcosms of the social interactions that make up the novel as a whole.

Conversational Subtexts

Much of the dialogue in *Emma* has double or even triple meanings, with different characters interpreting a single comment in different ways. Sometimes these double meanings are apparent to individual characters, and sometimes they are apparent only to the alert reader. For example, when Mr. Elton says of Emma's portrait of Harriet, "I cannot keep my eyes from it," he means to compliment Emma, but she thinks he is complimenting Harriet. When, during the scene in which Mr. Knightley proposes to Emma, Emma says, "I seem to have been doomed to blindness," Knightley believes she speaks of her blindness to Frank's love of Jane, but she actually refers to her blindness about her own feelings. One of our main tasks in reading the novel is to decode all of the subtexts underlying seemingly casual interactions, just as the main characters must. The novel concludes by unraveling the mystery behind who loves whom, which allows us to understand Austen's subtext more fully.