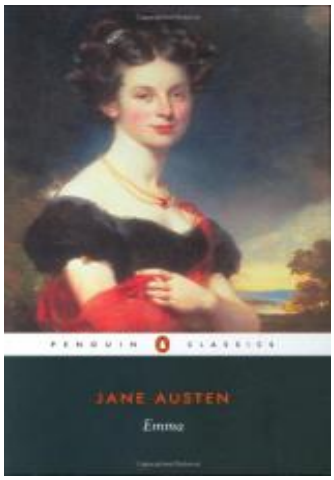
Emma

by Jane Austen



About the Book

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. So begins Jane Austen's comic masterpiece *Emma*. In *Emma*, Austen's prose brilliantly elevates, in the words of Virginia Woolf, the trivialities of day-to-day existence, of parties, picnics, and country dances of early-nineteenth-century life in the English countryside to an unrivaled level of pleasure for the reader. At the center of this world is the inimitable Emma Woodhouse, a self-proclaimed matchmaker who, by the novel's conclusion, just may find herself the victim of her own best intentions.

This Modern Library Paperback Classics edition includes newly commissioned notes on the text.

Discussion Guide

1. Describe the class and rank of various characters in the village of Highbury. Compare the positions of Mr. Weston, Mr. Elton, Miss Taylor, Harriet, and Emma with others in Highbury. How do matters of class affect the interaction of these characters, and would you describe class as being rigid or flexible as it is depicted by Jane Austen? To what extent can class be said to be of central importance to the development of the novel, since it is one of the most important considerations in marriage? Does class seem to be treated differently by those in Highbury than it does by outsiders, for example Frank Churchill and Mrs. Elton? Do you think it is significant that no woman in Highbury is of Emma's age and rank?

2. How does the relationship between Mr. Knightley and Emma change throughout the course of the novel? Although Austen does not directly tell us what their relationship was like during Emma's childhood, their long and intimate friendship is established at the novel's opening. In light of their occasional quarrels and Knightley's criticisms of Emma, for example, the criticism he made on Box Hill, how does Mr. Knightley feel about Emma? Do Mr. Knightley's feelings

change as the novel progresses? If they do, what incidents account for the changes in his feelings?

3. Does Emma act as a good friend to Harriet Smith? Are Emma's concerns for Harriet's education and refinement born of an honest desire to help, or is it something less altruistic? Are Mr. Knightley's criticisms of Emma's interference with Mr. Martin's marriage proposal justified? Does Harriet ultimately benefit from Emma's friendship or her attempts to help her?

4. While matchmaking is the central device in Emma, both for the plot and as a backdrop to develop characters, not all of the matches made in the novel are good. Compare the matches made between Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor, Emma and Mr. Knightley, Harriet and Mr. Martin, Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, and Mr. Elton and Mrs. Elton. Which are good matches and which are bad? What character traits in the couples make them suited or unsuited for each other? Why are the mismatches so important to the story?

5. In the final analysis, is Emma a sympathetic character? Does she seem to have good intentions only marred by a slight desire to interfere with other people's lives, or is she thoughtless and unconcerned with the effects she has on others? In your estimation, is Emma ultimately moral or immoral? What specific incidents in the novel lead you to that conclusion?

Author Bio

Though the domain of Jane Austen?s novels was as circumscribed as her life, her caustic wit and keen observation made her the equal of the greatest novelists in any language.

Born the seventh child of the rector of Steventon, Hampshire, on December 16, 1775, Austen was educated mainly at home. At an early age she began writing sketches and satires of popular novels for her family?s entertainment. As a clergyman?s daughter from a well-connected family, she had ample opportunity to study the habits of the middle class, the gentry and the aristocracy. At 21, she began a novel called ?The First Impressions,? an early version of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. In 1801, on her father?s retirement, the family moved to the fashionable resort of Bath. Two years later she sold the first version of NORTHANGER ABBEY to a London publisher, but the first of her novels to appear in print was SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, published at her own expense in 1811. It was followed by PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (1813), MANSFIELD PARK (1814) and EMMA (1815).

After her father died in 1805, the family first moved to Southampton then to Chawton Cottage in Hampshire. Despite this relative retirement, Jane Austen was still in touch with a wider world, mainly through her brothers; one had become a very rich country gentleman, another a London banker, and two were naval officers. Though her many novels were published anonymously, she had many early and devoted readers, among them the Prince Regent and Sir Walter Scott. In 1816, in declining health, Austen wrote PERSUASION and revised NORTHANGER ABBEY. Her last work, SANDITION, was left unfinished at her death on July 18, 1817.

Austen was buried in Winchester Cathedral. Her identity as an author was announced to the world posthumously by her brother Henry, who supervised the publication of NORTHANGER ABBEY and PERSUASION in 1818.

Critical Praise

"Jane Austen is my favorite author! ... Shut up in measureless content, I greet her by the name of most kind hostess, while criticism slumbers."

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