

2nd Year Novel Early 19th century Novel

Text: Jane Austen's *Emma*

Genre: Novel of Manners

Lecture 1

Jane Austen's Life and background

Jane Austen, (born December 16, 1775, Steventon, Hampshire, England—died July 18, 1817, Winchester, Hampshire), English writer who first gave the novel its distinctly modern character through her treatment of ordinary people in everyday life. She published four novels during her lifetime: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Emma* (1815). In these and in *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* (published together posthumously, 1817), she vividly depicted English middle-class life during the early 19th century. Her novels defined the era's novel of manners, but they also became timeless classics that remained critical and popular successes two centuries after her death.

Jane Austen was born in the Hampshire village of Steventon, where her father, the Reverend George Austen, was rector. She was the second daughter and seventh child in a family of eight—six boys and two girls. Her closest companion throughout her life was her elder sister, Cassandra; neither Jane nor Cassandra married. Their father was a scholar who encouraged the love of learning in his children. His wife, Cassandra (née Leigh), was a woman of ready wit, famed for her impromptu verses and stories. The great family amusement was acting.

Jane Austen's lively and affectionate family circle provided a stimulating context for her writing. Moreover, her experience was carried far beyond Steventon rectory by an extensive network of relationships by blood and friendship. It was this world—of the minor landed gentry and the country clergy, in the village, the neighborhood, and the country town, with occasional visits to Bath and to London—that she was to use in the settings, characters, and subject matter of her novels.

Her earliest known writings date from about 1787, and between then and 1793 she wrote a large body of material that has survived in three manuscript notebooks: *Volume the First*, *Volume the Second*, and *Volume the Third*. These contain plays, verses, short novels, and other prose and show Austen engaged in the parody of existing literary forms, notably the genres of the sentimental novel and sentimental comedy. Her passage to a more serious view of life from the exuberant high spirits and extravagances of her earliest writings is evident in *Lady Susan*, a short epistolary novel written about 1793–94 (and not published until 1871). This portrait of a woman bent on the exercise of her own powerful mind and personality to the point of social self-destruction is, in effect, a study of frustration and of woman's fate in a society that has no use for her talents.

In 1802 it seems likely that Jane agreed to marry Harris Bigg-Wither, the 21-year-old heir of a Hampshire family, but the next morning changed her mind. There are also a number of mutually contradictory stories connecting her with someone with whom she fell in love but who died very soon after. Since Austen's novels are so deeply concerned with love and marriage, there

is some point in attempting to establish the facts of these relationships. Unfortunately, the evidence is unsatisfactory and incomplete. Cassandra was a jealous guardian of her sister's private life, and after Jane's death she censored the surviving letters, destroying many and cutting up others. But Jane Austen's own novels provide indisputable evidence that their author understood the experience of love and of love disappointed.

The earliest of her novels published during her lifetime, *Sense and Sensibility*, was begun about 1795 as a novel-in-letters called "Elinor and Marianne," after its heroines. Between October 1796 and August 1797 Austen completed the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*, then called "First Impressions." In 1797 her father wrote to offer it to a London publisher for publication, but the offer was declined. *Northanger Abbey*, the last of the early novels, was written about 1798 or 1799, probably under the title "Susan." In 1803 the manuscript of "Susan" was sold to the publisher Richard Crosby for £10. He took it for immediate publication, but, although it was advertised, unaccountably it never appeared.

Up to this time the tenor of life at Steventon rectory had been propitious for Jane Austen's growth as a novelist. This stable environment ended in 1801, however, when George Austen, then age 70, retired to Bath with his wife and daughters. For eight years Jane had to put up with a succession of temporary lodgings or visits to relatives, in Bath, London, Clifton, Warwickshire, and, finally, Southampton, where the three women lived from 1805 to 1809. In 1804 Jane began *The Watsons* but soon abandoned it. In 1804 her dearest friend, Mrs. Anne Lefroy, died suddenly, and in January 1805 her father died in Bath.

Eventually, in 1809, Jane's brother Edward was able to provide his mother and sisters with a large cottage in the village of Chawton, within his Hampshire estate, not far from Steventon. The prospect of settling at Chawton had already given Jane Austen a renewed sense of purpose, and she began to prepare *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* for publication. She was encouraged by her brother Henry, who acted as go-between with her publishers. She was probably also prompted by her need for money. Two years later Thomas Egerton agreed to publish *Sense and Sensibility*, which came out, anonymously, in November 1811. Both of the leading reviews, the *Critical Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, welcomed its blend of instruction and amusement.

Meanwhile, in 1811 Austen had begun *Mansfield Park*, which was finished in 1813 and published in 1814. By then she was an established (though anonymous) author; Egerton had published *Pride and Prejudice* in January 1813, and later that year there were second editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. *Pride and Prejudice* seems to have been the fashionable novel of its season. Between January 1814 and March 1815 she wrote *Emma*, which appeared in December 1815. In 1816 there was a second edition of *Mansfield Park*, published, like *Emma*, by Lord Byron's publisher, John Murray. *Persuasion* (written August 1815–August 1816) was published posthumously, with *Northanger Abbey*, in December 1817.

The years after 1811 seem to have been the most rewarding of her life. She had the satisfaction of seeing her work in print and well reviewed and of knowing that the novels were widely read. They were so much enjoyed by the prince regent (later George IV) that he had a set in each of his

residences, and *Emma*, at a discreet royal command, was “respectfully dedicated” to him. The reviewers praised the novels for their morality and entertainment, admired the character drawing, and welcomed the domestic realism as a refreshing change from the romantic melodrama then in vogue.

For the last 18 months of her life, Austen was busy writing. Early in 1816, at the onset of her fatal illness, she set down the burlesque *Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters* (first published in 1871). Until August 1816 she was occupied with *Persuasion*, and she looked again at the manuscript of “Susan” (*Northanger Abbey*).

In January 1817 she began *Sanditon*, a robust and self-mocking satire on health resorts and invalidism. This novel remained unfinished because of Austen’s declining health. She supposed that she was suffering from bile, but the symptoms make possible a modern clinical assessment that she was suffering from Addison disease. Her condition fluctuated, but in April she made her will, and in May she was taken to Winchester to be under the care of an expert surgeon. She died on July 18, and six days later she was buried in Winchester Cathedral.

Her authorship was announced to the world at large by her brother Henry, who supervised the publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. There was no recognition at the time that regency England had lost its keenest observer and sharpest analyst; no understanding that a miniaturist (as she maintained that she was and as she was then seen), a “merely domestic” novelist, could be seriously concerned with the nature of society and the quality of its culture; no grasp of Jane Austen as a historian of the emergence of regency society into the modern world. During her lifetime there had been a solitary response in any way adequate to the nature of her achievement: Sir Walter Scott’s review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review* for

March 1816, where he hailed this “nameless author” as a masterful exponent of “the modern novel” in the new realist tradition. After her death, there was for long only one significant essay, the review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in the *Quarterly* for January 1821 by the theologian Richard Whately. Together, Scott’s and Whately’s essays provided the foundation for serious criticism of Jane Austen: their insights were appropriated by critics throughout the 19th century.

Lecture 2

Major themes:

Social Class:

Emma, like most of Austen’s novels, is a study in 18th Century English society and the significance of propriety. The rich and “well-bred” control the social situations, issuing and initiating invitations and friendships. Those of low social standing depend upon the charity and initiative of those in the higher class. When violations of this order occur, they are often met with great indignation by those of genteel-breeding, as when Emma takes offense at Mrs. Elton presuming to nickname Mr. Knightley.

Social class also dictates the social obligations between the characters, and the way in which their actions respond to these obligations reveals their character. The novel, for instance, teases out the nuances of charity regarding class: Emma is charitable towards the poor, but shows little initiative in befriending the orphaned and talented Jane.

The characters' use or abuse of their social standing reveals much about their kindness or cruelty. For instance, Emma's exercise of wit at the expense of the silly, but low-standing Miss Bates is condemned as cruel by Mr. Knightley because it is an abuse of her social clout. Humiliating the hapless Miss Bates sets a bad example for those in society who would follow her example. On the other hand, Mr. Knightley's asking Harriet to dance after she has been snubbed by Mr. Elton is an act of charity, graciousness, and chivalry because he is of a high social standing in comparison to both her and Mr. Elton. His act socially "saves" Harriet and reprimands the Elton for their rudeness.

Social class also restricts the actions that characters are able to take in fulfilling their desires, as is most evidently seen in the novel's drama regarding marriage matches. Frank must conceal his engagement with Jane because she is an orphan and regarded as an unsuitable social match by his family. Harriet rejects Robert Martin because Emma advises her that he is "beneath" her. Mr. Elton rejects Harriet by the same calculations, and so on.

Marriage

Emma deals with many visions of what marriage entails. Social acceptability, financial practicality, similar social standing, shared virtues, matching talents, comparable charm and beauty, and similar dispositions are all components that present themselves with different degrees of importance in the marriage calculations of different characters. For women, who were often barred from owning property and faced significant limitations in employment, marriage became particularly critical as both the expected social norm and the often necessary means of financial security. Harriet's

bewilderment as Emma's decision to remain single and her own horror of the fate of spinsters illustrates the social stigma attached to those who were unable to marry, like the unfortunate and foolish Miss Bates.

Emma believes herself to be a skilled matchmaker, and her pride in her discernment of good matches and her ultimate humbling in this regard highlights that she has much to learn in judging others characters, her own, and what makes a good marriage. While Austen in certain ways affirms the social conventions of marriage in pairing most of her characters with partners of equal social standing, she also complicates and critiques these conventions. Though Emma believes Mr. Martin to be below Harriet, Mr. Knightley argues that Harriet would be lucky to be with Mr. Martin on account of the latter's virtue. Similarly, both Mr. Knightley and Emma come to agree that Frank is lucky to be accepted by Jane, even though she is considered of inferior social standing, because she surpasses him in virtue.

Marriage is also an agent of social change. Though certainly dictated by the characters' social standing (as when characters reject or pursue matches to consolidate their social standing), it also *makes* characters' social standing, as in the case with Mr. Weston's first marriage to a wealthy and well-connected woman, which elevated his social standing in society.

Gender limitation

Despite the strong-willed and confident female protagonist who is the novel's namesake, *Emma* reveals the limited options of women in Austen's era. Early in the novel, Emma decides to stay single: she views her situation as a financially self-sufficient single woman at the top of the social hierarchy to suit her preferences more than being a wife would. Yet Emma's influence

in society is for the most part limited to her attempts to arrange her friends' marriage, and even this influence is revealed to be questionable. Mr. Knightley counters Emma's belief that she arranged Mr. Weston and Mrs. Weston's marriage with the assertion that they would have found each other on their own terms and time without Emma's "help." Furthermore, Emma's meddling more often than not proves mistaken and disastrous, as when she becomes responsible for Harriet's heartbreak at the hands of Mr. Elton. Emma's hobbies of charity, social calls, and the nice "female accomplishments" of music and art reflect a privileged but relatively limited sphere of activity.

Jane represents a case in which the limitations of her gender, combined with her relative lack of social status and financial stability, threaten her freedom to live the life she desires. This becomes particularly clear when she no longer views marriage to Frank as a viable option, and finds herself forced to accept an undesirable position as a governess. In the case of other female characters and even finally Emma, marriage represents the most viable option for a woman to live a comfortable life. Women's influence, in this sense, lies largely in their relation to men—to attract, reject, and accept their proposals of marriage.

Misperception

Emma's initial perceptions of people and her own confidence in her abilities as matchmaker turn out to be very mistaken. Throughout the course of the novel, Emma repeatedly misreads signs of attention and attraction: she believes Mr. Elton to be wooing Harriet, when he is in fact interested only in her; she believes Harriet to be in love with Frank, when she is in fact in love

with Mr. Knightley, and so on. At the heart of Emma's misperception is her vanity and pride. She sees what she wants to believe, and it is not until the disastrous consequences of her interference that she gradually comes to realize how misplaced her confidence in her abilities is.

Lecture 3

Themes cont.

Oppression of women

As a heroine, Emma possesses beauty, wealth, intelligence, high social standing, and financial independence. However, Austen makes it clear that Emma is unique in her position; most of the women in the novel lack Emma's financial independence and, as a result, have much more limited options for their futures. This speaks to the ingrained oppression of women in British society at the time. Most occupations were deemed inappropriate for women (akin to prostitution), which left women almost incapable of supporting themselves independently. Jane Fairfax is presented as an example of this ingrained oppression of women. Although she possesses all of the same personal qualities as Emma, she lacks the wealth that could give her financial and social security. The only options available for her are marriage or becoming a governess. Most of the other female characters in the novel are faced with a similar choice: Harriet Smith can either marry or continue to work at Mrs. Goddard's school; Mrs. Weston only marries Mr. Weston after working as Emma's governess. Although Emma is luckier than most, even she has limited options for her future: she can either marry or

become a wealthy spinster. Ironically, Austen herself had to submit to this ingrained oppression: because she never married and could not publicly claim her novels, she was dependent on her family for support.

Miscommunication

Many of the major conflicts in the novel are a direct result of miscommunication between characters. One primary example is Mr. Elton's misguided courtship of Emma during which Emma assumes that Mr. Elton is actually courting Harriet Smith. This misconception is perpetuated when Mr. Elton presents Emma with a riddle for Harriet's book. Because there is no real communication between the three characters, the revelation of Mr. Elton's true feelings is much more problematic. Similar problems arise because of miscommunication between Frank Churchill and Emma. While Emma initially views Frank Churchill as her future husband, Frank is secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax and manipulates Emma into promoting the façade. Even Mr. Knightley engages in miscommunication by failing to reveal his true feelings for Emma until the very end of the novel. As such, Emma assumes that Harriet and Mr. Knightley are in love with each other. In each of these cases, the required formality of social interactions ends up causing nothing but confusion and hurt feelings. However, in the end, all of these social mishaps are resolved, and each character is ultimately matched up with an appropriate partner.

Lecture 4

Character analysis

The protagonist of the novel, Emma Woodhouse is the rich, beautiful, and privileged mistress of Hartfield. She lives a comfortable life with her elderly father, running the house and organizing social invitations within the high society of Highbury. Her mother died when she was young, and she was since spoilt by her governess, the newly married Mrs. Weston. At the start of the novel, her major flaw is a combination of vanity and pride: she thinks a little too highly of herself and believes herself possessed of great discernment in matchmaking. Despite these flaws, Emma's understanding and good nature allow her to learn from her mistakes and cultivate kindness and humility. Her resolution to remain single also demonstrates an unusual prioritization of her independence and pleasure as a woman, though it is one that she later gives up in marrying Mr. Knightley.

George Knightley

The long-time friend and trusted confidante of the Woodhouses, Emma's brother-in-law. Mr. Knightley is a true gentleman in lineage, estate, and virtue. He lives at Donwell Abbey, the spacious estate that he manages. He displays integrity and charity, as he constantly uses his resources—whether it is his position, his carriage, or his apples—to assist others. He is the only character who openly critiques Emma, demonstrating his dedication to her moral development. His judgment is well respected and, though not entirely biased by his self-interest, he nonetheless proves to be more discerning than many of the other characters in the novel.

Frank Churchill

Mr. Weston's son and Mrs. Weston's stepson. Raised by his aunt and uncle in Enscombe, Frank is anticipated as a suitor for Emma, though his real love is Jane. His lively spirit and charms render him immediately likeable, but he also reveals himself to be rather thoughtless, deceitful, and selfish. He carelessly interprets Emma's behavior in a manner convenient to himself, and he petulantly disregards Jane's feelings. However, like Emma, Frank possesses an improvable disposition and good understanding and ultimately desires to do what is right for those he loves.

Jane Fairfax

Miss Bates's niece and Mrs. Bates's granddaughter. As another accomplished and beautiful young woman of similar age, Jane incites Emma's jealousy and admiration. Her reserved temperament frustrates Emma, even as Emma admires Jane's elegance of look and manner. Jane's lack of fortune and good family leave her dependent on the good will of others and force her to seek employment, but her marriage to Frank saves her from the latter fate.

Mr. Woodhouse

Emma's father and the Woodhouse patriarch. Mr. Woodhouse is a rather silly, excessively nervous, and frail old man who dotes on his daughter. He hates change and possesses a narrow-minded and even selfish outlook on changes like his oldest daughter's marriage, which he views as a tragedy

depriving him of familiar and beloved company. However, Emma and his close friends not only humor, but also comfort him in all of his foibles.

Lecture 5

Symbols Analysis

Riddles and word games

Riddle and word games represent the major theme of misperception, as their hidden meaning leaves much open for interpretation *and* misinterpretation. Just as Emma constantly reads romance between the lines of various social interactions, riddles and word games serve as disguised messages of romantic intentions. For those like Emma who possess an incomplete knowledge of others' and their own hearts, however, these puzzles may contribute to, as opposed to clarifying, the confusion. For instance, Emma interprets Mr. Elton's riddle of "courtship" as intended for Harriet, when it is in fact intended for Emma herself, and Mr. Elton mistakenly interprets Emma's warm reception of it as encouragement.

Letters

Word games can also be intended to deceive, rather than clarify. As Mr. Knightley suspiciously observes the word games that Frank plays with Emma and Jane, he becomes convinced that it is but a cover for a much deeper game of deception and intrigue that the young man plays with the two ladies' hearts.

Tokens of Affection

A number of objects in the novel take on symbolic significance as tokens of affection. Mr. Elton frames Emma's portrait of Harriet as a symbol of affection for her, though Emma misunderstands it as a symbol of affection for Harriet. Harriet keeps court plaster and a pencil stub as souvenirs of Mr. Elton. When the engagement between Jane and Frank is briefly called off, she returns his letters to symbolize her relinquishment of his affection.