

## Representation Of Social Class, Intellectual Independence And Gender Roles In Emma By Jane Austen

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### Abstract:

*Emma by Jane Austen, published in 1815, primarily focuses on the social and romantic life of its protagonist, Emma Woodhouse. While the novel does not explicitly address the theme of women's emancipation as a central subject, there are elements and themes within the story that can be interpreted in the context of women's roles and societal expectations during the Regency era. Here are some themes related to women's emancipation that can be explored in Emma. This paper investigates the patriarchal values and feminist ideas in the novel Emma by Jane Austen. The focus of this paper is on how patriarchy and feminism are portrayed in the novel Emma. The study concludes that there are concepts of both feminism and patriarchy in the novel depicted through the situations that the character faces in terms of marriage, social class, and relationships. The result of this paper and my argument is that there is a new emerging society portrayed through the protagonist, Emma Woodhouse, in terms of her personal growth, the patriarchal relationship, and the independence that stems from her education.*

### Introduction:

**1. Social Class:** Social class plays a central and complex role in Jane Austen's Emma, shaping the characters' lives, relationships, and motivations. Here's a breakdown of how Austen portrays the rigid social hierarchy of early 19th-century England and its impact on the story.

(i) **The Landed Gentry:** At the top of the social pyramid stands the landed gentry, like Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightly. They inherit wealth and land, enjoy significant social standing, and possess considerable power within the community. Emma embodies the privileges and limitations of her position. She enjoys leisure, independence, and the expectation of a good marriage within her class. However, her sheltered life also fosters arrogance and a tendency to meddle in others' affairs.

(ii) **The Middle Class:** The middle class encompasses diverse characters like the Bates family, Mr. Weston, and the Coles. They have varying degrees of wealth and education but lack the landed gentry's inherent social authority. The Bates' poverty and dependence on charity highlight the vulnerability of this class. Mr. Weston, on the other hand, demonstrates the possibility of upward mobility <sup>1</sup>through marriage and wealth acquisition.

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**(iii) The Lower Classes:** The lower classes, represented by servants and trades people like Mrs. Goddard, occupy the bottom of the hierarchy. They face economic hardship and limited social mobility. Austen portrays their struggles with a mixture of sympathy and satire. While she criticizes the gentry's snobbishness towards the lower classes, she also reinforces the existing social order.

### **Division of Social Class:**

- (a) **Distinct Strata:** Emma Woodhouse occupies a privileged position within the landed gentry. Austen meticulously portrays the social hierarchy of Highbury, highlighting the clear distinctions between the wealthy landowners like Emma, the middle class represented by the Bateses and the Martins, and the working class embodied by the servants.
- (b) **Economic disparities:** Financial security underpins social standing in Emma. Emma's wealth allows her a degree of independence and leisure, while the Bateses struggle with debt and social anxieties. This economic disparity shapes their interactions and influences their agency.
- (c) **Marriage as social currency:** Marriage, particularly for women, serves as a means of social advancement in Austen's world. Emma's matchmaking schemes often revolve around securing advantageous unions for her friends, reflecting the societal pressure to marry within one's class.
- (d) **Marriage and Independence:**

The novel reflects the societal norms of the time, where marriage was often seen as the primary goal for women. Emma, however, initially expresses a desire to remain single and independent. Her character development involves understanding the importance of love and companionship over societal expectations.

- (e) **Social Class and Gender Roles:**
- (f) The characters in "Emma" are constrained by the rigid social class structure and gender roles of the time. Women, especially, were expected to conform to certain standards. Emma, being of a higher social class, has more privileges, but her actions and choices are still circumscribed by societal expectations.
- (g) **Female Friendship:**
- (h) The novel explores the dynamics of female friendship, particularly through the relationship between Emma and Harriet Smith. Emma tries to shape Harriet's life choices, reflecting the limited agency women have in making their own decisions. However, the story also highlights the importance of supportive female friendships.

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## 2. Intellectual Independence:

- (a) **Education and Refinement:** Emma's education and intellectual pursuits set her apart from other young women in Highbury. She possesses a sharp wit, enjoys reading and conversation, and engages in thoughtful introspection.
- (b) **Challenging Conventions:** Emma's intellectual curiosity and independent spirit lead her to question societal norms and expectations. She critiques the limitations placed on women and challenges the prescribed roles assigned to different classes.
- (c) **Limits of female agency:** Despite her intellectual prowess, Emma's agency is ultimately circumscribed by societal constraints. Her meddling in others' lives stems from a misguided sense of control, highlighting the limitations placed on women's autonomy in Regency England.
- (d) Emma is portrayed as an intelligent and witty character, challenging the stereotype that women are not capable of intellectual pursuits. Her matchmaking schemes, while misguided, showcase her active mind. The novel subtly challenges the notion that women should not engage in certain intellectual or social activities.
- (e) **Emma's Personal Growth:**

Throughout the novel, Emma undergoes significant personal growth. Her journey can be seen as a form of emancipation from her misconceptions and societal expectations. She learns from her mistakes and gains a better understanding of herself and others.

- (f) **Self-Determination in Romance:**

The novel explores the idea of women having agency in their romantic lives. While societal norms heavily influence the characters, the resolution of the plot allows for characters to make choices based on their feelings rather than succumbing entirely to societal pressures.

It's important to note that Jane Austen's works are products of their time, and while they may not explicitly address women's emancipation as a central theme, they provide insights into the social constraints and expectations placed on women in early 19th century England. Readers can interpret and analyze these themes through a modern lens to explore issues related to women's roles and autonomy.

## 3. Gender Roles:

**Women:** The novel reflects the societal expectations of women in Regency England. Marriage is considered the ultimate goal, and women are expected to be accomplished in domestic skills and social graces. Characters like Miss Bates and Harriet Smith represent this traditional path.

### Subverting Expectations:

**Emma:** The protagonist, Emma Woodhouse, challenges these expectations. She is intelligent, independent, and financially secure, allowing her a degree of freedom uncommon

for women of her time. Her meddling matchmaking and intellectual pursuits defy traditional gender roles.

**Other Characters:** Characters like Miss Taylor and Jane Fairfax also navigate the boundaries of societal expectations. Miss Taylor, though unmarried, finds fulfillment through her friendships and community involvement, while Jane Fairfax, despite limited options, exhibits intelligence and independence.

### **Limitations and Consequences:**

**Social Pressures:** The novel ultimately reinforces the importance of marriage and social standing. While Emma's defiance is initially amusing, she faces consequences for her meddling and misjudgment. Her journey involves learning humility and understanding the complexities of human relationships.

**Limited Options:** Despite Emma's relative freedom, the novel also highlights the limitations faced by women in Regency England. Lack of inheritance rights and dependence on men for financial security restrict their choices and agency.

### **Interpretations and Criticisms:**

**Feminist Readings:** Some critics view Emma as a proto-feminist figure, challenging the constraints placed on women. Others argue that the novel ultimately upholds traditional gender roles by punishing Emma's defiance and advocating for marriage as the ultimate fulfillment.

**Social Commentary:** The novel can be seen as a social commentary on class, wealth, and marriage in Regency England. It satirizes societal norms while offering glimpses of alternative ways for women to find meaning and happiness.

**Confined Expectations:** Austen subtly critiques the societal expectations placed upon women in the early 19th century. Women like Emma are expected to be accomplished, charming, and ultimately marry well. However, their pursuits and ambitions are often limited by societal pressures.

**Defining Femininity:** The novel explores the various facets of femininity within the context of societal expectations. While Emma embodies a confident and independent spirit, Austen also portrays the vulnerability and emotional intelligence of characters like Miss Bates and Harriet Smith.

**Subversion and Transformation:** Through Emma's journey of self-discovery, Austen suggests the possibility of subverting traditional gender roles. Emma's mistakes and eventual humility pave the way for her growth and a more nuanced understanding of her place in society.

### **Conclusion**

Jane Austen's "Emma" offers a rich depiction of social class, intellectual independence, and gender roles in early 19th century England. Through the experiences of the characters, particularly Emma Woodhouse, the novel provides insight into the challenges and dynamics of a society bound by strict social hierarchies and gender expectations. Austen's narrative skillfully combines wit, satire, and social commentary, making "Emma" a timeless exploration of human nature and societal norms.

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