

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO JANE AUSTEN'S



EMMA

“What fantastic guides these are - I wish I'd had them
when I was eighteen”

EMMA THOMPSON

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by John Sutherland and Jolyon Connell

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Introduction

“A heroine whom no-one but myself will much like,” the author famously proclaimed. In fact, in any league of likeability Miss Woodhouse is streets ahead of Miss Fanny – the ostentatiously “meek” heroine of *Mansfield Park*. Meek Emma is not. Indeed it is her sense of absolute sovereignty over her little world of Highbury – her right, as she presumes, to dispose of the marriage choices of those in her circle – which brings her to grief. And that grief, by the familiar course of the heroine’s moral education in Austen’s fiction, makes her, through remorse and repentance, a mature woman capable of forming correct judgements. Not least about whom Miss Woodhouse herself will marry.

Some of Austen’s heroines are encountered in conditions of hardship (Fanny Price again), or facing a lonely future (Anne Elliot), or in relative penury (Catherine Morland). None of these apply to Emma. As the novel opens we are informed that she is “handsome, clever, and rich”. The happiest of Austen’s heroines at the outset, she comes close to being the unhappiest when her match-making schemes go all awry and her protégée, Harriet Smith, becomes her Frankenstein’s monster.

Emma, of all the six great novels, is the one which conforms most closely to Austen’s famous formula (expressed to a friend as she was writing *Emma*) that “three or four families in a country

village is the very thing to work on”, or the sarcasm she directed against herself about the “little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work”.

Emma is, by general agreement, the “quietest” of the novels. The critic Maria Edgeworth’s private complaint that “there is no story in it” is cited by those who find it culpably lacking in incident, or excitement. Others, however, find the plot in *Emma* the most successful Austen achieved. It is, for example, unusual among the sextet in playing a cunning trick on the reader who – unless they are sharp (sharper certainly than Miss Woodhouse) – may well be deluded as to which eligible young (or less than young) man the heroine will end up spending the rest of her life with. Or whether, given her frequently uttered distaste for marriage, she will end up the only unwed of the six heroines at the end of it all.

A summary of the plot

Emma has a deceptively simple plot which is easy enough to summarise, but teasingly complex as one reads it on the page. It is the only one of Austen’s novels which has, as its title, the heroine’s name – predicting the close focus which the narrative will have on Miss Emma Woodhouse and her fortunes.

She is rich, clever, and nearly 21 – three facts which alert the reader that, coming into adulthood

and her fortune, as she is, Emma will be a prize on the marriage market. Emma's elder sister, Isabella ('Belle' – considerably less clever) has married a local man, John Knightley, who is now a rising barrister in London. They have four children. A fifth is born during the course of the narrative. Emma's mother, after whom she is said to "take", died some years since. Emma devotes herself to the care of her valetudinarian and semi-invalid father. The Woodhouses have for generations been the leading family in Highbury – whose confines the narrative never leaves (something else which makes this novel different from Austen's other five, where different settings are prominent features).

As the action opens Emma has triumphantly disposed of her governess, Miss Taylor, to a middle-aged local neighbour, Mr Weston. He is prosperous, but of a slightly lower class than the Woodhouses. Such small social differences are of great significance in Highbury – a fictional location based on the small agricultural towns which Austen knew from her own county, Hampshire. Enthused by what she thinks is her success in match-making, Emma rashly befriends Harriet Smith, a senior pupil at the local school. Harriet is illegitimate – the daughter of who knows (a tradesman, it later emerges, who lives well away from Highbury). Emma persuades Harriet to give up her plans to marry an eminently suitable young farmer, Robert

Martin, scheming instead to marry Harriet to the recently arrived young clergyman, Mr Elton. Mr Elton appears to play along but his interest is actually in Emma, not Harriet. Emma ignores the warnings of her oldest friend, Mr Knightley, the 37-year-old local squire and older brother of John Knightley, who perceives what is really going on. On the way back from a Christmas party at the newly-married Westons' house, all becomes clear to Emma when a tipsy Mr Elton finally plucks up the courage to propose to her. She is disgusted by his absurd pretensions. Her matchmaking plans, humiliatingly, have come to nothing.

Highbury is put into a flutter by the imminent arrival of two new faces. Mr Weston's son, Frank, by his first marriage – now adopted by wealthy in-laws and renamed by them "Churchill" – is coming to the town for the first time. (He did not, oddly, attend his father's wedding.) He is a dashing, eligible bachelor of a kind rare in Highbury. Another new arrival is Jane Fairfax, who has come to stay with her relations, the elderly Mrs Bates and the middle-aged Miss Bates, a genteel couple left in penury by the death of the Revd Bates, an earlier occupant of the vicarage. Jane is a governess, and highly cultivated. An orphan, her ostensible reason for coming to Highbury is a worrying cold, but there may be another reason – as Mr Knightley, the keenest observer in the community, suspects. The paths of

Jane and Frank have, we learn, crossed at the seaside town, Weymouth, where she was the companion-tutor of a young lady. Emma has an instinctive dislike for the accomplished Miss Fairfax, and barely manages to disguise it. But she is fascinated by Frank Churchill and fancies that he may be falling in love with her.

She is flattered by his attentions but thinks he might be a suitable match for Harriet, about whom she feels guilty. Frank mischievously encourages Emma to think that there is some illicit sexual reason for Jane Fairfax's having left the family with whom she was employed. He is, it later emerges, throwing dust in her face. The truth is very different.

Mr Elton returns from the marriage market at Bath with a rich wife, the former Miss Augusta Hawkins. Mrs Elton proves as vulgar and as imperious as her Christian name predicts. Mr Elton continues to be brutally rude to Harriet, fuelling Emma's dislike of the vicar and his wife. Things come to a head on a picnic organised by Mrs Elton where Emma loses control of herself, flirts with Frank Churchill and is unforgivably rude to the stupid and garrulous Miss Bates, for which Mr Knightley rebukes her. She is bitterly ashamed. Her cup of bitterness continues to overflow as she suspects that Harriet may be Mr Knightley's intended. Everything resolves itself when it emerges, to everyone except Mr

Knightley's surprise, that Frank is secretly engaged to Jane. By this point, Emma has realised that she is in love with – has long been in love with – Mr Knightley. The novel, which began with a marriage, ends with a trio of them: Harriet to her farmer, Jane to Frank, and Emma to Mr Knightley. The newly married Revd Elton presides.

What is *Emma* about?

Emma is set in a small, claustrophobic provincial world – a world from which, for the heroine and most of the characters, there is no escape. It is not a world which has entranced everyone. Charlotte Brontë complained that Austen “ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound; the Passions are perfectly unknown to her”; D.H. Lawrence called her “a narrow-gutted spinster”; Joseph Conrad wondered: “What is there in her?”; Kingsley Amis argued that she habitually indulges those she should censure, and censures those she should indulge; while Mark Twain cheerfully commented that any library that didn't have a book by Jane Austen in it had the makings of being a good library.

Writing in 1949, the critic E.N. Hayes found the material Austen used in *Emma* “singularly confined”, objecting to the fact that virtually all the fully developed characters belong to the upper middle class. There is no aristocracy; the lower

middle class receive the same treatment, with young farmer Robert Martin scarcely making an appearance – he never speaks a word in the novel – and the poor are admitted only “to show that Emma is kindhearted”.

Jane Austen is incapable of arriving at the conclusion that elegance, ‘nice’ manners, and simpering performances on the piano are stupid and wasteful. Her view is too narrow, her understanding too limited, her ethic too much bound to that of her class to understand the true nature of the lives of these people.



AUSTEN, LEAVIS AND TOLSTOY

The 20th-century critic F.R. Leavis famously asserted that a “Great Tradition” links Jane Austen with the other great exponents of the 19th-century novel, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. But in one respect, argues John Bayley, Leavis was

wrong. We know where we are with the last four and what they believed; they make it abundantly clear. Our relationship with Austen is not like that: her attitude towards experience is more equivocal; it’s much harder to define her attitudes or know what she thinks.

In one way we know her too well to be so coherently aware of her: and in another way we do not know her at all.

This is evident from the extraordinary variety of different critical responses to her work, especially to her

From this, and similar strictures, including the familiar one that Austen is incapable of writing about “the passion of love” because (in Hayes’s almost certainly misguided view) she never experienced it, he proceeds to his damning conclusion:

There is revealed in the book no attitude towards the major political, economic, psychological, or philosophical problems with which most novelists of importance since Richardson have more or less been concerned in their books. And if irony is the tone of *Emma*, the voice with which the author

last three novels, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. The real distinction, Bayley suggests, is not Leavis’s one of a Great Tradition of the novel, but the distinction which puts Eliot and James on one side and Shakespeare, Austen and Tolstoy on the other.

The Victorian Thomas Babington Macaulay was the first critic to compare Austen with Shakespeare. They are certainly alike in being hard to pin down. Shakespeare had an uncanny ability to get inside his characters; Austen was the same. When Emma is rude to Miss Bates and

then bitterly regrets it we feel we could easily have done the same thing, and we feel a kindred shame.

Whatever her image, Austen is no cosy old-fashioned peddler of Regency period pieces. In her breadth of outlook and the carefully defined nature of her world, says Bayley, the fictional writer she most resembles is Tolstoy. In his preface to the first, unpublished version of *War and Peace* in 1865, Tolstoy anticipated a possible charge that his view of Russian society was a limited one by writing that “the lives