

Summaries of Jane Austen's six novels

4. *EMMA*

(Begun 1814; published 1816)

Emma Woodhouse is "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition." She sounds very fortunate but Emma's mother died when she was little, and during the sixteen years since, she has been nurtured by Miss Taylor, her governess. Miss Taylor has just married their neighbour Mr. Weston, and Emma and her father are sad to lose Miss Taylor from their household, even though the families will keep in very close touch. Emma is inclined to think a little too well of herself and we see this when she meets Harriet Smith. Harriet has no real potential as a friend for Emma but serves as a distraction from Emma's profound loss of Miss Taylor's company. Miss Smith is a boarder at Mrs. Goddard's school for girls and her parents are unknown. Perhaps it is this very social vulnerability which makes a lonely and bored Emma decide to practise on her, to groom her for refinement and an advantageous marriage. Mr. Knightley of Donwell Abbey, Emma's brother-in-law and neighbour, is critical of this project and of Emma's meddling in the private life of another but Emma pays no heed to him.

Emma hopes to "improve" Harriet by association with more privileged people and to match her to the eligible bachelor, Mr. Elton. When Emma learns that Harriet is falling in love with the suitable Robert Martin, a decent tenant farmer, she immediately sets about changing Harriet's

romantic perspectives. Emma is here in total disagreement with Mr. Knightley, who very much wants the union with Robert Martin to succeed.

Emma apparently cannot see that Mr. Elton's real intentions are to win *her* hand, not the lowly Harriet's. Emma becomes more and more irritated by Mr. Elton's attentions to her, and she wonders why he is not more concerned about Harriet, particularly when Harriet is poorly. During an impromptu carriage ride, the truth is revealed when Mr. Elton suddenly proposes to Emma and finds himself abruptly rejected. Emma must now comfort Harriet for the illusions that Emma herself has created. Harriet seems to hold no grudge about the matter, but Emma is temporarily more aware of the dangers of manipulating others.

A new subject of dispute arises between Emma and Mr. Knightley which concerns the personality Frank Churchill, who is expected to visit his father, Mr. Weston, and his new step mother, but who keeps postponing his arrival. Emma claims that Frank is likely to be an easy-going young man, although she has never actually met him. Mr. Knightley, however, suggests that Frank's pleasantness may be superficial, and his speculation is later to be proved right after the arrival of Jane Fairfax in Highbury.

The elegant but aloof Jane Fairfax comes to live with her aunt, Miss Bates, who is poor in wealth but abundant in warm words for her musically talented niece. Jane is soon noticed by Emma, Mr. Knightley, Mrs. Elton (the former Augusta Hawkins, who has also just come to town with her new husband, Mr. Elton) and by Frank Churchill, among others.

Frank Churchill's arrival corresponds almost exactly with Jane's. He bonds with Emma by collusively baiting Jane Fairfax about her supposed past love intrigue with a married man. The mysterious delivery of a piano as a gift for Jane heightens Emma's curiosity about Jane's past. Emma enjoys her lively relationship with Frank but works out that she is not in love with him, despite her conviction that he loves her. All are disappointed when Frank must suddenly leave to visit his sick aunt.

At the first gathering after Frank's return, Mr. Knightley gallantly steps in to rescue Harriet from the embarrassment of a snub by Mr Elton on the dance floor. Frank continues his flirtation with Emma, but some days later, when gypsies alarm Harriet, it is Frank who gallantly comes to her aid. Emma promptly decides that Frank could be paired off with Harriet, quite unaware that Harriet may have become attached to the first, not the second, of her two rescuers.

At a subsequent picnic on Box Hill, Emma's deliberate insult to the kindly Miss Bates makes Mr. Knightley so angry that Emma later feels deep shame and regret. Emma has another unpleasant shock later on when she learns through Mrs. Weston that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax have been secretly engaged all along. Emma is very worried for Harriet, for she had begun to think of Frank and Harriet as a match. Now that Frank's aunt has died, Frank and Jane can openly declare their love and marriage plans.

Harriet, however, confesses to a shocked Emma that she has fallen in love with Mr. Knightley and believes that he might share her feelings. Emma is completely unnerved by this information, until it is proven

delightfully false by Mr. Knightley's proposal of marriage to Emma herself. Harriet's rejected admirer, Robert Martin, is still in love with her and at last gains the chance to propose to Harriet again, ensuring her and his own happiness in the future. Emma and Mr. Knightley also move forward towards marital harmony, and the couple appear extremely well suited, despite the considerable number of false trails they have followed before they have eventually found one another as husband and wife.