

Aspects of comedy: Exemplar student response (AS Paper 2B, Section B)

This resource is an exemplar student response to a Section B question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 2B.

Paper 2B, Section B, Band 5

Sample question

Explore the view that in *Emma*, the comedy is most apparent in those moments of self-discovery experienced by Emma Woodhouse herself.

Remember to include in your answer relevant analysis of Austen's authorial methods.

Sample response

Arguably, the novel *Emma* follows the moral education of the protagonist, Emma herself. It is the story of her "self-discovery" as she matures and comes to understand herself better, particularly because of the influence the character Mr Knightley has on her. Austen uses moments of self-discovery such as Emma realising that she is in love with Knightley, and realising how cruelly she has acted towards other characters.

The realisation that she herself is in love with Knightley is arguably the most shocking realisation for Emma herself, although the comedy for the reader comes from the fact that we have suspected it all along. From the beginning of the novel, Austen hints to the underlying mutual affections between Emma and Knightley. Austen has Knightley subtly display his attraction to Emma, "I confess I have seldom seen a face or figure more pleasing to me than hers", which to the reader could seem a direct confession of this affection. However, Austen immediately has him quash the hopes of the reader with "But I am a partial old friend". The reader is therefore delicately hinted to within the first few chapters of the novel, that there may be an eventual union between the two characters. Despite the third person narrator being sympathetic to Emma's point of view, through Austen's use of free indirect discourse, there is never any direct confession from Emma about her attraction to Knightley. We are told that "general benevolence, but not general friendship, made a man what he ought. She could fancy such a man" and that "you might not find one in a hundred with gentlemen so plainly written as in Mr Knightley", by Emma herself.

The phrase about Mr Knightley comes at a much earlier stage in the novel, so that when the narrator admits Emma "could fancy such a man", meaning a benevolent man, as readers we are reminded of Emma's earlier appreciation of Knightley's gentlemanlike character. These hints given by Austen from the beginning of the novel, increase the sense of climax up to the moment where Emma realises, "It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr Knightley must marry no one but herself." This is the first moment of realisation for Emma, and we see how forcefully it hits her with the imagery of "an arrow", similar to cupid's arrow. However, for the reader, it is no great surprise. Instead, we find comedy in the naivety Emma has shown up to this point, and take pleasure in the fact we could have foreseen it. The narration in this paragraph shows Emma's internal mental struggle with "why was it so much worse that Harriet should be lone with Mr Knightley than with Frank Churchill?". Even right up to the epiphany, Austen has Emma in a state of confusion, which creates comedy as we see how blind Emma is to her own feelings. A sense of relief and happiness is felt by the reader in this moment of self-discovery for Emma, and being the most important realisation throughout the novel, it is all the more comedic because of the importance of it.

Whilst this is an example of a clearly comedic "moment of self-discovery" as it is a purely happy realisation, there are other moments where comedy arises in a slightly more sinister way. The most prominent example of this is in the moment where Austen has Emma realise she was wrong to attempt to meddle in Harriet's romantic relationships, except that Emma then continues to repeat her mistake. It is the first of Emma's series of attempts to find a partner for Harriet, the first being Mr Elton. After being shocked at Elton's confession of love for not Harriet, but Emma herself, the narrator shows the mental turmoil Emma undergoes because of her mistake. This therefore does not seem particularly comedic, as it is a potentially unkind and insensitive thing that Emma has done. However, through her language, Austen uses the narrative voice to show how in fact more meddling on Emma's part is looming. Though superficially Emma does seem to be blaming herself by calling it "foolish" and admitting "she was quite concerned and ashamed". However, "foolish" is a particularly light adjective to employ to describe her potentially devastating actions, and the fact she was only "quite" concerned and ashamed, shows the slightly light-hearted way in which Emma views her actions. Although this is a "moment of self-discovery" for Emma, this time, the comedy comes from the fact that we know she is not going to change. "She resolved to do such things no more". Austen uses language to hint to the fact that Emma may repeat what she has done, but it is on a second reading that we see the real irony of this phrase. We know for certain that Emma will "do such things again", the comedy in this moment of self-discovery is more from the irony of what is to come.

We see that comedy is apparent in moments of self-discovery experienced by Emma Woodhouse herself, although the comedy arises from positioning of the moment in relation to the rest of the novel. It is the events leading up to, or

coming after, that make these moments comedic, as it is the progression of Emma's self-discovery that is what makes these moments so significant.

Examiner commentary

This student produces a confident response to the task and has a clear personal voice. The argument is driven through the answer and the student makes a good range of points. This is a response that improves as it progresses.

The student addresses the task at the start of her essay and sees the novel's comedic pattern – the journey of Emma Woodhouse's moral education – and the importance therefore of Emma's moments of self-discovery. Perhaps there could be a little more precision at the end of the introduction as the reference to how Emma 'has acted to other characters' is rather vague, but the direction the essay is to take is set up.

In the second paragraph the student focuses on Emma's realisation that she loves Mr Knightley and how the comedy is clear to readers who have 'suspected it all along'. There is some slight drifting after this when the focus is not particularly sharp. The student discusses Knightley's interest in Emma and the narrator's sympathy and there is not enough contact with Emma's moments of self-discovery and whether the comedy is most apparent in those moments. However the argument is brought round and there are some telling comments about Austen's methods and how she gives hints to the reader of what the outcome is likely to be. The discussion of Austen's use of imagery is good and from this point the essay becomes much better focused.

There are very good comments on comedy and the student shows that she understands the generic conventions. Some of the commenting is perceptive, for example: 'However, for the reader, it [Emma's realisation that she loves Knightley] is no great surprise. Instead, we find comedy in the naivety Emma has shown up to this point, and take pleasure in the fact we could have foreseen it'. This point is very well developed with some integrated comments on Austen's narrative methods and a very good understanding of comedic elements, for example love, relief and happiness, comic confusion and epiphany.

After the very well developed ideas about Emma and Mr Knightley, the student discusses other examples of Emma's self realisation, though the suggestion that these moments are 'slightly more sinister' is questionable. Still, the student's choice to focus on Emma's realisation that she was wrong to meddle in Harriet's romantic relationships is a good one and the ideas are very well developed particularly in relation to the moral context that is set up in the introduction. The student argues confidently that Emma's realisation regarding Harriet and Elton is not particularly comedic 'as it is potentially unkind and insensitive', and that Austen makes it clear through narrative voice that 'more meddling...is looming'. This is a very strong section of the essay, busy with ideas and textual detail. Although the student offers this section as a counter argument, she realises that the argument is not just black and white as she sees that there is comedy in the irony that Emma will do such things again.

Overall this is an interesting response which is confidently argued. A05 is a real strength of this answer and A04 is also securely hit. There is some perception in the student's understanding of Austen's methods here and comments about method are clearly connected to the task. This is a very well argued answer and seems to be operating at the lower end of Band 5.