

Aspects of comedy: Text overview – *Emma*

Read our overview which shows how you can consider *Emma* in relation to the genre of Comedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.



'Silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way.'

Overview

Emma is a comedy of manners, with a host of comedic characters and a plot that is based on deception, misunderstanding, courtship and marriage. The eponymous heroine, intelligent and vivacious, has so little to do in the stagnant world of Highbury where she lives, that she busies herself with organising love matches. Her scheming, built on what she perceives as an early success – the marriage of her former governess to Mr Weston – is thereafter so misplaced that it leads to unrealistic expectations in Mr Elton and Harriet Smith, unhappiness in herself and Harriet and irritation and anger in Mr Knightley and Mr Elton. Until the final comedic resolution when the young people find their right partners, it seems that Emma is destined to create misery rather than joy. True love, however, and some plain talking, conquer all and the novel ends with a series of marriages, the most significant of which is that of Emma to George Knightley, significant because Emma had vowed never to marry and is rich enough not to need to do so.

Emma as Comic Heroine

Austen suggested that in *Emma* she had created a character that no one but herself would much like and her heroine certainly has many faults. It is established from the start that Emma has many benefits and privileges, and she

seems to 'unite some of the best blessings of existence'. She also has an intelligence that is superior to most of her associates. However, it is from these 'qualities' and 'privileges' that her faults emanate. When Austen ironically tells us that Emma has a disposition to 'think a little too well of herself', what she really means is that Emma has an extraordinarily high opinion of herself. Emma is also used to getting 'rather too much her own way' - or in fact far too much. Despite Emma's belief that she is wise in the affairs of the world, she is actually naïve, arrogant and wilful. Emma has a privileged position at the heart of Highbury society and not only rules her father's household (he is weak and excessively indulgent of her) but also her social circle. If Emma is to be forgiven for interfering in the love interests of Harriet, Robert Martin, Mr Elton and Frank Churchill then it is because she is bored and unchallenged. Perhaps it is not surprising that she should meddle in other people's affairs. What else is a young woman in her position supposed to do to pass the time? Whether readers sympathise with her or condemn her, what is clear is that her actions are used by Austen to create disruption in harmony - a key aspect of comedy. The narrative follows Emma's movement from blindness and folly to an understanding of herself and an acknowledgement of her mistakes. Along her path to enlightenment, Emma learns many lessons but in keeping with a traditional comic ending she is finally rewarded with a deeper sense of happiness than she enjoyed at the start of the novel.

Education and Learning

'Till the heroine grows up, the fun must be imperfect', wrote Austen to her niece Anna. Emma begins the novel believing that she knows it all, but she is emotionally and sexually naïve. For much of the novel, she has no personal interest in love because she believes she will never marry; her interest in the marriage stakes is vicarious, but in planning the marriages of others, she receives a series of shocks that cause her to confront her own folly and her own feelings. She misjudges the intentions of the social climber Mr Elton (how foolish it was to ever think that he would want to marry the illegitimate Harriet Smith); she fails to see that Frank Churchill is only flirting with her as a blind and that he is secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax; she has no awareness that Harriet has set her sights on Mr Knightley but most importantly she does not understand her own feelings until very late in the novel that Mr Knightley must marry no-one but herself. As Emma's learning develops she is able to reflect and criticise herself and understand that her profoundest feelings are for the master of Donwell Abbey.

Emma also has to develop a moral consciousness. For much of the novel she is dismissive of others, tolerating rather than respecting them. The climax of her moral development is at Box Hill. Here she is so absorbed in her flirtation with Frank Churchill (because she is bored rather than because she is sincere in her affection), that she is rude and cruel to the harmless Miss Bates. During the word game set up by Frank Churchill in which the players have to say either one witty, two semi clever or three dull things, Miss Bates is innocently about to

oblige with saying dull things when Emma, unable to resist, says 'Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me - but you will be limited as to number - only three at once.' Emma does not immediately understand the pain she causes, but after Mr Knightley's stern rebuke (he tells her that she was insolent and unfeeling), she redeems herself through her repentance. Her recognition is important and her efforts to make amends by coming as close as she can to an apology command not only Mr Knightley's respect but also the readers'.

Disguise and duplicity

Unlike some other comedic texts, such as *She Stoops To Conquer* and *Twelfth Night*, there is no literal disguise in *Emma* but Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax try to conceal their feelings. The elusive Frank Churchill is not what he seems to Emma or to Mr and Mrs Weston or indeed to Highbury as a whole. The story he tells of his aunt and her state of health is a little slippery, his commitment to his father is dubious and, of course, all along he is disguising the fact that he is engaged to Jane Fairfax (who also therefore is not all she appears). When the truth unfolds, Frank's reasons for his duplicity are explained and although they are not entirely convincing (and certainly not his cruelty to Jane), he is not finally cast as a reprobate. Until then, Frank's flirtation with Emma is a cause of confusion for the reader, largely because Emma is the centre of consciousness and the reader is duped because she is.

Although it could be suggested that Mr Elton is duplicitous in seeming to give attention to Harriet, this is not quite the case. As part of his strategy to curry favour with Emma he praises Harriet, but in doing so, he is really praising the education Emma has given her. Emma may not see this but understanding Austen's irony means that readers can. Elton is shrewd and calculating and an overreacher who wants to marry for status and money. His designs are well spotted by both Mr Knightley and his brother. Emma's misjudgement of Elton's interest in Harriet is her first calamitous mistake in the novel.

Misunderstanding

Misunderstanding is central to the comedy of the novel - most of it caused by or experienced by Emma. Her list of errors is long: not only does she believe Mr Elton to be in love with Harriet, but she also believes Robert Martin to be unworthy of her friend when in fact he is cultured and sincere; she decides Harriet is the neglected daughter of a man of status in order to elevate and romanticise her illegitimate position; she speculates that Jane Fairfax had formed a liaison with Mr Dixon; she believes Frank to be in love with herself and she is almost wilful in thinking that Churchill is honourable even though Mr Knightley thinks he is trifling and silly. When Frank departs suddenly for London on a whim, seemingly to get his hair cut, Emma finds excuses for him while Mr Knightley thinks Frank is empty, selfish and a fool. Emma later wills herself to believe Harriet loves Frank, when actually Harriet has her focus on Mr Knightley, and she fails to recognise the love she and Mr Knightley feel for each other.

Emma must learn many lessons about herself before the confusions can be resolved.

Order and disorder

Marriage, and the scheming that surrounds the quest for marriage, is the bringer of most of the disruption and disorder in the novel though tellingly it is also used to signal the restoration of order. Emma opens with Mr Woodhouse lamenting the regrettable change and upset to his household caused by the marriage of Miss Taylor, and Highbury society is altered by love plots and marriages (Mr Elton leaves Highbury and returns with Augusta Hawkins; Frank Churchill is an outsider who forms a secret liaison with one of Highbury's daughters and tricks another). However, although disorder is often regarded negatively, disorder in the form of change can be seen as good for Highbury, if only to ignite some life into it.

There are other types of disorder that bubble beneath the surface, particularly in relation to social class. In the class bound society of Highbury, Emma's plans to elevate the relatively low status Harriet, out of her natural social sphere, potentially end in disaster when it seems, due to Emma's scheming, Harriet might end up the mistress of Donwell Abbey. Frank's engagement to the moderately genteel though penniless Jane Fairfax is kept secret to maintain harmony in his Enscombe world (and more importantly to secure his fortune), though it creates disorder in Highbury (his father and step mother are duped, he openly flirts with Emma as a screen to hide the secret and Jane is made uncomfortable and ill, exacerbated by the officious attentions of Mrs Elton). The disorder that Frank brings comes to a head in the events at Box Hill, a microcosm of sorts. Whereas strawberry picking at Donwell Abbey which happened the previous day is largely convivial, the Box Hill picnic which follows it shows the breakup of social harmony: 'there seemed to be a principle of separation', the picnickers are discontent and ill at ease. For some time only Emma and Frank are speaking, the seven others are silent and then Frank conjures them into speaking and playing word games, an activity that increases the discord. There is rising tension between them and Miss Bates is humiliated; Jane Fairfax suffers acutely, everyone seems irritable and the party dissipates. Most significantly for the heroine, Mr Knightley is cross with her, striking at her conscience and she goes home in misery: 'She had never been so depressed ...Emma felt tears running down her cheeks almost all the way home'.

However, because the novel is a comedy, disharmony is only temporary and unhappiness relatively short lived. Any deeper misery (particularly for Jane) is averted by the fortuitous death of the tyrannical Mrs Churchill, the good nature of her easily guided husband who could be 'persuaded into anything by his nephew' and the open hearted Westons who are always ready to understand and make allowances.

Comic villains

While it is easy to see Mr Elton and his wife primarily as comic creations, it is also possible to see something of comic villainy in them. Mr Elton is often absurd, full of greasy smiles and excessive flattery. He arrives for the Westons' Christmas party 'spruce, black and smiling' and thereafter is glib and oily, making ridiculous comments, misunderstanding the feelings of others. However, his behaviour is not always comic. His profession of love to Emma is gross and presumptuous and betrays his lack of breeding. It is also potentially terrifying. No sooner had they left Randalls than Emma's hand is seized, her attention is demanded and he expresses the violence of his love for her. Although Austen does not allow Emma to be in any serious danger of assault, Elton is drunk and in his indignation that Emma could have thought he might marry Harriet, vaguely threatening. No sympathy is afforded Elton for being rejected by Emma; his protestations do not carry sincerity. It is clear that he is more interested in her £30,000 than her charming wit and vivacity. In the second half of the novel, after his marriage to Augusta Hawkins (with a fortune of £10,000), his comic role is less prominent. Now he becomes bitter and cynical, often seen in a huddle with his wife making derogatory comments about Harriet and Emma. His snub of Harriet at the Crown Ball is deliberately cruel, its intention is to wound.

After her arrival in the novel, Mrs Elton becomes a significant figure of fun with her comically excessive language, her presumptuousness, her misquoting literature and her ridiculous incorrect use of Italian when she calls her husband her caro sposo. However, she is also scheming and ruthless, interfering in the life of Jane Fairfax, assuming that she is the most important person in Highbury and rudely taking charge of the Donwell Abbey strawberry picking. Her behaviour towards Emma is undignified though she has no real power to hurt her, but she is a threat to Jane Fairfax who becomes her prey because Jane does not have the power, that comes with economic security, to resist.

Frank Churchill has the hallmarks of a comic villain in the way he creates disruption. However, although he is overly charming and flirtatious he is not a rake like Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*. But he is a menace to order. His main 'villainy' is in his deception. He 'seems' to be a lot of things - the thoughtful gentleman, one who is open, intelligent, considerate and accomplished, and though he has good qualities, he is also a deceiver. Emma is at first charmed by him but, interestingly, she does not completely buy into him. She is certainly not smitten and at times is bored. But even though Emma is not wounded by him, she might have been. He has a dark edge. He keeps his engagement secret to maintain his inheritance and he wilfully causes Jane embarrassment and pain.

Comic characters

Austen creates some characters largely for amusement and comedic purposes. Mr Woodhouse, the over-solicitous invalid, fusses endlessly over his own health and that of his family and friends to the extent that he would deny them any luxuries in the interests of better digestion. He is perhaps also comic because of

his hatred of marriage; he never ceases to refer to poor Miss Taylor and poor Isabella whose conditions he sees have been made worse by marriage. Mr John Knightley is used for different comedic purposes. He is without the grace and courtesy of Mr Woodhouse and has more of the acerbic wit that is evident in Austen's own letters. He is often slightly cruel (he knows how apprehensive his father-in-law is and rather than calming him, takes great pleasure in exacerbating his anxiety over the bad weather). Austen makes him wickedly delightful. At the Christmas party, John Knightly pursues his triumph over his father in law somewhat unfeelingly ('Another hour or two's snow can hardly make the road impassable; and we are two carriages; if one is blown over in the bleak part of the common field there will be the other at hand'). Miss Bates' comic value is different again. Although pitiful because she has little money and status and, although good natured, she is a comic chatterbox, irritating in the extreme, silly and dull, a great talker upon little matters, full of trivial communications and harmless gossip. No wonder Emma finds her tiresome.

Wordplay and Games

Austen's style in delivering her story contributes much to the comedy of the novel. She employs irony and satire, and the narrator's pronouncements often work on a number of levels: at times the narrator is ironically detached, at times speaks through the consciousness of Emma. The novel is also structured carefully around wordplay, puzzles and games. Emma's game of matchmaking begins and ends the novel, but embedded in the story are the games the characters play - cards, conundrums, riddles. Mr Elton's riddle to Emma and Harriet is rich in significance. In an immediate sense, Emma easily decodes it as 'courtship' and applies meaning to Elton and Harriet, but courtship is itself a riddle in the wider novel and a central comedic aspect. It is ironic that although Emma quickly works out Elton's riddle she is not able to unravel the mysteries of actual courtships until the end of the novel.

Frank Churchill is the novel's keenest games player. He introduces many word games with loaded meanings and he is himself a puzzle that needs solving (he turns up late, leaves early, breaks social rules). Jane Fairfax is another conundrum - described by Emma as 'a riddle, quite a riddle', though her mystery is less her design than that of her fiancé.

Resolution

Emma ends with three marriages that resolve most of the confusions and misunderstandings that occur in the novel. As expected from a romantic comedy the right people end up with each other and there is a general sense of completeness and closure at the end. The misconduct of Emma and Frank is forgiven; Mr Woodhouse's anxieties are soothed by Mr Knightley; everyone takes their rightful place in society and the novel ends on a happy note. The dance signifies that social order is restored when Emma and Mr Knightley become partners. Word games are now at an end. The fact that Mrs Elton doesn't

approve of the marriages only serves to convince the reader of the fitness of things!

However, in keeping with other comedies, some dark issues remain and could leave readers with a sense of disquiet. Mr Woodhouse's hatred of change and marriage, while comic on one level, is also slightly sinister and threatening. His acquiescence to the marriage is actually prompted by fear rather than a desire for his daughter's happiness (the robbing of the poultry houses makes him give his consent), and it could be argued that he is a kind of living death standing in the way of the healthy and vital marriage that is due his daughter.

There is also the issue of Frank Churchill. He is indeed, as Mr Knightley suggests, a child of good fortune. He gets money and a talented woman. But it is less easy to see that Jane is rewarded. True she will enjoy wealth and she is saved from the horrors of being a governess, but the fact remains that unlike Emma, she is in no position to be selective in her choice of marriage partner. As a result, he gets a better deal than she does.

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