

Money isn't
everything:
complexity of
motivations and
messages in emma



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“Austen’s novels are all about money.” To what extent is this a true comment in relation to ‘Emma’?

Behind every action is a drive, a will that serves to uphold the most open and secretive desires of the self. Within Jane Austen’s *Emma*, money acts as a motivator, spearheading and underpinning all interactions and ensuing relationships. However, to say that the novel is “all about money” would be a blind sighted approach; Austen paints a vibrant and convoluted world, such complexity naturally making all character motivations not solely tied to one thematic desire, but rather multiple. As with the ensuing discussion one will realize the importance of further themes as love or class, and how Austen cleverly intertwines the use of comedy and commentary to compliment character development and the reader’s experience.

Money, for many characters, acts as a central motivator. For women, wealth creates independence and distance from their male counterparts and from laborious or degrading occupations. For men, wealth equals freedom, an ease of living, and societal respect. A key example is that of Mr. Elton, an individual who is driven to marry by prospects of wealth. Whenever he is in narrator or character discussion, synonymous words surrounding themes of monetary value arise, such as “high place” and “fortune”, both of which hold connotations with societal hierarchy and fiscal incentives. The persona further remarks using metaphor that Mr. Elton would rather “Miss Somebody” than Harriet, as to him, he innately requires an individual of a wealthy and strong social status. The pronoun “somebody” acts somewhat hyperbolic, as if to say that Mr. Elton believes anyone other than Harriet could fulfill such a desired disposition in a partner. Austen appears further to

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be giving an underlying message within this simple sentence, that an individual who regards money to be the key reason for marriage is someone with insincere, spiteful, and simply sycophantic motivations, as suggested by this backhanded descriptive comment of “ Miss Somebody”. Mr. Elton even hyperbolizes his thoughts by stating that he “ never cared whether she [Harriet] were dead or alive”; such exaggerations appear ignorantly rude and thus humorous to the reader, especially due to the placement of the two characters within a small carriage and Mr. Elton’s subsequent crying. The monosyllabic diction of the words “ dead or alive” gives emphasis to the direct and hurtful nature of them also. The importance of repeating the description of Mr. Elton in this way is later seen in his motivation to marry Miss Hawkins in the subsequent chapters, the rapid movement on from Emma and the wealthy status of Miss Hawkins only proving the truth in this element of Mr. Elton’s character and the nature of money as a motivator and a theme. From such descriptions it can be easy to understand the centrality of money within Austen’s novels, but can money be the one true thematic presence within the text?

Not quite, as love arguably is a stronger force for both character and plot development. Emma for example is constantly fixated over the relationships and flirtatious signs of her societal counterparts, noticing all acts of potential compassion and connection. Marriage and love here drives social interaction, whether it be the numerous attempts to set Harriet up with a partner, the resolution of which is that Harriet is driven to Mr. Martin by love, or the numerous other pairings of which are either open to discussion or held secret, such as that of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax; life and society here

revolves around concepts of love and marriage. Emma's realization that "Harriet had always liked Robert Martin" is a key example of love's centrality throughout the novel, the adverb "always" emphasizing its ever-present nature and underlying effects on both the subconscious and conscious minds. In this case, such an effect is on Harriet who is only now given conscious thought to her deeply ingrained desire and love for Mr. Martin, making such marriage almost bound to destiny. As further emphasis on this idea, after learning of Harriet's feelings for Mr. Knightley a few chapters prior, Emma's subsequent thoughts surround her depressed state, one hindered by the knowledge that she may not be able to express her love for Mr. Knightley. The narrator notes that Emma's "happiness depended" on Mr. Knightley, the noun "happiness" here holding greater connotations than the mere fact of contentment but rather acting as a summary of Emma's whole state of well-being, that her present and future emotional condition is in fact dependent on an engagement with Mr. Knightley. With such interactions and marital structures it is therefore easy to see how love is thematically central to the novel.

However, this use of theme within the novel is much more complex than simply stating that one is separate from the other, as although possibly not being 'all about money', ideas of love and marriage are underpinned and supported by fiscal notions; many thematic concepts within the text do work hand in hand. For example, the allure of money more often than not will guide love, such as that with Mr. Elton. Likewise love can conquer any overbearing fixations on money, as with Emma and Mr. Knightley, both of whom are connected by their attraction to one another rather than any dollar

value. Mr. Knightley states that his “ mind has been hard at work” and that Emma has been “ at [the] heart” of all his thoughts. The word “ heart” here acts symbolic of his emotional center, holding his deepest passions and desires. The adjective “ hard” and the verb “ work” suggesting that Emma has been on his mind for a while, something of which has likewise been happening for Emma regarding Mr. Knightley, and that to not have expressed his love for her up until now has been a difficult feat. Such is a prime example of how although there is an unspoken agreement on class and monetary status of the two in their engagement; Austen brings their love as a motive to the forefront rather than anything solely fiscal related.

Arguably the most outright aspect that ties all Austen novels together is that there are no complete fairy-tale endings – but why should there be? If anything, Austen attempts to engage and inform the reader about what life is really like, and not to be deceived by the falsehoods of fiction. In this way money does become a central aspect of society and individual desire throughout Emma as naturally such a necessary and integral part of the developing world is contemporarily fundamental too. However, money is not the only thing that drives humanity, but other central motivations, such as love, thus warranting their own thematic presence within all of Austen’s novels and descriptions of them.