

# Knightley moves in: place and resolution in emma



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Mr. George Knightley chooses to live at Hartfield with Emma Woodhouse, the protagonist and heroine, after their marriage, instead of moving her to his elaborate estate, Donwell Abbey. This decision is significant because of what the choice reveals about their relationship. Typically, in a Jane Austen novel, married women move out of their family home into the house of their husbands, adopting their husband's life as their own. However, Mr. Knightley makes the sacrifice to leave his substantial property to live with Emma because of her anxious, ill father who must remain at Hartfield. The decision proves the importance of Emma in his life as well as the depth of his love, and the decision works in accordance with the close friendship the two have always had with one another. The event is also significant in its consistency with Emma's marital wishes for herself that she expressed to Harriet at the beginning of the novel. Despite the unusual living arrangement of the couple, their situation reveals great depth of love, is consistent with Emma's character needs and wants, and makes sense once the history and dynamics of their relationship is considered.

Emma and Mr. Knightley marry for love and even relinquish some of their prestige by not living at Donwell, and therefore proving that their relationship is based much more on emotion than on material wealth and success. Mr. Knightley makes the considerable sacrifice to leave his grand property to be with her and to keep her happy because abandoning her father, Mr. Woodhouse, would make Emma miserable. Emma recognizes how lucky she is to marry a man so willing to give up his home for hers. Emma knew that "in quitting Donwell, he must be sacrificing a great deal of independence of hours and habits; that in living constantly with her father,

and in no house of his own, there would be much, very much, to be borne with” (417; Chapter 51). Even when Emma tries to convince Mr. Knightley to rethink the plan, he insists that “ he was fully convinced, that no reflection could alter his wishes or his opinion on the subject” (417; Chapter 51). Their relationship is shown to be even deeper in love with Mrs. Weston’s thoughts of “ How very few of those men in a rank of life to address Emma would have renounced their own home for Hartfield! And who but Mr. Knightley could know and bear with Mr. Woodhouse, so as to make such an arrangement desirable!” (434; Chapter 53). While most marriages at the time are focused on the male: his desires, successes, fortunes, connections and more, Emma and Knightley’s marriage focuses mostly on her, or at least, on their mutual happiness and comfort from their deep love and attachment after their long friendship.

The effects of Mr. Knightley’s sacrifice are also consistent with Emma’s initial wants for marriage for herself from the beginning of the novel if she ever decided to get married. By marrying Mr. Knightley, Emma is able to marry for love, while maintaining her wealth, comfort, power at home, and closeness to her father. Emma’s marriage to Mr. Knightley is significant with the pattern of her character as a woman who knows what she wants and tends to get what she wants eventually. Emma enjoys power and attention, which her position at Hartfield with her ill, nervous father gives to her. Emma explains to Harriet the significance and importance of her life at Hartfield as a reason why she will never marry, saying, “ I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always

first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's" (79; Chapter 10). Emma initially did not plan to get marry for numerous reasons based largely on her own fortune and social status so she did not need a man's title or money to make her wealthy; however, she also specifically states that the power, position, and attention she receives as mistress of her own home, Hartfield, with her father's constant adoration, is better than any marriage or husband's home she could be in. Yet, she does state that only love would entice her to marry, and " without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine." (79; Chapter 10). Therefore, Mr. Knightley's final choice to give up his grand estate to live with her at Hartfield secures Emma the same position of power she has always had in her home, as well as the constant praise of her father along with the added affections of Mr. Knightley. This conclusion for their marital living together at Hartfield is then significant because not only is it consistent with Emma's character because she achieved the ability to maintain her present situation of power, affluence and happiness, along with the bonus of truly loving Mr. Knightley; but it also provides evidence of Mr. Knightley's love for her and the satisfaction of the marriage for both characters.

While the choice to live at Hartfield over Donwell Abbey is good for the main characters of Emma, and provides a satisfactory ending for the audience, there is more significance to the choice than just a happily ever after. A main significance of the decision is how opposite the event is from the typical convention and propriety of marriage in Jane Austen novels. Consistent with Jane Austen novels, Emma, just like Austen's other heroines, does have a happy ending with a lovely marriage at the conclusion of the story with " the

wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union.” (450; Chapter 55). However, Emma differs in the fact that her situation and position remains the same, except for her new husband joining in her life. In essence, besides the change of last name and the vows that make her a married woman, Emma’s life does not drastically alter, while all other Austen heroines or supporting female characters do. For example, in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Elinor, Marianne, and Elizabeth Bennett all move out their homes to live with their husbands. These women leave their parent or parents behind to slip into their husband’s lives and begin a new life as a missus. In *Emma*, Mr. Knightley makes the sacrifice to leave Donwell to live with Emma which gives her advantages of power and situation; Hartfield has been her home all her life and she has been the mistress of the home since the marriages of her sister and her governess. Emma essentially took on the male or husband role of being in charge of the home, the servants, and the inhabitants of the home, including her father. In essence, Mr. Knightley moves into her territory, differentiating their relationship and situation from those of other Austen novels.

The reversal of gender roles in regard to class, propriety, and wealth could possibly be a potential issue for Emma and Mr. Knightley if it weren’t for the particulars and history of their relationship. While Mr. Knightley would appear to have little power by sacrificing his home to live in Emma’s; the women’s; the wife’s; the respect and influence that he has always had for and over Emma due to their long friendship balances out the strange exchange. Mr.

Knightley is Emma's senior by sixteen years, and they allude often in the novel of his constant, well-intended criticisms of Emma when she behaves improperly or arrogantly. For example, Mr. Knightley scolds Emma when she behaves rudely to Miss Bates, by telling her "it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will,—I will tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now" (349; Chapter 43). Mr. Knightley always has Emma's best interest at heart and corrects Emma in her manners and behaviors. While at first Emma is usually resistant to his words, she eventually recognizes them as correct; "The truth of his representation there was no denying," and she feels her shame; "she felt it at her heart," and then she adjusts her behavior, proving her strong, mutual respect for him as well (349; Chapter 43). In this way, the power he has over her to adjust her manner and maturity, balances out the superiority that Emma may have by remaining in her own home instead of moving into his at Donwell.

Mr. George Knightley and Emma Woodhouse's marriage in Jane Austen's *Emma* is unusual in its untraditional manner. Mr. Knightley chooses to move out of his extravagant estate, Donwell Abbey, to live with Emma and her ill, nervous father at Hartfield. This sacrifice of Mr. Knightley's, the male in the relationship, is unique and therefore has many significances for the novel and their relationship. Mr. Knightley's sacrifice for Emma and her father not only proves the true depth of his love and commitment towards her, but it also reflects on the strength of their relationship as a partnership, based on their many years of previous friendship and the driving forces of respect and

care that have always kept the two concerned about the other. Finally, Mr. Knightley's sacrifice is consistent with Emma Woodhouse's character, in that she retains the same level of power, wealth, class, and authority that she has always had by remaining mistress of her home, and the only adjustment is simply the added benefits of being in love with her best friend who helps her mature while also departing from the typical husband and wife roles of Jane Austen novels.