

The role of miss bates in "emma"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

While Miss Bates, in Jane Austen's *Emma*, may initially be perceived as a minor character from afar, upon deeper analysis it can be noted that she is of capital importance in this novel. Serving as a representative of Highbury's lower classes, Miss Bates not only gives readers an insight into their situation, but she also serves as an example of the correct behaviour that would be expected from upper classes towards their social inferiors. Being the town's gossip also makes Miss Bates an important source of news in Highbury and she also acts as a spokesperson for the mysterious and reserved Jane Fairfax.

Due to the fact that she is the daughter of the late vicar of Highbury, one would expect Miss Bates to be living a fairly comfortable life in terms of finance. However, she and her mother face the predicament of having to survive on the charity of the benevolent members of the upper class. This leads us to conclude that the character of Miss Bates has been constructed in this way for Austen to be able to illustrate the relationships that exist between members of the upper class and their social inferiors. For example, it is mainly through the Bateses that Austen is able to show Mr Knightley as a model of correct gentlemanly behaviour, when he sends them apples from his own orchards and gives them the use of his carriage. Through the relationship between Mr Knightley and Miss Bates, the author is able to convey the message that privilege entails responsibility.

Similarly, through Miss Bates, Austen is able to draw on incorrect behaviour from the upper classes which stems from their superiority and lack of sensitivity towards the plight of the less fortunate. Emma, for example, initially fails to sympathise with Miss Bates as she is so occupied with

avoiding the latter because of her 'horror of falling in with the second and third rates of Highbury'. This careless and irresponsible behaviour leads to her snubbing and, consequently, seriously offending Miss Bates during the picnic at Box Hill. The fact that Mr Knightley reprimands Emma by saying; 'how could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her age, character and situation?' – proves that Miss Bates is used as a moral lesson by Austen. This leads us also to conclude that her role is of significance in Emma's transformation as a character. Just as Mr Knightley's outburst is a shocking eye-opener for us, it has the same effect on Emma. It is in fact this incident which serves as the catalyst for the turning point in the life of the protagonist.

Another moral lesson that Austen transmits through Miss Bates is the consequence of being an unmarried woman in the lower class of a patriarchal society. As illustrated by other female characters in the novel, such as Harriet Smith and Mrs Weston, Austen draws on the fact that it was necessary for women of low social standing to marry, to be able to secure financial stability. Miss Bates stands as a lesson to characters like Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith, who fear having to end up in a similar predicament as her. The conversation between Harriet Smith and Emma Woodhouse concerning the latter's declaration that she will never marry is important in illustrating this argument. Emma declaring, 'fortune I do not want, employment I do not want...', highlights the fact that unlike Miss Bates, she can choose not to marry as she is the heiress to thirty thousand pounds and therefore has financial stability.

The character of Miss Bates not only illustrates serious arguments, but is also used as a device by Austen to bring a sense of comedy and lightheartedness to the novel. Her incessant babble and love for gossip make her a woman who enjoys a 'high degree of popularity for a woman neither young, rich, handsome nor married' in Highbury, and we cannot help but consider her as an altogether likeable character. The fact that she focuses on trivial affairs and indirectly meddles in the lives of others also helps us to identify characters who are similar to her such as Mr Woodhouse. It is through his interactions with Miss Bates and other women that we see the rather effeminate side to Mr Woodhouse's personality. Moreover, what may be seen as trivial gossip by Miss Bates is in fact an important source of information in Emma. For example, it is through Miss Bates that we find out about Mr Elton's marriage and the details about his wife. Similarly, it is only through Miss Bates that we gain insight into the otherwise reserved and mysterious character of Jane Fairfax. It is only through Miss Bates's reading of Jane's letters that we can conjure up an image of the latter before she even arrives in Highbury. Therefore, we can say that Jane Austen uses Miss Bates to prepare the reader for Jane Fairfax's arrival into Highbury and to cause us to become curious about the latter. For example, it is Miss Bates's declaration that Mr Dixon saved Jane's life that create the romantic link between the two that both Emma and the readers feed upon.

The character of Miss Bates is pivotal in Jane Austen's Emma. She not only serves as a representative of the lower classes and as a device to model correct upper class behaviour, but she is also important in the turning point in the life of the protagonist, Emma Woodhouse. Moreover she acts as a

moral lesson for the fate of poor spinsters. Her endless talking and gossiping bring comedy to the novel, as well as providing important pieces of information.