

# The goals and their achievement in "emma"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Jane Austen's novel *Emma* and Douglas McGrath's film interpretation of the same name share many key similarities. Important transferred elements and cardinal functions are sustained in the jump from novel to film, rendering the plot, atmosphere and characters familiar to the reader. However, the overall impact of the same underlying story is vastly different when told utilizing these two independent mediums. While both book and film explore the life of Emma and her meddling ways, main narrative and character elements of Austen's novel leave readers with the sentiment that Emma's attempts at matchmaking were carried out with the best intentions, and that by the end of the novel she is humbled and realizes the error in her ways. The film, on the other hand, utilizes characterization, portrayal, and cinematic enunciation through visual elements to impart viewers with the notion that Emma's intentions in matchmaking were far more self-serving than they were magnanimous, and that she has not learned a lesson or matured by the end of her antics.

One of the most evident reasons that the film and book differ in impact is in their overall portrayal of the power Emma holds in society and how she ultimately uses it. Austen's novel starts off by establishing her status in Highbury, noting that " Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (1). While this characterization is impactful in giving the impression that Emma is in a highly agreeable situation, Austen's use of language like " seemed" and " had lived" leaves readers with a lingering doubt about whether Emma truly has full control

over all of her surroundings. The film, on the other hand, starts off with a shot of Emma spinning a small ornamental replica of the world on a thread, surrounded by friends and acquaintances lauding her for her artistic abilities. The impact of showing Emma with the world on a literal string is felt strongly by the viewer, who is left with the notion that Emma has the ability to control and change anything to her liking. Additionally, in using the first moments of the movie to show praise being heaped onto her by others, praise that even she deems undeserved, viewers are left with the impression that the world exists purely to serve and please her. This difference in characterization across film and novel is significant in introducing viewers and readers to what Emma's character is like, as the novel is quick to hint that not all will go well for her despite her situation, while the film focuses on the power that Emma holds in society and over the people around her.

This sentiment of the world serving to please Emma is continually shown in the film through use of other visual elements. One scene that exemplifies this in particular is when Emma makes the decision to match Frank and Harriet. While she talks about how happy the two will be together, the camera repeatedly emphasizes her face being reflected in different mirrors that are placed throughout the room. This visual element further cements the idea that the people in Emma's life exist to serve and bring her entertainment. While Emma's words speak of the joy that her actions will bring to others, the reflection of her face in mirrors gives the impression that she is really doing something for herself. During this same moment in the novel, Austen's narrator asks from Emma's perspective, " Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did,

have witnessed their appearance together, and heard their history of it, without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other?" (230). The book's language leaves readers with the impression that Emma's desire to bring Frank and Harriet together is a real attempt to make them happy, as she sees what she thinks is obvious chemistry between the two. This difference in portrayal further adds to the novel's significance in using literary enunciation through language to emphasize Emma's genuine joy in helping others by doing what she thinks is right, while visual elements in the film are significant in showing that her actions and the people around her serve to bring excitement to her life.

Aside from the portrayal of Emma's position of power and intentions in matchmaking, another great difference between the film and novel is in their visual and narrative portrayal of Knightley and Emma's relationship. Austen's novel is told primarily through an omniscient third person narrator who tends to stick with Emma's thoughts. But as Knightley becomes a more central character in later chapters of the novel, Austen shifts narration to his point of view, even dedicating a whole chapter in the third volume to his perspective. This change in narration has the impact of establishing Knightley as a viable partner for Emma, as readers get the chance to hear his voice and see him as a balancing force to Emma's dominating perspective throughout the novel. In the film however, Knightley never gets the chance to show things from his point of view, an element that leaves viewers with the impression that Emma is the commanding force throughout much of the story, and will continue to be in their relationship.

This notion of Emma's position of power in the relationship is further emphasized through visual elements in the movie, an example being when Emma and Knightley try to figure out a way to get married despite the disapproval of Emma's father. After Knightley and Emma make their proclamations of love to one another in the film, Emma quickly draws away and says that their relationship will never work because she cannot abandon her father. As she moves away from him into the foreground of the shot, the camera loses focus on Knightley and he fades into the background. To remedy the situation Knightley quickly proclaims that he will move to Hartfield and live with Emma. Upon this, the camera regains focus on him as the pair is brought back together in a tight shot. In the novel, the process is a two-sided one as Emma and Knightley both throw out options and work together to come up with a solution. Emma suggests that they wait until her father passes away to get married because "while her dear father lived, any change of condition must be impossible for her" (308). Knightley ultimately refuses to burden her and decides to leave his home for Hartfield. Despite still moving to Hartfield in the novel, because Knightley and Emma go through the decision making process together, readers are left with the impression that the two play equal roles as partners in a relationship. This is significant in that the novel leaves readers with the notion that Emma has become more humble by the end of the story, and is willing to compromise with others rather than assert her will to get her own way, whereas Emma's actions in the film neglect to show this character development, as Knightley immediately jumps to change his way of life in order to not inconvenience her, while she makes no attempt at offering her own form of compromise.

Differences in portrayal of Emma's development and character by the end of the story is another element that impacts the significance of both novel and film. Despite all of Emma's missteps in the novel, readers get the chance to see her learn from her mistakes and grow as a character. An example of this is when Emma goes to visit the Bates's and makes amends with Jane Fairfax. Prior to even meeting with Jane, readers see that Emma is no longer as blindly confident and self-assured as she once was, and instead takes into account how Jane might receive her as, "the fear of being still unwelcome, determined her, though assured of their being at home, to wait in the passage, and send up her name" (311). This reluctance shows a new development of self-awareness, and an understanding of how her actions impact others. Upon meeting with Jane, Emma congratulates her on her engagement to Frank and the two make up over past grievances. Emma's decision to revisit the Bates's and Jane to make amends shows her maturation and growth as a character. In the film, however, this moment is completely omitted. Although Emma attempts a visit to the Bates's in order to make amends, she never gets a chance to speak with them as Miss Bates and Jane hurry upstairs. The film does eventually confirm that the two have made up as she lets them know of her engagement to Knightley, but the elimination of a scene where the two have a heart to heart leaves the impression that she hasn't learned her lesson or developed as a character, but that things have returned to normal by sheer force of will on her part.

Another example of Emma's character growth in the novel is when she realizes her true feelings for Mr. Knightley. While she spends much of the novel trying to match other couples because she believes that she has the

world figured out, her moment of introspection and self-reflection allow her to realize that she was clueless about a lot of things – even her own feelings. This realization impacts readers in that they see her mature and gain the ability to reflect upon herself. Emma's realization in the film, however, comes through a contrived scene in which she pays a visit to Mrs. Weston and reveals her feelings about Mr. Knightley. Having Emma reveal her feelings in this context impacts viewers in that they are left with the impression that Emma has once again been relegated to the position of a child as she confides in her governess. Gwyneth Paltrow's performance in this scene further cements this notion, as the actress uses a whiny tone of voice throughout the encounter with Mrs. Weston, and childishly proclaims that Harriet is not worthy of Mr. Knightley as “ her parents could be pirates”. The impact of these differences has the overall effect of depicting Emma as a more developed, and fully realized character by the end of the book, whereas in the film her actions do little to point to any maturation or growth.

Through portrayal of Emma's character at the beginning and end of the story, and in her relationship with Knightley, the impact and significance of the film and novel Emma differ in that the former portrays Emma as a self-serving character who fails to learn or grow from her missteps, while the latter depicts her acting with the best intentions in mind, and ultimately coming to realize more about herself and the world at large. The film's emphasis on this self-serving nature is clear from the start, as cinematic enunciation through visual elements work to portray her as a powerful socialite with control over those around her. Conversely, the novel maintains a more balanced depiction of her character, and points out her strengths as

well as her flaws. Furthermore, the novel works to emphasize her growth in character through varied narration, compromise, and depiction of her magnanimous actions towards the end of the story, while the film omits, alters, or glosses over many scenes that depict this growth, and ultimately leaves viewers with the impact that little has changed for Emma by the end.