

From all indifference:
the bias of
selfishness in jane
austen's emma



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“ The exploration of different kinds of selfishness gives Emma considerable depth of meaning beneath it’s [sic] comic surface,” and also contributes to that comedy. Jane Austen’s characters inhabit a hyper-polite society, where admirable displays of selflessness and concern for others are often the result of characters’ self-interest, and what is right for them they consider right for everyone. Though many characters, such as Mr. Woodhouse Mrs. Elton, and Mr. John Knightley share this characteristic, it is most important in Emma and Mr. Knightley. Because the novel is filtered chiefly through their perspectives, it portrays a comically confused world in which social virtue and selfishness are indistinguishable when they help these characters, opposites when they do them harm, and worthless in their own right. Mr. Woodhouse, being Emma’s father, doubtless influenced her views of others. He is an invalid, or at least a hypochondriac, who provides a comic foil for Emma as he presses his opinions upon everyone. Because gruel is good for him, all the guests should have some; he is shocked that his grandchildren want to play with knives; he consistently calls Emma’s governess, who has just married Mr. Weston, ““ poor Miss Taylor!” (18), not because she made an unhappy match, but because in moving she bereft him of company. Emma gently corrects him, observing that “ Mr. Weston is such a...pleasant...man, that he thoroughly deserves a good wife” (9), but as children often do, Emma notices her father’s faults without realizing that she has adopted them. She approves of Miss Taylor’s marriage not least because she considers it her own doing. Emma enjoys nothing more than matchmaking for her friends, and once Miss Taylor has wed, Emma is restless and lonely. Lacking a hobby, she befriends Harriet Smith, a young and well-supported girl of mysterious parentage, and brings her into society. Emma thinks that <https://assignbuster.com/from-all-indifferency-the-bias-of-selfishness-in-jane-austens-emma/>

she is doing a great good to Harriet, but primarily she is amusing herself and flattering her own ego with generosity. Helping Harriet, she muses, “ would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking” (22). Mr. Knightley observes that “[Harriet’s] ignorance is hourly flattery” (34); Emma can credit herself with all sorts of improvements in the patient, passive girl. When Mr. Elton lauds Emma for “ the attractions [she has] added...infinitely superior to what [Harriet] received from nature” (37), Emma accepts this hyperbolic commendation with only polite modesty. Her good deed not only contributes to society, but wins society’s approval for her. Confident in her benevolence, Emma undertakes to marry Harriet to Mr. Elton, a man she calls “ good humored, cheerful, obliging, and gentle” (30). Mr. Elton is Harriet’s social superior and has no interest in her, but Emma deludes herself into thinking he does. She advises Harriet to reject her suitor Mr. Martin, calling him a “ gross, vulgar farmer” (30). Absorbed in doing good, Emma ignores Mr. Knightley’s warning that Mr. Elton cares a great deal about his future wife’s wealth; and when she learns that Mr. Elton is really in love with her, her ostensible pity toward Harriet quickly turns into self-pity and resentment of the previously-praised Mr. Elton. She reflects, “ If I had not persuaded Harriet into liking the man, I could have born any thing” (112), then proceeds to find praise of her “ ready wit” (112) and reasons to dislike Mr. Elton’s presumption to marry above his class, never entertaining the idea that Harriet is as socially inferior to Mr. Elton as he is to Emma. Soon afterward, Mr. Elton marries a rich merchant’s daughter and brings her to Highbury. Upon meeting Mrs. Elton, Emma requires only fifteen minutes’ acquaintance to compose a litany of her faults. Mrs. Elton is indeed a thoroughly unpleasant woman, but Emma judges hastily nonetheless. She rejects as

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impertinence Mrs. Elton's offers of friendship: an introduction to Bath and the formation of a musical society; she is aghast that such a "little upstart, vulgar being" (229) could call Mr. Knightley a gentleman, despite the fact that she herself would agree with the sentiment. Frank Churchill's opinions are more temperate; the only fault he finds in Mrs. Elton is her quickness of speech, but Emma cannot forget that "Harriet would have been a better match" (224). Because he proposed to Emma instead of Harriet, no wife of Mr. Elton's could ever be virtuous in Emma Woodhouse's eyes. Emma's opinions are influenced by lack of connections as well. She and Harriet visit a poor, sick family, donating money and understanding. Emma reflects upon the ills of poverty, saying, "I feel now as if I could think of nothing but these poor creatures" (75) and then wondering how long she really will recall them. The brevity of her remembrance might surprise even herself; within a page she has decided that thinking upon the poor is but "empty sympathy" (75). The novel's social consciousness abruptly vanishes and does not reappear until Emma's chance remark some chapters later "of what the poor must suffer in winter" (129) and Harriet's encounter with gypsies in the third volume. Emma's visit to the sick family is as much to get exercise and have an excuse to lead Harriet to Mr. Elton as it is true kindness. The second mention is only to distract Harriet from thoughts of Mr. Elton. The third provides a backdrop for the valiant Frank Churchill to rescue her from "half a dozen children" (276) so that Emma will think Harriet is in love with him and not Mr. Knightley. None of these events focus on the plight of the actual poor; no poor people are named, and none speak; they are not important to Emma or any other character. Everyone at the Cole's party is impressed by the liberality of the anonymous donor who gives Jane Fairfax a pianoforté, <https://assignbuster.com/from-all-indifferency-the-bias-of-selfishness-in-jane-austens-emma/>

but none find it odd, even when they know that Frank Churchill presented the gift, that he also chased away a pack of gypsies without giving them a shilling. Frank Churchill himself presents an odd mixture of generosity and selfishness. He marries Jane Fairfax, a girl without money, and yet conducts his engagement at the expense of others. To hide the secret attachment from his adoptive mother, who would never allow it, he flirts with Emma. This distresses Miss Fairfax and risks distressing Miss Woodhouse even more. Frank Churchill claims, ““ had I not been convinced of [Emma’s] indifference, I would not have been induced by any selfish views to go on’” (359). He may be truthful, but he lays great stakes upon his judgement of character. Emma considers him “ much, much beyond impropriety” (327). Her indignation is understandable, but in a sense absurd. She defends Frank Churchill’s inability to defy his parents in even the small matter of visiting Highbury, yet she would have him confess this engagement to them. Frank Churchill risks either losing his beloved or embarrassing Emma. From Emma’s point of view, he chose selfishly; therefore, he breaks “ the strict rule of right” (329) to save Miss Fairfax from the hideous fate of becoming a governess. But Emma has suffered no real wrongs, and Frank Churchill can use praise to win her back; “ as soon as she came to her own name, it was irresistible...he had been less wrong than she had supposed” (364). Mr. Knightley also criticizes Frank Churchill unjustly, and his condemnation is more serious. Though Mr. Woodhouse’s views are humorously self-centered and Emma is not known for her unbiased consistency, Mr. Knightley’s viewpoint is dependable. He is accurate about Mr. Elton’s motives, sensible of Emma’s wrong to Harriet, and conscious of her envy toward Jane Fairfax, but even he judges according to his own biases. Before even meeting him, Mr. Knightley blames the “ very <https://assignbuster.com/from-all-indifference-the-bias-of-selfishness-in-jane-austens-emma/>

weak young man," (123) who can have no " delicacy toward the feelings of other people" (124) for not coming without his parents' leave. While Emma, eager to fall in love with him, shrugs off Frank Churchill's bizarre visit to London for a haircut, Mr. Knightley finds it evidence that the boy is a " trifling, silly fellow" (171). But when Mr. Knightley becomes engaged to Emma and discovers that jealousy of Frank Churchill was the only reason for his dislike, " if he could have thought of Frank Churchill...he might have deemed him a very good sort of fellow" (355). Nobody, not even the most trusted voice of reason, is free of selfish thought. Not even the most reasonable are free of love, either. Mr. Knightley's engagement to Emma is marked by a great outpouring of selfish motives on both sides. Mr. Knightley realizes his jealousy of Frank Churchill; Emma, her wrong to Harriet. Yet Emma also dismisses the fear of disinheriting " her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded" (368) when she had objected to a marriage between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Knightley. While Mr. Knightley is a sensible man whose sense is impeded by love, Emma is inherently selfish in her views, and though she changes her mind on some subjects, her opinions still serve herself. Only her goals have changed. Not until the end of the book does she stop thinking of her friendship with Harriet as a great favor. Only when Emma realizes that she has accidentally encouraged Harriet to love Mr. Knightley does she wish she had never raised the girl's sights. Emma abandons any thought of self-sacrifice for her friend; " it must be her ardent wish that Harriet might be disappointed" (342). Learning that Mr. Knightley reciprocates her own feelings, Emma sees " that Harriet was nothing; that she was every thing herself" (353), and a match between Harriet and Mr. Martin, now a man " of <https://assignbuster.com/from-all-indifferency-the-bias-of-selfishness-in-jane-austens-emma/>

sense and worth” (395) to her, becomes most agreeable; Emma has found a companion, a cure for her boredom, and no longer needs Harriet as friend or romantic surrogate. She does worry about Harriet’s fortunes, does feel truly sorry for her, but that does not prevent Emma from failing to invite her former friend to the next party, where Harriet “ would be rather a dead weight” (369). Still later, Emma makes show of protestation to Mr. Knightley, but still “ submit[s] quietly to a little more praise than she deserved” (388) for improving Harriet, a deed she has supposedly regretted. Harriet and the rest do marry well; Emma and Mr. Knightley reconcile their interests and still remain themselves. The narration is still biased, but at least the biases are more benign, and Emma has resolved to improve. She and Mr. Knightley can continue to reveal to each other, or at least argue over, the truth behind their perceptions. Mrs. Elton disapproves of the wedding’s insufficient pomp and the match altogether, but the couple happily ignores her warnings. Between themselves, Emma and Mr. Knightley hold all the novel’s correct evaluations of character, and they share their view of Mrs. Elton, who holds none. Mrs. Elton might be correct in her own book, but she is a character in Emma, where a proper wedding is whatever the Mr. Knightleys want it to be, and a happy ending lies in their content.