

# Emma woodhouse and mr. woodhouse analysis



Both Emma Woodhouse and her father have a good deal of sway over the lives and affairs of the other members of their community. In the first scene of the book, we learn that Mr. Woodhouse finds homes for maids in other households, while Emma does essentially the same for her acquaintances, in attempting to pair them off with husbands and wives. The narrator presents this overzealous concern for other people's well being as an entirely harmless characteristic, in Mr. Woodhouse at least. While his intrusions into the personal lives of even non-family relations and frequent effusions of worry are bothersome to readers and characters alike, Mr. Woodhouse never actually does anyone the slightest bit of real or lasting harm.

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Even Mr. John Knightley cannot stay mad at him for very long. Emma, on the other hand, is capable of doing real personal damage, and her wilful intrusions into the lives of her acquaintance are presented as arrogant presumption - her character's major flaw: "The real evils of Emma's situation [are] the power of having rather too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself." (4) The key difference between her acts of presumption and those of her father is that she has a stronger will and mind than he.

Her actions are therefore not only more harmful to others but also more conscious and deliberate. Though she may, like her father, be acting out of good intentions, she is fully aware of the ways in which she manipulates. Emma not only sees that she is molding Harriet's weaker mind, she

understands how best to do it. If awareness makes her more responsible for her actions than the fumbling Mr. Woodhouse, it also increases the distance she has to fall when she acts irresponsibly. Because Emma's station is the highest in her social circle, her machinations go largely unchecked, but for the rebukes of Mr. Knightley. The standard of goodness in the book and its moral compass, Mr Knightley's criticism is the narrator's way of alerting us to Emma's faults. After all, social protocol forbids anyone else from attempting such criticism. The fact that Knightley practices great forbearance with Mr. Woodhouse but takes exception to most of Emma's doings highlights the differences in each character's culpability. In short, Mr. Woodhouse is excused because he cannot help his effrontery, while Emma is not because she can.

The distinction is related to each character's flexibility: Mr. Woodhouse is the most stagnant character of the book, while Emma is the one most capable of growth. Given Mr. Woodhouse's profound fear of change, it seems pointless to try to mend his flaws at this late age. Emma however, possesses the mental and spiritual instruments, which, applied correctly, and could bring her to a near-perfect existence, elevating her actions and awareness to a par with her social status. The work of the novel, and of Mr. Knightley himself, is to instil in Emma the humility that she lacks and help her evolve so as to become worthy of him, not only socially but also morally.

The book's final "happy union" (448) is a sign that Emma has achieved that end. Unlike Emma, whose vibrancy of person and strength of intellect substantiate her claims to social prowess, Mr. Woodhouse's power derives solely from his landed status. In Emma and Knightley's first conversation, we

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are told that Mr. Woodhouse understands "but in part;" (5) as a person and a character he is static, lacking in awareness, and defined wholly by his limitations. People defer to Mr. Woodhouse's fortune and subsequent social standing rather than his intellect or any belief in his being right.

The hypochondriac worries that he imposes on others are rarely given any credence because Mr. Woodhouse is never perceived as capable of solid reasoning. In fact, common sense almost always stands in opposition to Mr. Woodhouse's concerns. The likelihood of anyone getting trapped at Randall's on Christmas Eve because of half an inch of snow is not particularly high, yet the party is broken up early all the same. Everyone is quick to do Mr. Woodhouse's bidding, no matter how silly the cause.

Such power, to make people act entirely counter to their own sense of reason, could be dangerous if put into more potent hands. Luckily Mr. Woodhouse would never deliberately manipulate anyone; in fact, he is shown to be quite harmless. In expressing his personal displeasure at his daughter Isabella's going to a particular seaside resort, he actually twists the truth, "attributing many of his own feelings and expressions" (99) to Mr. Perry. However, the narrator is emphatic in noting that this is done "unconsciously." "And even when Mr. Woodhouse is conscious of trying to prevail upon others, he affects no real damage. He is constantly trying to get other people to take a basin of gruel with him, but Isabella is the only one who ends up complying. When Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Goddard come to keep Mr. Woodhouse Company during the Coles' party, his power as host is actually trumped by Emma's. Against his wishes, she sees to it that all of their guests are well

fed, with as much cake as they desire. Emma, like her father, enjoys a social dominion of fortune and station but joins it with a real superiority of intellect.

Situations like the gruel debate point up the inversion of the traditional family structure at Highbury, in which the daughter's authority exceeds the parent's. Emma takes care of her father, and the book's only other mother-figure, Miss Taylor, has become more like a friend than a parent, at least at the point where the story picks up: "The shadow of authority being now long passed away," Emma does "just what she like[s], highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgement, but directed chiefly by her own" (1).

Beyond the smaller family unit, there is no one but Knightley to challenge Emma's reign. She is at the highest spot on the social ladder, as indicated by the name of her estate, Highbury. Her peers are all inferior, in status as well as quickness and depth. Harriet is entirely vapid; she can "sit, without any idea of anything in the world, for full ten minutes." (163) And although Emma may mistake the direction of Elton's gallantry, she sees right through it: there is "a sort of parade in his speeches which was very apt to incline her to laugh. (46) Even in comparison to her sister, Emma has the "stronger hand." (241) In truth, Emma is wholly worthy of most of the praise bestowed upon her throughout the book. The most obvious example would be her "ready wit," (66) which Mr. Elton cites in his charade. The obvious problem with Emma's ready wit, though, and all her other powers, is that they are so often put to bad use. Where Mr. Woodhouse's social power is always proved to be harmless, Emma is the one with the potent hands that can at times wreak havoc.

At the party at Box Hill, Emma "cannot resist" (342) making a derisive comment to Miss Bates, simply because it is too "clever" to be kept in. The sole extenuating circumstance here (though it is one based on Emma's arrogance) is that she may not have anticipated its full effect - "I dare say she did not understand me." (346) But Emma's misuse of her own power of understanding is evident. The remark is both consciously derisive and deliberately aimed, and the evident pain it causes Miss Bates brings home the reality that Emma's understanding at that moment has become more limited than Miss Bates'.

Moreover, the impact of the harm extends both beyond the present moment and beyond the single personal relationship, revealing that unlike her father, Emma has the power to do real lasting damage. Miss Bates tries to hide when Emma next comes to visit, and it will take a while to repair their rapport. The event also affects the larger public sphere. As Mr. Knightley notes in his later reprimand, Emma's comment was made in the presence of others, "many of who would be entirely guided by your treatment of her." (346) In this social order, people who esteem the judgment of those superior in station use it as a model for their own. Not only has Emma spoken cruelly to Miss Bates, she has set up a standard of treatment which others may choose to follow. People cater to Mr. Woodhouse because they respect him, but they use Emma as a model because they take her opinion very seriously. Where until now Emma has been seeing power in terms only of its perks, the ripple effect of even a single lapse of judgment highlights the responsibilities that go with social power.

The moment is an important turning point in Emma's progress of self-transformation. Knightley's earlier reprimand, " Better to be without sense, than misapply it as you do! " (51) targets this larger responsibility that Emma has been both too young and too blind to see. (As an interesting side note, the movie version of Emma actually has Knightley and Emma shooting during this scene, and while Knightly delivers this comment his arrow hits a bull's-eye. ) The most striking example of Emma's misapplication of sense - along with her most deliberate act of manipulation - appears in her treatment of Harriet.

Emma literally tries to create Harriet, forging explanations of her parentage and painting portraits in which she alters Harriet's body structure. The craftsmanship of this artistic aspect of her assumed role is highlighted by Knightley's recognition, " she really does you credit. " (53) As pointed out in lecture, Emma even plays the literal puppet-master, using a set of strings, her bootlaces, to direct the scene when she and Harriet run into Mr. Elton after visiting the poor family. Emma presses on with her schemes despite the many clues that contradict her understanding.

Whenever circumstances displease her, she creates explanations in her head that run contrary to her own sense of reason, yet accepts them all the same. When Mr. Elton's behaviour does not fit that of a lover, Emma makes various excuses for him, laughing at his description of what she presumes to be Harriet's " ready wit" but attributing such an ill-judged compliment to the consequence of his being " very much in love. " (66) Even when Mr. Elton himself tries to clear up the confusion, in the scene in the carriage, Emma attempts to convince them both that he is hopelessly drunk.

Perhaps Emma's most blatant self-deception is her heedlessness of class and birth differences between Mr. Elton and Harriet: " You and Mr. Elton are by situation called together; you belong to one another by every circumstance of your respective homes. " (68) This statement could not stand in starker contrast to the acute, even over-conscious sense of social standing, which Emma displays throughout the rest of the book. She revolts at the idea of a union between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Knightley, but wilfully ignores the same obstacles in her matchmaking of Harriet and Mr. Elton.

Emma presumes to know what is best for other people, and in pursuit of her slated end goal will even act contrary to her (often accurate) perceptions of their feelings. When she writes Harriet's letter of refusal to Robert Martin, (an intrusion in itself,) Emma senses that " if the young man had come in her way at that moment, he would have been accepted after all" (50) - yet she seals and sends it all the same. The comment testifies not only to Emma's consciousness of Harriet's true feelings, but to her arrogance, in deferring to her own judgment of Harriet's best interests rather than to Harriet's.

The fact that Harriet ends up happily, but in exactly the same place that she started, is the narrator's way of putting Emma in her place. As in the encounter with Miss Bates, the gap between Emma's self knowledge and the perspective we are given on her suggests the conclusion that the proper sphere for exercising human judgment is on one's personal shortcomings instead of on anyone else's. What is most ironic about Emma's many social blunders is that, apart from Mr. Knightley, she has the deepest social consciousness of anyone in the book.



Emma has a truly devoted sense of responsibility to her father, cares deeply for her family and friends, and is constantly smoothing over various social rifts that only she can foresee and repair, like those between her father and John Knightley. Readers understand the great possibilities that come with Emma's characteristic awareness - we see the possibilities for a perfection which goes beyond the mere appearance of perfection introduced in the first line of the book - and it is this consciousness that makes Emma's blunders seem all the more blind and regrettable.

The turning point of the book is when Emma's awareness begins to work to her advantage - when she starts to become more aware of herself. Emma's ability to reflect and feel powerfully is what fuels her self-transformation once she directs that power inwards to observe her own heart instead of outwards to mold other people and events. It takes only the right catalyst, namely Mr. Knightley, for Emma to become able to realize her own wrongdoing. She responds to his reprimands about her treatment of Miss Bates, not with the defensiveness of someone truly arrogant but with " anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern. (347) A similar moment of realization and self-chastisement comes at the first big climax of the book, when Emma learns of Harriet's love for Mr. Knightley and realizes her own: " with insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. " (383) Emma proves herself capable of the character revolution which her father is not when she gives up her own pretensions to judge the best interests of others.

The fact that it is Knightley who sparks Emma's reformation of character might seem to give ultimate power to him rather than to Emma herself. After all, his intrusion into her personal life ends up being the most positive force of the book. But it is important to keep in mind that Knightley is only a catalyst, a stand-in for the author's criticism of Emma's flaws, while Emma shares something like the role of the author herself. Like the playwright or novelist, she learns through trial and error the limitations of power exercised in trying to create and dictate the course of other people's lives.