Emma by Jane Austen-Essay topics

Social life

Emma is structured around a number of marriages recently consummated or anticipated, and, in each case, the match solidifies the participant's social status. In Austen's time, social status was determined by a combination of family background, reputation, and wealth—marriage was one of the main ways in which one could raise one's social status. This method of social advancement was especially crucial to women, who were denied the possibility of improving their status through hard work or personal achievement.

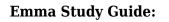
Yet, the novel suggests, marrying too far above oneself leads to strife. Mr. Weston's first marriage to Miss Churchill had ostensibly been a good move for him, because she came from a wealthy and well-connected family (Mr. Weston is a tradesman), but the inequality of the relationship caused hardship to both. He marries Mrs. Weston just prior to the novel's opening, and this second marriage is happier because their social statuses are more equal—Mrs. Weston is a governess, and thus very fortunate to be rescued from her need to work by her marriage. Emma's attempt to match Harriet with Mr. Elton is also shunned by the other characters as inappropriate. Since Harriet's parentage is unknown, Emma believes that Harriet may have noble blood and encourages her to reject what turns out to be a more appropriate match with Robert Martin. By the time it is revealed that Harriet is the daughter of a tradesman, Emma admits that Mr. Martin is more suitable for her friend.

The relationship between marriage and social status creates hardship for other characters. Frank Churchill must keep his engagement to the orphan Jane Fairfax secret because his wealthy aunt would disapprove. Jane, in the absence of a good match, is forced to consider taking the position of a governess. The unmarried Miss Bates is threatened with increasing poverty without a husband to take care of her and her mother. Finally, the match between Emma and Mr. Knightley is considered a good one not only because they are well matched in temperament but also because they are well matched in social class.

Austen is very careful to maintain the importance of British class structure in "Emma." Though it is a small town, Highbury has a very specific social structure that mirrors the larger class system of Britain. Emma, as heroine, is at the top of the social ladder with the rest of her family and Mr. Knightley, while Harriet Smith, Miss Bates, and Robert Martin are at lower levels of respectable society. Although Austen permits her heroine to associate with Harriet and Miss Bates, she emphasizes the importance of knowing one's proper place. Emma's first significant blunder in this regard is elevating Harriet to an inapporpirately-high social level. As a result of her interference.

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Didier Musso



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