

## READING QUESTIONS FOR *EMMA*

### Writing Style

Austen is credited with being one of the first authors to use **free indirect discourse**. This is a literary technique in which the author intermingles “the humorous, satiric voice of the narrator and the inner voice of a character’s thoughts, so that we as readers get a double view—both inside and outside. . . the author shifts the point of view back and forth from omniscient narrator to character” (or 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited point-of-view). Usually, past tense and 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns signal its use. Dashes and exclamation points also.

Austen also uses **direct interior monologue** where the author gives us characters’ own thoughts in their own words.

Your task: When you are in 3<sup>rd</sup> person point-of-view, try to figure out whose consciousness informs that point-of-view and how you figured it out.

[A personal exercise: pay attention to what is going on in your own mind—how much is in the form of articulated thoughts and how much in sensations that may not be put into words—all of this is what Austen tries to capture.]

Austen is a master of **dialogue** and of **extended monologue** (in the present tense and in 1<sup>st</sup> person). She is a master of revealing crucial, hidden plot details through this technique.

Much less frequently, Austen uses the **omniscient narrative voice**, always 3<sup>rd</sup> person and in the present tense, to present universal truths.

**Task:** Mark at least one passage that creates and reveals the following character’s voices: Mr Woodhouse, Mr. Knightley, Frank Churchill, Mr. Elton, Miss Bates, Emma herself, Harriet Smith, Mrs. Elton. Explain. Do any of the characters not have a voice style of their own?

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•Austen said about Emma even before she began writing the novel “that no one but myself will much like Emma.” Was she right? Why did Austen like her?

•The obvious question: Emma’s faults vs. Emma’s strengths. . . Look at opening paragraph and later, when you finish, consider the final chapters of the novel. Is she different? If so, how?

•Emma early on writes Miss Bates off as “so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguishing and unfastidious (vol. 1, ch. 10). Yet she also acknowledges that Miss Bates is “very much to the taste of everybody, though single and though poor.” How do you react to Miss Bates? Discuss as many functions Miss Bates and her conversation play in the novel as you can.

In 1, ch. 8, Mr. Knightley advises Emma that Harriet should marry Robert Martin. Does the narrator side with Mr. Knightley? Do you?

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Emma and Mr. Knightly argue over Mr. Elton's character (vol.1, ch. 1) AND Emma and Mr. Knightly argue over Harriet Smith's and Mr. Martin's social status (vol 1, ch. 8). What do these parallels reveal?

Consider the way that Austen first introduces Emma (1, ch 1) AND the way she introduces Miss Bates (1, ch.3). What do you hear?

- Frank Churchill—Is he, as Mr. Knightley observes, a frivolous young man? (Consider vol 1, ch. 18 AND vol.2, vii, ch.25)

- Compare Emma and Jane Fairfax. Why does Emma not like her? What might Jane think/feel about Emma? (vol. 2, ii, ch. 20)

- Note also how Emma's dialogue changes depending on whom she is talking to: her father, Mr. Knightley, Harriet Smith, Miss Bates and Mrs. Elton, Frank Churchill, etc Explain how.

- Take no more than five sentences of a paragraph involving Miss Bates (about her or by her) and notice all you can about it. Share specific observations. This is especially useful in vol 3, the Crown Inn Ball.

- Discuss in detail Emma's insult to Miss Bates at Box Hill. In what various ways did it reflect poorly on her? Vol 3, ch. 7

- Both Miss Taylor (Mrs. Weston) and Mr. Knightley are mentors/teachers of Emma. Does either have special strengths or weaknesses in that role?

Is Mr. Knightley always right? Does he have any flaws? Or, in what ways and in what specific instances is Mr. Knightley's understanding limited? (Is he the paragon of all that a gentleman should be?)

- Compare Mr. Knightley and Frank Churchill.

Consider parallels and what comparing/contrasting them reveals:

- \*Emma's patronage of Harriet Smith AND Mrs. Elton's patronage of Jane Fairfax

- \*Mr. Elton snubs Harriet at the Crown Inn ball AND Emma snubs Miss Bates at Box Hill;

- \*Mr. Knightley rescues Harriet at the ball AND Frank Churchill rescues Harriet from gypsies a day later;

- \*Jane Fairfax AND Mrs. Weston

- Emma as a comic novel: What for you are the two most comic scenes in the novel? Why?

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Mr. Woodhouse—Is he more than a comic figure in the novel?

Is the social world of Highbury Village fixed or in flux? Is it possible to move upwardly or downwardly in the social order? Consider Mr. Knightley, Mr. Woodhouse, Emma, Harriet Smith, Jane Fairfax, Miss & Mrs. Bates, Mrs. Elton (ne Augusta Hawkins), the Sucklings, the Coles, Frank Churchill, Mr. Elton, Robert Martin, Mrs. Weston (ne Miss Taylor). You might put them all into a hierarchy. How can you tell what place they would have?

And why do the nuances of class in the novel matter? Who is and who is not a gentleman or lady? Does birth matter? Does conduct/manners matter?

\*Why are Miss Bates' "untoward circumstances" worse than Miss Taylor's "lack of portion"?

\*Why is Frank Churchill superior in social status to his father, Mr. Weston?

\*Why is Mr. Weston the social superior of Mr. Perry?

\*What is Harriet Smith's status as "the natural daughter of somebody"? Why do Emma

"Noblesse oblige" operates throughout the novel: the obligation of the upper classes to take care of the poor and the dependent. Which of the characters exemplify the best and the worst of this concept?

•Many of the characters have lost their parents (literally or metaphorically) and are taken in by someone else. What impact might this fact have on the individual characters? Consider Harriet Smith, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax, Augusta Hawkins, Emma Woodhouse

Emma's actions take place over a year: late September 1813 until late September 1814. Do the seasons play any role in the lives of the characters? (It is possible to date the action in every chapter of the novel).

The Frank Churchill-Jane Fairfax subplot occurs beneath the surface, in hints, in silences, in looks, or dropped into the middle of dialogue—all of which are misinterpreted by other characters. Find instances and explain how Jane Austen misleads her first-time readers of Emma so that they too see and hear all from Emma's point-of-view but second-time readers understand what is actually going on.

What can we learn from comparing the relationships/marriages between: Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, Mr. and Mrs. Weston, Augusta (Hawkins) Elton and Mr. Elton, Harriet Smith and Mr. Martin, Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley, Emma Woodhouse and Mr. (George) Knightley. Which are most likely to succeed and which, if any, might not? Why?

•**Critical reception:** Emma is cited by many (most?) critics (Lionel Trilling, Harold Bloom, Marilyn Butler, Marcia McClintock Folsom, among them) as Jane Austen's greatest work

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(though not necessarily readers' favorite work which remains *Pride and Prejudice*). Their reason is her "mastery of the moral landscape of the everyday." Do you agree?

Huge credit goes to Marcia McClintock Folsom's edited *Approaches to Teaching Emma*, a collection of essays that helped me put much of the materials together for these Emma sessions. There is far too much here to discuss even in three sessions, but Judy and I decided that less is not necessarily better than more!!! I apologize for the very English teacher-y way I have worded many topics. Old habits die hard!