

## CHARACTERS

**EMMA WOODHOUSE**, heiress of Hartford

**MR. HENRY WOODHOUSE**, her father

**HARRIET SMITH**, Emma's protégé

**MISS BATES**, the village gossip

**JANE FAIRFAX**, Miss Bates' niece

**MR. GEORGE KNIGHTLEY**, Woodhouse family friend and brother of Emma's sister's husband

**MRS. WESTON**, Emma's former governess

**FRANK CHURCHILL**, Mrs. Weston's stepson

**MR. ELTON**, a rector

**ROBERT MARTIN**, a farmer

## PLOT

Emma Woodhouse, rich, clever, beautiful, and no more spoiled and self-satisfied than one would expect under such circumstances, has just seen her friend, companion, and ex-governess, Miss Taylor, married to a neighboring widower, Mr. Weston. While the match was suitable in every way, Emma cannot help sighing over her loss, for now only she and her father are left at Hartfield, and Mr. Woodhouse is too old and too fond of worrying about trivialities to be a companion for his daughter.

The Woodhouses are the great family in the village of Highbury. In their small circle of friends there are enough middle-aged ladies to make up card tables for Mr. Woodhouse-- but no young lady to be friend and confidante to Emma. Lonely for her beloved Miss Taylor, now Mrs. Weston, Emma takes under her wing Harriet Smith, the parlor boarder at a nearby boarding-school. Harriet is an extremely pretty girl of seventeen, not in the least brilliant, but with pleasing, unassuming manners and a gratifying habit of looking up to Emma as a paragon.

Harriet is the illegitimate daughter of some mysterious person, and Emma, believing that the girl might be of noble family, persuades her that the society in which she has moved is not good enough for her. She encourages her to give up her acquaintance with the Martin family, respectable farmers of some substance (though of no fashion). Instead of thinking of Robert Martin as a husband for Harriet, Emma influences the girl to aspire to Mr. Elton, the young rector.

Emma believes from Mr. Elton's manner that he is beginning to fall in love with Harriet, and she flatters herself upon her matchmaking schemes. Mr. Knightley, brother of a London lawyer married to Emma's older sister and one of the few people who can see Emma's faults, is concerned about her intimacy with Harriet. He warns her that no good can come of it for either Harriet or herself, and he is particularly upset when he learns that Emma has influenced Harriet to turn down Robert Martin's proposal of marriage. Emma herself suffers from no such qualms, for she is certain that Mr. Elton is as much in love with Harriet as Harriet-- through Emma's instigation-- is with him.

Emma suffers a rude awakening when Mr. Elton, finding her alone, asks her to marry him. She suddenly realizes that what she had taken for gallantries to Harriet had been meant for herself, and what she had intended as encouragement to his suit of her friend, he has taken as encouragement to aspire for Emma's hand. His presumption is bad enough, but the task of breaking the news to Harriet is much worse.

Another disappointment now occurs in Emma's circle. Frank Churchill, who has promised for months to come to see his father and new stepmother, again puts off his visit. Churchill, Mr. Weston's son by a first marriage, has taken the name of his mother's family. Mr. Knightley believes that the young man now feels himself above his father. Emma argues with Mr. Knightley, but she finds herself secretly agreeing with him.

Although the Hartfield circle is denied Churchill's company, it does acquire an addition in the person of Jane Fairfax, niece of the Miss Bates. Jane rivals Emma in beauty and accomplishment, one reason why, as Mr. Knightley hints, Emma has never been friendly with Jane. Emma herself blames Jane's reserve for their cool relationship.

Soon after Jane's arrival, the Westons receive a letter from Churchill setting another date for his visit. This time he actually appears, and Emma finds him a handsome, well-bred young man. He calls frequently upon the Woodhouses, and also upon the Bates family, because of prior acquaintance with Jane Fairfax.

Emma, rather than Jane, is the recipient of his gallantries, however, and Emma can see that Mr. and Mrs. Weston are hoping that the romance will prosper.

About this time, Jane Fairfax receives the handsome gift of a pianoforte, anonymously given. It is presumed to have come from some rich friends with whom Jane, an orphan, has lived, but Jane herself seems embarrassed with the present and refuses to discuss it. Emma wonders if it has come from Mr. Knightley, after Mrs. Weston points out to her his seeming preference and concern for Jane. Emma cannot bear to think of Mr. Knightley's marrying Jane Fairfax, and after observing them together, she concludes to her own satisfaction that he is motivated by friendship, not love.

It is now time for Frank Churchill to end his visit, and he departs with seeming reluctance. During his last call at Hartfield, he appears desirous of telling Emma something of a serious nature, but she, believing him to be on the verge

of a declaration of love, does not encourage him because in her daydreams she always sees herself refusing him and their love ending in quiet friendship.

Mr. Elton returns to the village with a hastily wooed and wedded bride, a lady of small fortune, extremely bad manners, and great pretensions to elegance. Harriet, who has been talked into love by Emma, cannot be so easily talked out of it, but what Emma has failed to accomplish, Mr. Elton's marriage has, and Harriet at last begins to recover. Her recovery is aided by Mr. Elton's rudeness to her at a ball. When he refuses to dance with her, Mr. Knightley, who rarely dances, offers himself as a partner, and Harriet, without Emma's knowledge, begins to think of him instead of Mr. Elton. Emma herself begins to think of Churchill as a husband for Harriet, but she resolves to do nothing to promote the match. Through a series of misinterpretations, Emma thinks Harriet is praising Churchill when she is really referring to Mr. Knightley.

The matrimonial entanglement is further complicated because Mrs. Weston continues to believe that Mr. Knightley is becoming attached to Jane Fairfax. Mr. Knightley, in his turn, sees signs of some secret agreement between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. His suspicions are finally justified when Churchill confesses to Mr. and Mrs. Weston that he and Jane have been secretly engaged since October. The Westons' first thought is for Emma, for they fear that Churchill's attentions to her might have had their effect. Emma assures Mrs. Weston that she has at one time felt some slight attachment to Churchill, but that that time is now safely past. Her chief concerns now are that she has said things about Jane to Churchill which she would not have said had she known of their engagement, and also that she has, as she believed, encouraged Harriet in another fruitless attachment.

When she goes to break the news gently to Harriet, however, Emma finds her quite unperturbed by it, and, after a few minutes of talking at cross purposes, Emma learns that it is not Churchill but Mr. Knightley upon whom Harriet has now bestowed her affections. When she tells Emma that she has reasons to believe that Mr. Knightley returns her sentiments, Emma suddenly realizes the state of her own heart; she herself loves Mr. Knightley. She now wishes she had never seen Harriet Smith. Aside from the fact that she wants to marry Mr. Knightley herself, she knows a match between him and Harriet would be an unequal one, hardly likely to bring happiness.

Emma's worry over this state of affairs is soon ended when Mr. Knightley asks her to marry him. Her complete happiness is marred only by the fact that she knows her marriage will upset her father, who dislikes change of any kind, and that she has unknowingly prepared Harriet for another disappointment. The first problem is solved when Emma and Mr. Knightley decide to reside at Hartfield with Mr. Woodhouse as long as he lives. As for Harriet, when Mr. Knightley was paying attention to her, he was really trying to determine the real state of her affections for his young farm tenant. Consequently Mr. Knightley is able to announce one morning that Robert Martin has again offered himself to Harriet and has been accepted. Emma is overjoyed that Harriet's future is now assured. She can always reflect that all parties concerned have married according to their stations, a prerequisite for their true happiness.

## MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

### Economic and Social Class

- marrying too far outside one's station leads to strife (more from social status than money)
- grasping for money vulgar, but life without it is fraught with discomfort and danger
- society establishes norms for people that may be difficult, or even undesirable, to meet; paradoxically, though, people depend on social connections for happiness and meaning

### Gender

- women lead confined, narrow lives; they have less options than men (whether of good birth or not), and their happiness is more precarious
- courtship/marriage is perhaps the one place where women wield some measure of power
- men and women have different roles, and though this may lead to unequal happiness, this arrangement is sensible and correct

### Self-Knowledge and Bias

- personal biases blind one to the truth (often different from appearances for this reason)
- jealousy and excessive pride lead to conflict
- we often choose to see what we wish to see, deluding ourselves in the process

### Self-Improvement and Transformation

- self-improvement is difficult (whether one's personality or one's station), requiring hard work and (often) a bit of luck
- maturity comes from self-knowledge and an understanding of one's strengths and (especially) weaknesses
- growing as a person requires the ability to move beyond one's own narrow point of view; one must be mindful of others