

Emma Woodhouse

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

So opens *Emma*. The young mistress of Hartfield seems to have it all — and the italicized word is the key to knowing Emma better. For Emma is not entirely what she appears to be. The veneer of her life turns out to be fragile, and easily cracked by stress. By the end of the novel, many cracks have appeared in the form of “vexations” that jolt Emma out of her “blessed” existence.

Though intelligent and quick-witted, Emma suffers from a lack of challenge in her life at Hartfield. After the marriage and subsequent departure of her friend and governess, Anne Taylor, Emma is despondent over how few possibilities exist for her now. She is left to care for her aging father and to manage a staff of servants. She is idle and bored.

She had always been overindulged and flattered by her father and her governess. As the story opens, she is used to having her own way. Without her character being tested, she'll never be able to realize her potential. Being “so always first and always right” has not been helpful to her. It has led her to be willful, spoiled and snobbish. The lack of outlets for her tremendous energy makes her domineering and insensitive, and leads her to seek pleasure from manipulating others' lives.

These are her faults as we see them, but Emma is, for a long time, blissfully unaware of them. Having long been surrounded by people eager to tell her of her “perfection,” she is unwilling to admit any other point of view.

As a result of her own and others' fine opinion of her worth, she sets out to help those less fortunate than herself. Her first attempt with Harriet Smith is, of course, the beginning of a series of “blunders” that bring pain and embarrassment to everyone involved. Her botched matchmaking manoeuvres are the start of Emma's journey to self-awareness. Aided by Mr. Knightley, who does not hesitate to remind Emma of her

faults, she undergoes a painful process of maturing that makes her, at the end of the novel, more worthy of his praise and ours.

Emma is neither "cured" nor substantially changed. Instead, she grows, or grows up, to add maturity and responsibility to her list of strengths. By the end of the novel, Emma is still unmistakably self-absorbed and class-conscious. Some of her traits will linger with her always, even into her married life with Mr. Knightley.

What is important is the subtle change that has occurred in her personality and attitude. Now, she can be kind to a chattering bore like Miss Bates, and quietly tolerate the pomposity of Mrs. Elton. Earlier, she was more likely to be sarcastic and cruel in her treatment of "inferiors." With Mr. Knightley's help, she has learned of the responsibility that comes with her position and intelligence. She now understands that she is liable for the consequences of her own actions. Jane Austen was probably very much aware of the charm, the spirit and the style of her heroine and of her basic likableness.