

Emma Discussion Questions

Natalie Goldberg

Volume I

Chapter 1

1. Read the first sentence of the novel aloud. How does this opening characterize Emma Woodhouse? What is the significance of the word “seemed”? What does the word “seemed” foreshadow? What does the word “vex” mean? What are the “best blessings”?
2. What are the “real evils of Emma’s situation” defined in the fourth paragraph? What are the solutions to this?
3. How in the opening paragraphs does Jane Austen tell us that Highbury is dull? In what ways is Emma trapped in the beginning of the novel? Why isn’t Mr. Woodhouse a good companion for Emma?
4. Explain the relationship between Emma and Miss Taylor. How was Miss Taylor a suitable friend and an unsuitable friend for Emma?
5. In Mr. Knightley’s visit to the Woodhouses on the evening of the Taylor-Weston marriage, what does the conversation reveal to us about Mr. Woodhouse? about Emma (in relationship to her father and her “triumph”)? about Mr. Knightley (in his response about Mrs. Weston and Emma’s claims of “success”)? What does it show about the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley?

Chapter 4

6. Emma reflects “Altogether, she was quite convinced of Harriet Smith’s being exactly the young friend she wanted--exactly the something which her home required. . . .” What qualities of Harriet made her the “useful” friend Emma sought? Why does Emma think she’s “useful” to Harriet? Why isn’t Harriet Smith a good companion for Emma?
7. What are Harriet’s initial feelings about Robert Martin? What is the effect of Emma’s questions about Robert Martin? What accusation does Emma make against Robert Martin that she is guilty of herself?
8. When Emma declares “I do not mean to set up my opinion against yours,” is she being truthful? Why does Emma want to take over Harriet Smith’s life?

Chapter 5

9. Chapter 5 gives an outside view of Emma in conversation between Mr. Knightly and Mrs. Weston: what “correctives” are readers given for Emma’s interior view of herself and Harriet? Why is Mr. Knightly against this friendship? What does Mrs. Weston’s advice reveal about Emma?
10. What does Mr. Knightley think would do Emma “good”? Why would this “good” seem unlikely in Highbury?

Chapter 6

11. What fantasy does Emma build for Harriet Smith? How? What clues seem to support Emma's matchmaking efforts?

Chapter 7

12. Look carefully at the scene between Emma and Harriet when the two discuss Robert Martin's letter. Contrast the opening of the scene to its close. What steps does Emma take to effect change in Harriet? What clues are we given to show Harriet wanted a different outcome? Why does Emma prevent the match? Is Emma being a real friend to Harriet?

Chapter 8

13. Why had Mr. Knightley thought that Emma would be pleased by the connection? Contrast their two views of Robert Martin and Harriet Smith.
14. What are Mr. Knightley's views of Mr. Elton as an eligible bachelor? Does Emma believe his warning? How does Emma try to manipulate the outcome? What does Mr. Knightley's assessment of Mr. Elton reveal about his own character and values?

Chapters 11 and 12

15. Characterize the relationship between Isabella and John Knightley. How does Isabella's temperament affect John? How does John Knightley feel about family loyalty? Contrast John Knightley to Mr. Weston.

Chapters 13–15

16. How does John Knightley judge Emma? What warning does he give her about Mr. Elton? How do we see Emma acting as a peacemaker in her family when the John Knightleys visit?
17. What illusions unravel regarding Mr. Elton? How has Mr. Elton reacted to Harriet's cold? How does it suggest a different focus than Emma expected? Describe Elton's behavior towards Emma at the Christmas party. How does it build toward the proposal in the coach? What is his reaction to Emma's expectations? Why?

Chapter 16

18. "The hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think and be miserable." What is the effect of the organization of details in this opening sentence?
19. Is Emma aware of her own wrongful conduct in making a game of Harriet and Elton? Does she think about other people's feelings? Is she ashamed? What accusation does she make against Mr. Elton that she is guilty of herself?

Chapter 18

20. Why doesn't Frank Churchill pay his respects to his new stepmother? In chapter 14, what was Emma's initial judgment of his absence? By chapter 18, how does Emma defend Frank Churchill to Mr. Knightley?
21. What does Mr. Knightley mean by "amiable" in the French and in the English way? What does Mr. Knightley's analysis show about his own character and situation?

22. Contrast Emma Woodhouse's character to the foils around her: Mrs. Weston, Harriet Smith, Mr. Woodhouse.
23. Mr. Woodhouse has been characterized by critics as "an old woman" in disguise. How accurate is that description? Does Emma try to change him? Why/why not? How does Highbury society regard Mr. Woodhouse?

☪☪ Volume II ☪☪

Chapter 19

1. Who are the Bateses? Why does Emma dread visiting them? Why is she "determined to call upon them"? What do these opposing attitudes reveal about her character and Austen's society? How is Miss Bates a foil to Emma?

Chapter 20

2. Who is Jane Fairfax? Why does she come to Highbury? How would she be a suitable friend for Emma Woodhouse?
3. What is the difference between Emma's inner reaction to Jane Fairfax and her outward manners? What does Emma's feelings and behavior reveal about her character and Austen's society?

Chapter 21

4. How does Mr. Elton's marriage reflect on his earlier courtship of Emma Woodhouse? What seems to be the objective of Elton's family planning? How does Highbury society react to the news of the prospective Augusta Hawkins Elton's arrival? Compare the reactions of Jane Fairfax and Emma Woodhouse: What do they reveal about their characters?
5. Reexamine the opening and closing of the scene between Harriet and Emma. Contrast how Harriet feels when she enters Hartfield to her mood when the scene closes. How does Emma manipulate the scene? Why?

Chapter 23

6. What is Emma's role in Harriet's visit with the Martins? What are the sources of Emma's misgivings?
7. Describe Frank Churchill's arrival at Highbury. How does his manner seem to contrast his earlier absence? What former acquaintance does he plan to visit? What are his reasons?

Chapter 24

8. What does Frank Churchill report about his acquaintance, Miss Fairfax, after visiting her? Are there any inconsistencies of behavior?
9. How does Emma judge Frank Churchill? How is he different from the other men of her acquaintance? What makes him an attractive personality? What character traits do they share?

Chapter 26

10. Why does the gift of a pianoforte cause Jane Fairfax some embarrassment? What does her reaction suggest about Jane Fairfax and her society?

11. What does the dinner party at the Coles's reveal about Mr. Knightley in regard to Emma, Harriet, Frank, the Eltons? about Frank Churchill in regard to Jane Fairfax, Emma, himself? about Emma in regard to Frank, Jane, Mr. Knightley?
12. How has Frank Churchill's arrival changed Emma's social life? How does Mr. Knightley react to these changes? What do the plans for a dance reveal about each man's character?

Chapter 30

13. In their last meeting before his departure for Enscombe, Frank Churchill uses almost the same words as Mr. Elton had in their private meeting: "perhaps Miss Woodhouse--I think you can hardly be quite without suspicion" and "I am sure you have seen and understood me" (Volume I, Chapter 15): In Mr. Elton's case, she did not understand that he was courting her and not her friend; how does that earlier scene affect what Emma thinks Frank Churchill is about to reveal? Does she want this outcome? How does this interview end ambiguously?

Chapter 31

14. Emma thinks about being in love with Frank Churchill: What does she see as the necessary outcome of a marriage proposal? How does her experience with Mr. Elton affect her planned behavior towards Frank Churchill? What does this growth reveal about Emma's character?
15. Contrast Emma's feelings towards Jane Fairfax to her reflections on Harriet Smith. What are the sources of this difference? What does this contrast reveal about Emma's character? What do her stated beliefs reveal about her self-knowledge? Is Emma right when she thinks, "I know the danger of indulging in . . . speculations"?

Chapter 33

16. What are the sources of the friendship between Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax? Compare this friendship to that between Emma and Harriet Smith.
17. Speculation about matches continues to be made: What is Mr. Knightley's reaction to a possible marriage with Jane Fairfax? What do his comments reveal about his ideal bride? What do Mrs. Weston's comments reveal about the persistence of rumors? Could Mrs. Weston be right?

Chapter 34

18. Examine Chapter 32 and Chapter 34: What are the social obligations to a new bride? How does Emma act with great propriety? How do her interior feelings contrast to her exterior manners? Note the "stage directions"--the clues Austen gives for Emma's outward reactions to Mrs. Elton.
19. Both Augusta Elton and Mr. Woodhouse are comic characters. How is Mr. Woodhouse treated more gently than Mrs. Elton?

At this point, students might draw up a list of matches: In column 1, list the names of the single women; in column 2, list the names of the men (married or single) who have been suggested as their possible loves. Then draw lines connecting the women and the men which gossip has united at one point or another. Which connections are conspicuously absent?

20. Jane Fairfax's walk in the rain to fetch her letters becomes subject to speculation and bullying. What do the reactions of three women--Jane Fairfax, Mrs. Elton, Emma--reveal about their characters? What does this episode reveal about women's position in Austen's society? about social rules on correspondence between men and women?

Chapter 36

21. Compare the significant houses Austen has identified with major characters: Hartfield, Randalls, Maple Grove, Enscombe, and the Bates's apartment in Highbury. What do these houses reveal about their owners?
22. Volume II ends with Mrs. Weston's letter announcing Frank Churchill's imminent return to Highbury: Compare the reactions of Mr. Weston, Emma Woodhouse, Mr. Knightley, Jane Fairfax, and Mrs. Elton.

Volume III

Chapter 37

1. Describe Frank Churchill's first return to Highbury: How has he seemed to be changed? What seems to be the cause?

Chapter 38

2. Who are the guests Mr. Weston entreated to come early to the Crown rooms? Why? What do his manners reveal about his character?
3. Describe Mrs. Elton's behavior at the Crown. How does Mrs. Elton show her vanity? Notice the many examples of irony.
4. Read aloud Miss Bates's monologues: What character traits does she reveal? What absurdities does she reveal about other Highbury characters? What relationships does she talk about?
5. What actions at the Crown Ball reveal the significance of social decorum: How must Frank Churchill first meet the Eltons? Who must open the ball?
6. How is social aggression manifested within the rules of propriety? Consider Mrs. Elton's behavior towards Jane Fairfax and Mr. Elton's humiliation of Harriet Smith. If Emma Woodhouse was the real target of the Eltons's enmity, why don't they humiliate her?
7. What is the importance of Mr. Knightley asking Harriet Smith to dance? How does this dance also change the relationship between Mr. Knightley and Emma?

Chapter 39

8. How does Frank Churchill rescue Harriet Smith? Why was he in the neighborhood? What does Emma see as a likely result from this rescue? Contrast this dramatic rescue to Mr. Knightley's rescue of Harriet at the Crown Ball.

Chapter 40

9. What do Harriet's "treasures" reveal about the role of her imagination? about Emma's role? What has disillusioned Harriet about these "treasures"? Has Emma learned from her past mistakes with Harriet?

Chapter 41

10. What are the sources of Mr. Knightley's dislike of Frank Churchill?
11. What clues show an understanding between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill? How is Mr. Knightley now beginning to construct meaning with the help of his imagination?
12. Contrast Mr. Knightley's reaction to what he "imagined" were "symptoms of attachment" to Emma's reaction. What does this difference reveal about their character and situation?

Chapter 42

13. How does Mrs. Elton change the social life of Highbury? What does the Donwell Abbey party show about Mrs. Elton?
14. Why does Mr. Knightley host a strawberry picking party? How does Mr. Knightley handle Mrs. Elton's presumption? Why doesn't Mr. Knightley's reaction offend her? What do his plans for the party reveal about him?
15. How does Donwell Abbey reflect Mr. Knightley's character? What does Donwell Abbey represent? What are its associations with Robert Martin and his class? How does Hartfield compare to Donwell Abbey?
16. Compare the mood and behavior of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. What separate request does each make of Emma?

Chapter 43

17. How does Austen develop the unhappy tension at the Box Hill picnic?
18. How do Frank Churchill and Emma try to improve the mood? How does their playfulness affect each other? affect the remainder of the party? How are Frank and Emma similarly cruel? How does Mr. Weston contribute to Emma's heartless theatricality?
19. What does Box Hill symbolize? What descriptive words come to mind when thinking of each? Would Emma have acted at Donwell Abbey as she did at Box Hill? Why/Why not?
20. What is Mr. Knightley's view of Emma's behavior? What do his concerns and his manner of expressing them to Emma reveal about his character?

Chapters 44–45

21. How does Emma try to make amends? Why? To what extent is she successful?

Chapter 46

22. Was Jane Fairfax's secret engagement a surprise? What foreshadowing did Austen give in Mr. Knightley's suspicions? What foreshadowing in Emma's *not* getting emotionally involved with Frank?
23. Reexamine the Coles's dinner party scene in chapter 26 and the two closing chapters of Volume II (chapters 35 and 36) in light of the secret engagement. What wonderful dramatic irony might even an alert reader miss?

Chapter 47

24. Was Harriet's love for Mr. Knightley a surprise? What foreshadowing did Austen give at Donwell Abbey? How does Harriet Smith's explanation show she learned from her friendship with Emma?

Chapter 49

25. Why does Emma stop Mr. Knightley from proposing? What does she think he is about to reveal? What does she do to lead him to propose? How is this an unselfish act?

Chapter 50

26. How does Emma try to make amends to Harriet Smith?

Chapter 54

27. How does Austen wind up the plot with Harriet Smith? In what ways is this conclusion appropriate?

Chapter 55

28. What reconciles Mr. Woodhouse to Emma's marriage? Emma has tried to change everyone else around her; why won't she try to change Mr. Woodhouse?

Overview of Novel

29. Jane Austen is concerned with the social world and the moral world. How do they interact in this book? Who is morally inferior in the book? Who is morally superior?
30. Why must Emma suffer a little? Has Emma shrunk in the social scene by the end of the novel?
31. What episodes show Mr. Knightley's decency and charity?
32. Since marriage is both a social and moral act, what does it show about Emma when she commits to marriage? Contrast it to her earlier statements about marriage and herself?
33. When does Mr. Knightley fall in love? How has loving Emma changed him? Why is he the only man in the novel who could marry Emma?
34. Are the five marriages which occur reasonable and balanced?
35. Does the author think it is worth it for Jane Fairfax to marry Frank Churchill? What was her alternative? What are her trade-offs? What happens to her when she loses all hope? How do you think Frank Churchill sees Jane Fairfax based on how he describes her to Emma in Jane's presence? What does the author imply about Frank Churchill?
36. What characters and actions illustrate the contrast between what Emma believes herself to be, what others believe her to be, and what she really is?
37. Jane Austen said she created a heroine in Emma "whom nobody but myself will much like." Agree?