

EMMA WOODHOUSE AS AN UNCONVENTIONAL HEROINE: A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF EMMA

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Abstract. This article deals with the heroes of the novel “Emma”, one of the most popular works of English Romanticism literature. There is a comprehensive analysis of female image. A special place in the work of Jane Austen is occupied by the novel o’Emma”, a novel that presents a complex and independent female protagonist whose personal growth challenges traditional expectations of womanhood. the article explores issues of female agency, economic independence, self-realization, and gender norms. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which Emma negotiates social conventions while maintaining a strong sense of individuality and autonomy. The analysis demonstrates that Austen's portrayal of Emma Woodhouse anticipates later feminist concerns by emphasizing intellectual development, moral responsibility, and the right of women to shape their own identities. The findings suggest that Emma can be interpreted as an unconventional heroine whose experiences reflect both the limitations imposed upon women and the possibilities for female empowerment within a patriarchal society.

Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена героям романа «Эмма», одного из наиболее известных произведений английской литературы эпохи романтизма. В работе представлен всесторонний анализ женского образа. Особое место в творчестве Джейн Остин занимает роман «Эмма», в котором создан образ сложной и независимой героини, чьё личностное становление ставит под сомнение традиционные представления о роли женщины в обществе. В статье рассматриваются вопросы женской субъектности, экономической независимости, самореализации и гендерных норм. Особое внимание уделяется тому, каким образом Эмма сочетает следование общественным условностям с сохранением собственной индивидуальности и автономии. Анализ показывает, что образ Эммы Вудхаус предвосхищает многие идеи более позднего феминистского дискурса, подчёркивая важность интеллектуального развития, нравственной ответственности и права женщины самостоятельно формировать свою идентичность. Полученные результаты позволяют рассматривать Эмму как нетрадиционную героиню, чья история отражает как ограничения, налагаемые патриархальным обществом, так и возможности женской самореализации и расширения прав и возможностей.

Annotatsiya. Mazkur maqola ingliz romantizm adabiyotining eng mashhur asarlaridan biri bo‘lgan “Emma” romani qahramonlariga bag‘ishlangan bo‘lib, unda

ayol obrazi har tomonlama tahlil qilinadi. Jeyn Ostin ijodida “Emma” romani alohida o‘rin egallaydi, chunki unda murakkab va mustaqil ayol qahramon tasvirlanib, uning shaxsiy kamoloti ayollik haqidagi an’anaviy qarashlarni qayta ko‘rib chiqishga undaydi. Maqolada ayollarning fikrlashi, iqtisodiy mustaqillik, o‘zini o‘zi anglash hamda gender me’yorlari masalalari yoritiladi. Emma jamiyat qoidalariga moslashgan holda o‘z individualligi va mustaqilligini qanday saqlab qolishi alohida e’tibor markazida turadi. Tahlil natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, Ostinning Emma Vudxaus obrazini yaratishi keyingi feministik g‘oyalarning ayrim jihatlarini oldindan ifodalab, intellektual rivojlanish, axloqiy mas’uliyat va ayolning o‘z shaxsiyatini mustaqil shakllantirish huquqini ta’kidlaydi. Tadqiqot natijalari Emmani noan’anaviy qahramon sifatida talqin qilish imkonini beradi; uning hayoti patriarxal jamiyat tomonidan qo‘yilgan cheklovlar bilan bir qatorda ayollarning o‘z imkoniyatlarini ro‘yobga chiqarish va mustaqillikka erishish yo‘llarini ham namoyon etadi.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Regency literature, Harriet Smith, Emma Woodhouse, feminism, female autonomy, gender roles, social conventions, economic independence, unconventional heroine.

Introduction. The representation of women in literature has long been a central concern of feminist literary criticism, which seeks to examine how literary texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge gender hierarchies embedded within society. Beginning in the late twentieth century, feminist scholars shifted the focus of literary analysis toward the ways in which women’s experiences were either marginalized or redefined within dominant cultural narratives. Elaine Showalter argued that women must be studied not merely as characters constructed within male-authored traditions, but as participants in a distinct literary and cultural experience.¹ Similarly, Judith Butler reconceptualized gender as a performative and socially constructed category, thereby opening new possibilities for interpreting literary representations of femininity and social identity.

In discussing the distinctive style and themes of Jane Austen's novels, I would like to begin by quoting one of her sayings: "I must have my own style and go my own way. And if I never succeed in that, I am sure I shall fail in anything else." Indeed, Jane Austen, when she entered literature, chose a literary style that was unique to her. Although she did not succeed in this, but also she created in a unique and distinctive direction and soon gained popularity. Austen expands her criticism by emphasizing social hypocrisy through irony; she often creates a tone of irony through speech mixed with the thoughts and words of the characters.

Among Austen's novels, Emma occupies a special place because of its portrayal of a heroine who differs markedly from conventional nineteenth-century female

¹ Showalter, Elaine. "Toward a Feminist Poetics." Women's Writing and Writing About Women, edited by Mary Jacobus, Croom Helm, 1979, pp. 125–143.

characters. Emma Woodhouse is wealthy, educated, and socially privileged, enjoying a degree of independence uncommon for women of her time. Her personal development, however, unfolds within a patriarchal social order that shapes her perceptions, choices, and relationships. The tension between autonomy and social expectation makes Emma an especially compelling subject for feminist interpretation. “I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like”.² This is how Jane Austen, according to her nephew’s Memoirs, defined Emma Woodhouse. The figure of this protagonist has caused some controversy in the various studies that have been conducted on the novel Emma in the more than two hundred years since its publication. Although the affirmation of her creator has not been fulfilled completely, since there are many articles and reviews in which this protagonist is praised, Austen’s doubts about the reception of this young lady among her readers and critics are understandable, due to the defects of Emma’s personality and the negative consequences that her actions cause in the characters that surround her.

The present article examines Emma Woodhouse as an unconventional heroine through the lens of feminist literary criticism. It focuses on issues of female agency, economic independence, self-realization, and gender norms, seeking to demonstrate how Austen both reflects and challenges traditional conceptions of womanhood. By analyzing Emma's intellectual growth and moral development, the study argues that Austen presents a complex female identity that anticipates later feminist concerns regarding women's autonomy and social position.

Research methods and materials. The extent to which feminist themes are reflected in the novels has been widely debated by scholars; most critics argue that some of the novels emphasize how the female characters manage their world. Others consider her physically and spiritually limited. Austen's novels have been variously described as having a political and social outlook. For example, in a number of critiques, her characters sacrifice their personal desires to serve the established social order, thereby supporting it. Scholars have examined the political issues surrounding the novel, noting that Austen discusses issues related to money and property, particularly the arbitrary nature of property inheritance and the precarious economic situation of women. Throughout her work, there is a conflict between the demands of society and the demands of the individual. In Jane Austen's Emma, it can be said that the stratified system of Highbury society is depicted as a realistic representation of the society in which Austen lived. The novel depicts the social culture of families with a relatively good financial situation and its ideals through the interrelationships between the characters and the social acceptance and perception of their actions within the work. More specifically, it depicts their ideas and actions regarding marriage as a social

² Austen-Leigh, Jane Edward. A Memoir of Jane Austen. Richard Bentley & Son, 1871.

institution. This ideal can be said to depend on the wealth into which the characters were born.

Characters such as Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith reflect Austen's ideas about money and society. The importance of social status in their society and the difference in terms of responsibilities between the two female characters between the upper and middle classes in society reflect the inequality of the social system in Austen's time. This reflects the values that Emma, as an upper class and wealthy woman, should be supported by the readers, such as ignorance towards the lower classes; she has a negative impact on the readers with her upper class ideas that persisted until she met Harriet. Harriet's character can be said to complement Emma's character, as Harriet is very submissive to Emma and listens to her sincerely. Therefore, it can be said to reinforce Emma's sense of superiority in society and her values, as Harriet is of an unknown class and Emma is of the upper class. This can be linked to the social context in which Austen wrote, which was a time when "democratic" subordination was seen as an insult, social subordination was the organizing principle of many interactions, both public and private. These values can be read through the relationship between Harriet and Emma. Emma's approach to someone of such class distinction is not considered socially beneficial and is perceived as either charity or mockery - this is seen in Mr. Knightley's response to their friendship; "How can Harriet imagine that she has anything to learn from herself?", showing his understanding of the class system around her, as well as Emma's superiority over Harriet in particular; these values are brought to Highbury society through Emma's separation from the class into which she was born.

When reading Austen's novels, it is common for a contemporary reader to be surprised by the absence of activity and the abundance of free time. It gives the impression that the ladies of that time did not have more obligations than to visit their friends, to receive visits, to go shopping, to attend a play or a concert, to go for a walk or to spend time reading or playing music. And the truth is that, in most cases, that was the real situation. During their childhood and adolescence, high-status girls received education in a school for young ladies or, in most cases, in their own home, from the hands of a governess.³ However, in the case of Emma, we know that this time has passed, so, certainly, she has no more obligations than those that she decides to exert. And, as we will see a little later, Emma does not stand out for her perseverance or self-demand. So this intelligent and active young woman needs to find tasks that occupy her time and can be rewarding for her, and that task is none other than that of being the matchmaker for those around her and, in particular, of her new friend Harriet Smith, a young girl of uncertain origin, who becomes Miss

³ Barker, Hannah, y Elaine Chalus. Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850 : An Introduction. Psychology Press, 2005.

Woodhouse's pastime. The relationship of these two young women is completely uneven and evidences the manipulative tendency of Emma, who "never saw Harriet as a person but as a blank page to be filled in".⁴ From the first moment, the reader detects the interested attitude of the protagonist, who sees in Harriet an opportunity to exercise the skills with which she fancies herself to be gifted Emma is not as interested in Harriet's good as her own entertainment and the self-affirmation of her projects. In this relationship of false friendship, Emma plays a manipulative role very similar to the one Isabella Thorpe exercises over Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*.⁵ Both Emma and Isabella boast repeatedly about their disinterested and unconditional friendship, although they use this relationship to achieve their goals and in the process hurt the other person. The reader is aware of this situation and also of the mistakes Emma makes throughout the story. In spite of the signs that indicate the wrongness of her attitude, she continues with her plans, without realising that she is wrong until it is evident. Emma insists on acting as Harriet's teacher when she has not yet passed the student stage. As Richard Simpson points out in his review of the novel, Emma overestimates her intelligence and ability to penetrate the hearts of those around her, causing uncomfortable and painful situations for others.⁶ With her impetuous nature, Emma comes to hasty conclusions denying evidence and ignoring advice. In this attitude of stubborn egoism, which leads her to insist that things be done according to her will, we can detect certain similarities with the character of Mary Crawford, the antiheroine of *Mansfield Park*, who will not hesitate to justify her attitude stating that "selfishness must always be forgiven, you know, because there is no hope of a cure". Emma's obstinacy and pride lead her to commit serious errors and prevent her from perceiving the feelings of other people. Instead Emma relies too much on her own judgments and does not consider habitual observation of her surroundings necessary. It demands what Aristotle calls "practical wisdom"; what we might call social intelligence; what Iris Murdoch (and Jane Austen herself) calls "attention." Emma has to be educated in this proper attention to individuals and their circumstances.⁷ As already explained above, Emma had certain deficiencies in her education, not only in the contents but also in that which refers to her attitude toward others. Despite the good intentions and the sincere affection of her closest circle, the lack of strength of some of her educators had as a consequence that this young woman grew convinced that she was always right, accustomed to always

⁴ Liu, Yan. "The Prosperity of English Literary Criticism in Multicultural Contexts: Jane Austen's Ideas on Kinships in Emma in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 4.3 (2014): 636-640

⁵ Hannon, Patrice. *Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine's Guide to Life and Love*. New York: Penguin, 2005

⁶ Edmonston & Douglas, editor. *The North British Review*. Edmonston Douglas, 1870.

⁷ Clark, Lorraine. "Influence and Interference: The Ethics of Attention in Emma." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 38 (2016): 56-65

getting away with her mistakes and, consequently, little sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others. Austen illustrates this attitude in a short passage starring Emma and Mrs. Weston, her former governess. They combated the point some time longer in the same way; Emma rather gaining ground over the mind of her friend; for Mrs. Weston was the most used of the two to yield. Along with these imperfections of character, we find in Emma another common characteristic of Austen's antiheroines: social classism. This class attitude, although inconsistent because she does show respect and affection for the working lady Mrs. Weston, leads her to judge certain people just for their work or position, to consider herself above certain members of the society in which she lives, and to adopt an attitude of condescending and contemptuous superiority towards families or people around her. The class-conscious attitude is a quality that Austen reserves for her antiheroines and "evil" characters, such as Caroline Bingley, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Ferrars or Sir Walter Elliot. Emma's manipulation of Harriet to reject Robert Martin's offer of marriage hardly differs from that of Mr. Bingley at the hands of his sister, who wants him to get away from Jane Bennet. And the same happens with her considerations about the Woodhouse's position at Highbury, and the need to stay away from certain lower-level people to avoid them wanting to frequent her deal. "And all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second-rate and third-rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever". This attitude has as a consequence that, on occasion, Emma feels isolated, as, for example, when she doesn't receive an invitation from the Coles to attend a reception at their home. At first, Emma feels offended at the mere possibility of being invited, but, seeing that many people around her are going to attend, including Mr. Knightley who enjoys a social position superior to hers, the young lady experiences the loneliness of her situation. "Emma is isolated not because she is superior but because she must feel superior; she can not participate in a relationship where she is not first".⁸ Her isolation is not forced by circumstances, but the result of her own conception of reality, which leads her to put herself on a higher level. Emma is not completely unaware of her shortcomings, although she usually judges them with indulgence. In spite of everything, in diverse moments of the novel, the author depicts attempts of the protagonist to improve her formation and personality. However, these attempts, instead of producing an improvement, only manage to highlight other defects of the protagonist: her inconstancy and her envy towards Jane Fairfax.⁹

Results and discussion. The findings of this study demonstrate that Emma occupies a significant place within feminist literary discourse by presenting a heroine

⁸ Thaden, Barbara Z. "Figure and Ground: The Receding Heroine in Jane Austen's 'Emma.'" *South Atlantic Review* 55.1 (1990): 47-62.

⁹ Jordán, Miguel Ángel, and Sarah Rose Kearns. "Emma Woodhouse: Heroine or Antiheroine?" *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2018, pp. 238-251.

who both conforms to and challenges the patriarchal conventions of Regency society. Emma Woodhouse emerges as an unconventional female protagonist whose economic independence, intellectual confidence, and moral development enable her to exercise a degree of agency uncommon for women of her time. The analysis reveals that Austen employs Emma's experiences to question traditional assumptions about femininity, marriage, and social responsibility, thereby offering a nuanced representation of female autonomy within a restrictive social framework. While Austen's novels are often celebrated for their social satire and romantic plots, this research shifts the focus to "Emma"'s subversive interrogation of gendered power dynamics, offering fresh insights into how privilege, autonomy, and societal norms intersect to shape women's agency. By centering Emma Woodhouse's defiance of patriarchal expectations her rejection of marriage as an economic necessity, assertion of intellectual independence, and navigation of class hierarchies this study addresses a gap in Austen scholarship, which has historically overlooked the novel's nuanced feminist critique in favor of its comedic or romantic elements.

Among Jane Austen's novels, Emma stands out for its portrayal of a heroine whose confidence, autonomy, and social authority dramatically invert early nineteenth-century expectations of female behavior. Unlike the typical Austen heroine who faces economic precarity and must navigate marriage as a matter of survival, Emma Woodhouse begins the novel with wealth, beauty, and status firmly secured. Her privileged circumstances allow her to transgress the boundaries of conventional femininity by exercising control over others, dictating social relationships, and even assuming the role of matchmaker. This unusual position challenges patriarchal assumptions by granting Emma qualities-authority, independence, and self-determination that were typically reserved for men. Emma's refusal to marry is perhaps the boldest articulation of her resistance to gender norms. Early in the novel, she declares: "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want".¹⁰ In a society that defined women primarily in terms of their dependence upon male partners, Emma's assertion of autonomy is radical. By rejecting marriage as a necessity, she reverses the gendered economic dynamic: it is men who must appeal to her, not the other way around. Her independence creates a space in which Austen can explore female agency unburdened by financial desperation, suggesting an alternative vision of womanhood. Equally significant is Emma's role as orchestrator of social relationships, particularly her determination to match Harriet Smith with men she deems suitable. In assuming this role, Emma takes on a power of mediation and control often associated with patriarchal figures who arrange marriages to consolidate

¹⁰ Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Edited by James Kinsley, Oxford University Press, 2003.

social and economic ties. Yet Austen complicates this reversal by exposing Emma's limitations: her misjudgments in matchmaking lead to embarrassment and disappointment. The failure of Emma's schemes critiques both the misuse of authority and the rigid social structures that make such manipulations necessary. In this sense, Austen simultaneously grants Emma agency and reminds readers of the responsibilities that accompany positions of power.¹¹

Emma's intellectual development further reinforces Austen's critique of conventional femininity. At the beginning of the novel, Emma's confidence frequently manifests itself as excessive self-assurance, leading her to believe that she can accurately judge the lives and emotions of those around her. However, Austen gradually transforms these flaws into opportunities for moral education. Rather than presenting Emma as an idealized heroine, Austen constructs a protagonist whose growth depends upon self-reflection and the recognition of her own limitations. This complexity distinguishes Emma from many contemporary female characters whose virtues remain static throughout the narrative. As Daniela Garofalo observes, Austen's interest lies not in creating a flawless heroine but in demonstrating how female authority is negotiated through error, responsibility, and self-correction rather than through unquestioned moral superiority.¹² The relationship between Emma and Harriet Smith also illustrates the intersection of gender and class within Regency society. Emma's attempts to elevate Harriet's social status reveal both her confidence in her own judgment and her inability to recognize the rigid class boundaries governing nineteenth-century England. Although Emma intends to improve Harriet's future, her interference ultimately exposes the limitations of privilege when exercised without genuine understanding. Austen therefore critiques not only patriarchal expectations but also the hierarchical social system that restricts women's choices according to birth and economic status. Emma eventually recognizes that true agency cannot be imposed upon another individual but must arise from personal experience, self-knowledge, and freedom of choice. Recent feminist scholarship similarly argues that Austen employs Emma's mistakes to reveal the tensions between autonomy, class privilege, and women's social responsibilities.¹³

Another important aspect of Emma's feminist significance lies in Austen's refusal to portray female independence as incompatible with emotional maturity. Emma's eventual marriage to Mr. Knightley should not be interpreted as a surrender of her autonomy. Instead, the conclusion represents the development of a relationship

¹¹ Dr. Gitika Balhara. "Gender Reversals in Emma and Pride and Prejudice By Jane Austen". *Kavya Setu*, vol. 1, no. 8, Aug. 2025, pp. 27-34, <https://kavyasetu.com/index.php/j/article/view/68>.

¹² Garofalo, Daniela. "Doating on Faults in Jane Austen's Emma." *European Romantic Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2017, pp. 235-250.

¹³ Hoyle, Darcey. "Austen Embodied: Class and Gender Performances in *Emma* and *Persuasion*." *ANU Undergraduate Research Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2024, pp. 48-53.

founded upon mutual respect, intellectual companionship, and moral equality. Unlike many heroines whose marriages primarily secure financial stability, Emma enters marriage from a position of economic independence and social security. Consequently, her decision reflects emotional growth rather than economic necessity. Austen thereby redefines marriage as a partnership based on affection and shared values rather than patriarchal dependence. Through Emma Woodhouse, Austen presents a heroine whose personal transformation demonstrates that female agency is strengthened, not diminished by self-awareness, ethical responsibility, and the freedom to choose one's own future.¹⁴

Conclusion. Jane Austen's "Emma" remains one of the most remarkable novels in English literature because of its realistic and complex portrayal of a female protagonist. The analysis carried out in this article has shown that Emma Woodhouse differs from many conventional nineteenth-century heroines in her financial independence, confidence, and ability to make her own decisions. These qualities allow Austen to present a character who questions many of the social expectations imposed upon women during the Regency period. At the same time, Emma is not portrayed as a flawless heroine. Her mistakes, particularly in her relationships with Harriet Smith and other members of her community, become an essential part of her personal and moral development. Rather than diminishing her character, these experiences enable her to gain greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of her responsibilities toward others. Austen therefore suggests that genuine strength lies not in perfection but in the willingness to recognize one's errors and grow from them.

The novel also illustrates that female autonomy is closely connected with social class and economic security. Emma's privileged position gives her opportunities unavailable to many women of her time, yet Austen makes it clear that wealth alone cannot guarantee wisdom or happiness. Through Emma's experiences, the novel explores the complex relationship between independence, social responsibility, and personal fulfillment. From a feminist perspective, Emma offers a nuanced representation of womanhood that extends beyond the traditional marriage plot. Although the novel concludes with Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley, this decision is presented as a personal choice rather than an economic necessity. In this respect, Austen challenges conventional ideas about women's roles and presents marriage as a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. Emma Woodhouse may be regarded as an unconventional heroine whose character anticipates many concerns of modern feminist criticism. Austen's portrayal of her demonstrates that women possess intellectual ability, moral agency, and the capacity for independent judgment, even

¹⁴ Akhtar, Shoaib, and Muhammad Azeem Afzal Bhatti. "Voicing Female Resistance Against Patriarchy in Austen's *Emma*: A Feminist Perspective." *International Premier Journal of Languages & Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2025, pp. 779–788.

within the limitations of a patriarchal society. More than two centuries after its publication, *Emma* continues to invite new interpretations and remains an important text for the study of gender, identity, and female agency in English literature.

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