https://doi.org/10.69760/jales.2025002020

Class and Character in Emma: Jane Austen's Subtle Critique of Social Hierarchies

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Abstract

This article analyzes Jane Austen's portrayal of class structures in *Emma*, exploring how social hierarchy, gentility, and economic status shape the characters' interactions and moral development. Through close reading and contextual analysis, the study argues that Austen critiques class consciousness not through radical opposition but via ironic observation and personal growth, particularly in the character arc of Emma Woodhouse. The article highlights Austen's subtle balance between reinforcing social norms and advocating for ethical responsibility among the privileged, revealing a rich engagement with class-based values in Regency England.

Keywords

Austen, class hierarchy, Emma Woodhouse, Regency society

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) provides a nuanced examination of the class structure of early 19th-century England through the lens of Highbury, a fictional village populated by characters from diverse social backgrounds. Austen, writing within the genteel world she knew, uses realism to depict "social reality within her own time and class (the gentry and professional classes of southern England in the early 19th century)". In *Emma*, questions of social rank, gentility, and "propriety" are not merely background details but drive character interactions and the plot itself. The novel's heroine, Emma Woodhouse, is a wealthy gentlewoman, "handsome, clever, and rich," who believes she knows "to a *T*" everyone's proper place in society. Emma's attitudes and misjudgments, as well as her growth in understanding, form Austen's nuanced commentary on the class structure of her day. Austen's approach to class in *Emma* is characterized by subtle satire and social observation: she gently critiques the rigid hierarchies and snobberies of her society while stopping short of outright social revolt. This balanced perspective has led to critical debate. Earlier critics like Marilyn Butler viewed Austen as a conservative realist aligned with the anti-Jacobin sentiment of her era, whereas others (e.g., Claudia Johnson) have argued that Austen's fiction is

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implicitly subversive of established social hierarchies. Through *Emma*, Austen engages with class issues not through overt polemic but through the everyday interactions and moral development of her characters. Notably, *Emma* was recognized even by contemporaries for its attention to ordinary life; one early review famously "classed it among a new kind of novel which 'draws characters and incidents… from the current of ordinary life'", underscoring Austen's realistic portrayal of social relations.

This article examines how Jane Austen approaches class structures in *Emma* through literary analysis of the novel's characters, events, and narrative techniques. We focus on how Austen depicts the class hierarchy of Highbury, the interplay between economic status and social rank, and the moral implications of class-based attitudes. Avoiding anachronistic modern critical theories, we analyze *Emma* in light of its contemporary context and Austen's nuanced style. We aim to show that Austen's treatment of class is neither a wholesale endorsement of the status quo nor a radical critique, but rather a complex exploration of social constraints and personal values. The analysis is structured in an IMRAD format: the Introduction outlines the context and critical background; the Methods explain our analytical approach; the Results detail the findings from our close reading and synthesis of scholarly insights; and the Discussion interprets these findings, considering what they reveal about Austen's perspective on class and why it remains significant. By drawing on a range of openly accessible scholarly sources and Austen's text itself, we provide a comprehensive view suitable for an academic understanding of *Emma*'s engagement with class structures.

Methods

Our study employs a qualitative literary analysis method, centered on close reading of Austen's *Emma* alongside historical-contextual research and critical scholarship on the novel. We began by situating *Emma* in the social context of the Regency period (early 19th-century England), when society was stratified into distinct classes (landed gentry, emerging merchant class, yeoman farmers, the laboring poor, etc.) governed by strict norms of conduct. Understanding these historical class distinctions is crucial, as Austen assumes her readers' familiarity with them and builds her plot around subtle class cues (such as modes of address, manners, and economic details). We consulted open-access academic sources that discuss Austen's social context and class dynamics—for example, Kathryn Sutherland's commentary on Austen's social realism and studies of the period's class definitions. These sources helped clarify contemporary notions of *rank*, *gentility*, and the way wealth and birth defined one's "sphere" in society.

In analyzing the text, we focused on key characters and episodes in *Emma* that illuminate class structures. Specifically, we examined: (1) Highbury's class hierarchy – the relative positions of families like the Woodhouses and Knightleys (old gentry) versus newcomers like the Coles (wealthy tradesmen) or the Bateses (impoverished genteel); (2) Emma Woodhouse's attitudes –

her preconceived notions of who is an appropriate friend or match for whom, especially her interventions in Harriet Smith's love life and her treatment of Miss Bates; (3) Cross-class interactions – such as Emma's conflict with Mrs. Elton (a clergyman's nouveau-riche wife) and the contrast between characters of different ranks; and (4) Resolutions – the marriages and social outcomes at the novel's end, which either reinforce or subtly adjust class boundaries. By tracing these narrative threads, we identify Austen's implicit commentary on class values.

Our method involved iterative close reading: identifying relevant passages in the novel and then interpreting them with the aid of critical insights. For example, we analyzed the pivotal conversation in which Mr. Knightley rebukes Emma for persuading Harriet to reject a proposal from a farmer, Mr. Martin, on the grounds of social inferiority. We aligned such textual evidence with scholarly interpretations. Paul Delany's framework, distinguishing *economic class* from *social status*, for instance, provided a lens to understand why Emma objects to Harriet marrying a financially secure man but of lower social station. Likewise, Mary-Elizabeth Fowkes Tobin's concept of *"impoverished gentlewomen"* informed our examination of Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax as examples of genteel women left without fortune or prospects in a class-conscious society. We also drew upon literary analyses that avoid overt ideological bias (per the study's focus) but still provide insight, such as Frances Koziar's discussion of manners and mobility in Austen's novels, and Ala Eddin Sadeq's findings on how *Emma* portrays class superiority and social climbing.

All sources were openly accessible (e.g., journal articles in open repositories, society websites, public domain texts) and are cited in APA 7th edition format. We have preserved direct citations from these works to maintain scholarly rigor. Our analytical approach is interpretive and contextual: we interpret Austen's literary techniques (irony, free indirect discourse, characterization) in showing class attitudes, and we contextualize those findings with historical norms and critical commentary. This combined methodology—textual analysis supported by contextual research—allows us to comprehensively assess Jane Austen's approach to class structures in *Emma*, as would be expected in a scholarly literary analysis by a university lecturer.

Results

Class Hierarchy and Social Order in *Emma*

Austen paints the village of Highbury as a tightly knit society where everyone's rank is understood, and social interactions are governed by that hierarchy. At the apex of Highbury's class structure are the landed gentry: Emma Woodhouse and her family at Hartfield, and Mr. Knightley of Donwell Abbey. Their status rests on traditional bases – lineage, land, and longstanding local prominence. As Elizabeth Hawksley observes, *Emma*'s world "on the surface…is a socially stable society with the Woodhouses…and Mr. Knightley at the apex. Their wealth and status has been

established for many generations – that socially damning word 'trade' is no part of their…inheritance". Below them are the likes of Mr. Weston, a man of good character who had to "engage in trade" in his past to restore his fortune but has since rejoined the ranks of the gentlemen. The novel subtly notes that Mr. Weston's foray into commerce is politely forgotten now that he owns land and has married a former governess, Miss Taylor (now Mrs. Weston). We also meet Mr. Elton, the vicar, who as a clergyman is considered a gentleman by profession and is "always welcome at Hartfield"; his status, however, is lower than the Woodhouses', and his later behavior shows a keen consciousness of class (aspiring to marry higher, then settling for a rich bride of ostensibly lower breeding).

Austen populates Highbury with *characters from various rungs* of the social ladder, carefully delineating their positions. The "upper-middle" gentry (like Emma and Knightley) occupy the top; the "second tier" includes people like the Eltons and Westons who are respectable but slightly below the old families; further down are individuals such as Harriet Smith, of uncertain parentage, and the Bates family (Miss Bates and her elderly mother), who, though born into the genteel class (Miss Bates is the daughter of the former vicar), now live in genteel poverty on the margins of Highbury society. *Emma* explicitly maps out this hierarchy. For instance, the narrator notes that "the Woodhouses were first in consequence there. All looked up to them." Conversely, the Bateses, while treated with courtesy, have no significant influence; their status is precarious because they lack wealth. Mrs. and Miss Bates represent what Tobin calls the "impoverished gentlewoman" – women of gentle birth who have little money and thus occupy a painful social position ("She cannot work, she cannot beg" in the patriarchal society). Austen portrays the "quiet desperation" of their lives: Miss Bates is endlessly grateful for small favors and invitations, and her incessant chatter is both a comic device and a pathetic reflection of her social insecurity. According to one analysis, *Emma* features a "surprisingly large number" of such impoverished gentlewomen, underlining how even in a comfortable village setting, class and gender conspire to leave some individuals vulnerable. These women depend on the charity and goodwill of their higher-class neighbors – a dependence Austen illustrates, for example, when Mrs. Elton officiously plans to "help" Jane Fairfax by finding her a governess position, a gesture that underscores Jane's lack of social power.

The social order in *Emma* is not merely background; it actively shapes events and relationships. Highbury's class conventions dictate, for example, who can socialize with whom and under what terms. The novel shows that "the rich and 'well-bred' control the social situations, issuing and initiating invitations and friendships," while "those of low social standing depend upon the charity and initiative of those in the higher class". Emma, as the leading lady of the village, feels it is her prerogative to visit or not visit families like the Coles, wealthy tradespeople who have recently gained money. In a telling episode, the Coles hold a dinner party and, aware of their *new money* status, initially do not presume to invite the higher-ranked Emma. Emma internally debates

whether she would accept if invited; she is *relieved* (and a little piqued) when an invitation does arrive, and ultimately she attends, deciding it would be worse to be left out when all her peers go. This scene gently satirizes Emma's snobbery while also indicating that class barriers in Highbury, though real, are beginning to show tiny cracks under the pressure of merit and wealth (the Coles are "worthy people" in Emma's begrudging estimation, and their hospitality wins her over). Still, Austen shows that violations of the expected order can offend: for instance, Emma is scandalized when the vulgar Mrs. Elton, a parvenu from Bristol, takes the liberty of calling Mr. Knightley "Knightley" without a proper prefix – a breach of etiquette across class lines. Such moments illustrate how deeply ingrained class consciousness is in social behavior.

Emma Woodhouse's Class Consciousness and Misguided Social Engineering

Emma Woodhouse herself embodies Austen's complex approach to class structure. At twenty-one, Emma has "been mistress of the house" at Hartfield from a young age and, as the narrator archly notes, enjoys "the power of having rather too much her way". Secure in her social position, Emma believes she can manage the lives of those around her, especially in matters of marriage. However, her well-intentioned meddling is warped by her class prejudices. From the start, Emma is described as "a little too well" convinced of her judgment, and nowhere is this more evident than in her treatment of her friend Harriet Smith. Harriet is a sweet-tempered young woman of uncertain parentage (she is termed "the natural daughter of somebody" in polite terms), whom Emma befriends and takes under her wing. Seeing Harriet's pliability and lower social situation, Emma decides to improve Harriet by steering her away from those Emma deems beneath her and aiming her toward a "gentleman" match. This mentorship is condescending in itself; Emma never considers Harriet her equal, but rather a protégée or even a doll to practice her matchmaking ambitions on.

Emma's class consciousness is starkly revealed in the episode of Mr. Martin's proposal. Robert Martin is a respectable, educated young farmer – industrious and kind, but a yeoman class, which in Emma's eyes is far below her sphere. When Mr. Martin courts Harriet, Emma swiftly intervenes. Mr. Martin's proposal in a letter is quite well-written and sincere (even Emma has to admit it "is a better written letter than I expected"); Harriet is inclined to accept, touched by his affection. Yet Emma, in subtle but manipulative ways, dissuades Harriet from esteeming Mr. Martin. She implies it would be degrading for Harriet, now *Emma's friend*, to "sink" into marriage with a farmer. Later, when Mr. Knightley confronts Emma on this interference, a crucial dialogue ensues that lays bare the novel's central class tension. Knightley reproaches Emma for having "no business" to separate two young people who were well-suited. Emma, affronted, defends herself by elevating Harriet's social standing: *"Mr. Martin is nothing more than a farmer…a good match for Harriet? How could you think it? …Harriet's claims should be considered. Mr. Martin may be the richest of the two, but he is undoubtedly her inferior in rank… The sphere in which she moves is much above his. –*

It would be a degradation.". Here Emma explicitly voices the classist assumption that governs her actions: even though Harriet's origins are murky and her fortune modest, Emma perceives Harriet as elevated by association (Harriet has been educated at a boarding school and now socializes with Emma, a gentleman's daughter). In Emma's view, Harriet now moves in a "sphere" above that of a farmer; for Harriet to marry Robert Martin would be a step down, a disgrace to the higher status Emma believes she has conferred upon her friend.

Mr. Knightley's response is a sharp reality check and reflects Austen's more pragmatic take on class. He exclaims, *"A degradation for illegitimacy and ignorance to marry a respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer!"*. With this retort, Knightley punctures Emma's pretensions: Harriet, he reminds her, is socially *below* Mr. Martin by birth and education – Harriet is likely an illegitimate child with no family name, and she has received a very "indifferent education". Knightley points out that those who raised Harriet (probably her unknown father or guardian) never intended her for high society; she was left at Mrs. Goddard's school to grow up among tradesmen's daughters. *"She desired nothing better herself. Till you chose to turn her into a friend, she had no sense of superiority to her own class… She was as happy as possible with the Martins. …If she now imagines herself above them, it is you who have given her that idea."*. Knightley's words highlight two significant points in Austen's approach: first, the folly of ignoring practical social truths (Harriet's situation did not objectively change just because Emma took notice of her), and second, Austen's implicit criticism of those in the upper class (like Emma) who irresponsibly meddle in the lives of their social inferiors out of pride or fanciful notions. Emma's attempt to socially re-engineer Harriet is shown to be not only arrogant but cruelly misguided – it raises Harriet's expectations only to subject her to humiliation later (as Mr. Elton will rudely reject the thought of courting Harriet, and Harriet will suffer greatly). Here, Austen uses Emma's mistakes to satirize class snobbery: Emma, though kind at heart, has absorbed the values of her class to the point of *"snobbishness"*, displaying what one critic calls an "unease about class" that makes her *"unforgiving about people wanting to climb above their 'proper' place"*.

Notably, while Austen gently chides Emma's class prejudice, she does so with comedic irony rather than harsh condemnation. The narrative allows Emma to learn and grow. The painful outcome of the Elton fiasco (Emma's attempt to match Harriet with Mr. Elton backfires when Elton, a social climber himself, presumptuously seeks to marry Emma and, spurned, marries a nouveau-riche woman instead) is a lesson for Emma. Mr. Elton's behavior – he considers Harriet far beneath him ("a *distasteful* alliance" once he realizes Emma never intended to marry him) – mirrors Emma's class disdain, but in a more vulgar way. Austen thus holds up a mirror to Emma: the snobbery she exhibited in undervaluing Robert Martin is reflected in Mr. Elton's snub of Harriet. This parallel is strengthened by the character of Mrs. Elton (formerly Augusta Hawkins), who arrives as Mr. Elton's wife. Mrs. Elton is depicted as grossly *vulgar and pretentious* – she constantly brags of her relations and wealth, liberally bestows nicknames and presumptuous advice, and tries to position

herself as Queen of Highbury society. Because Mrs. Elton is "new money" and lacks true gentility of manners, Emma (and the reader) find her laughable and offensive. Yet Austen implies that Emma and Mrs. Elton share a key flaw: *both* treat people as social capital. Mrs. Elton patronizes Jane Fairfax in an ostentatious show of charity, and Emma had patronized Harriet in a similarly self-satisfied way. The crucial difference, as Emma and others perceive, is *breeding*: Emma's manners are superior, her condescension more subtle, whereas Mrs. Elton's crassness makes her an easy target of ridicule. Austen thus uses Mrs. Elton as a foil to underline the novel's theme that true gentility is a matter of conduct and kindness, not just class status. Emma's irritation that Mrs. Elton calls Jane "my friend" and Knightley "Knightley" reveals that Emma does know what polite respect entails, even if she needed a rebuke to exercise it fully.

Cross-Class Relationships and Responsibilities

Throughout *Emma*, Austen examines how people of different classes relate to each other, and she often critiques the *moral responsibilities (or failures)* of the upper classes toward those below. Mr. Knightley emerges as a figure of an ideal gentleman who responsibly bridges class differences. He is frequently shown performing acts of kindness and respect across social boundaries. For example, at the Crown Inn ball, when Mr. Elton pointedly refuses to dance with Harriet (leaving her publicly embarrassed), Mr. Knightley gallantly steps in to ask Harriet to dance, rescuing her from disgrace. This gesture is minor but telling – Knightley understands the *social pain* Harriet felt and uses his high status to restore her dignity in the group. Similarly, Knightley visits his tenants, gives advice to farmers like Robert Martin, and shows genuine concern for the welfare of the Bateses. In contrast, Emma initially avoids or neglects those duties: she *means* to be charitable (she occasionally sends food to poor families and visits the Bateses with gifts), but she does so more out of a sense of propriety than sincere fellowship, at least until her turning point in the novel.

The pivotal Box Hill scene dramatizes the responsibilities of class in a moral sense. In this scene, Emma, Knightley, the Eltons, the Westons, Jane Fairfax, Frank Churchill, and Harriet are gathered for an outing. The social mix is volatile: tensions and secrets abound, and Emma, feeling witty and mischievous, ends up *insulting Miss Bates*. Miss Bates, the kindly spinster of reduced means, is an easy target—she chatters incessantly, repeating trivialities. When prompted to play a word game of conceits, Emma lightly tells Miss Bates that *with her talent for tedious talk she will have no trouble coming up with three dull things to say, or rather, she'd "only have to say three things" to meet the requirement*. This cruel joke, spoken publicly, wounds and humiliates Miss Bates, who immediately apprehends it and stammers an apology for "being so dull." The significance of this moment is profound: Emma, a social superior, has abused her privilege by being callous to someone vulnerable. Mr. Knightley later takes Emma aside and scolds her in perhaps the most famous reprimand in Austen's works: *"It was badly done, indeed! …Were she a woman of fortune, I would not quarrel with you… But poor Miss Bates, with her narrow income! …Her situation*

should secure your compassion. To laugh at her, humble her… was cruel" (Ch. 43). Knightley's words echo Austen's own moral voice. He emphasizes that *with social privilege comes the duty of kindness*: *"How could you be so unfeeling to a woman of her character, age, and situation?*" Austen thus makes clear that noblesse oblige (the obligation of the privileged to be generous and respectful) is a core principle she endorses. Emma's lapse is portrayed as a serious moral failure precisely because Miss Bates's class and age ought to have elicited protection, not scorn, from someone like Emma.

This incident catalyzes Emma's moral awakening. Deeply chastened, Emma visits the Bateses the next day to atone, demonstrating personal growth in humility and empathy. Austen uses this reconciliation to illustrate that *class distinctions can be mediated by personal virtue*. Emma's sincere remorse and kindness toward Miss Bates restore a proper social and ethical balance. In effect, Emma learns to exercise the true graciousness that her station demands, aligning her behavior with Knightley's standards. As one scholar notes, by the end, *Emma* suggests that the real markers of being a "lady" or "gentleman" are not birth or wealth alone, but behavior – "refinement in manners, delicacy of sentiment, and propriety in conduct". These qualities, Austen implies, are *"not the monopoly of…those…with distinguished social positions"*. In *Emma*, characters of lower rank like Harriet or even the Martins can have excellent natural qualities and feelings, while high-ranking figures can lack grace (e.g., Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* is all arrogance without true gentility, a point Austen generalizes in her oeuvre).

Social mobility (or its limits) is another aspect Austen threads through the novel. The time when *Emma* was written (1814–1815) followed the upheavals of the late 18th century and was on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution's social changes. While *Emma* stays focused on a rural gentry setting, it subtly acknowledges that the class system was not entirely static. The presence of the Coles as upwardly mobile former tradespeople, and of Mrs. Elton with her merchant-class background, indicates that wealth from business was forcing its way into gentry circles. Indeed, *"during the Industrial Revolution, the meaning of the word 'gentleman' expanded to include merchants, clergy, army officers, and others"*, and Austen is aware of this shift. Mr. Weston's life story (an army officer who married into the aristocracy, then did business, then bought an estate) exemplifies the blurred lines of class in her era. Frances Koziar observes that *in the late Romantic period, increasing social mobility intensified class consciousness*, as the established gentry grew more defensive of their status: *"this social mobility only increased the snobbishness of the middle and upper classes and the outcry against lower-class people coming into money and having the audacity to move upward"*. In *Emma*, we see that "outcry" or resentment is embodied in Emma's initial scorn for the Coles' pretensions and in Miss Churchill's family disinheriting her for marrying Mr. Weston. Yet Austen does not depict any *violent* class conflict or overt social protest in Highbury – the tensions are expressed in drawing-room slights and private conversations rather than public drama. The novel suggests that while upward mobility is possible (money can *buy* a

certain entry, as with the Coles or Mrs. Elton), *social acceptance* lags. True integration into the gentry requires gentility of conduct and time. The Coles, for instance, gain respect gradually by good manners and generosity. Mrs. Elton, lacking genuine refinement, remains a figure of ridicule despite her money. Austen's approach here is realistic and moderate: she neither glorifies the old aristocracy nor champions a classless society, but she *does* point out that character and behavior are the ultimate measures of worth.

Resolutions: Class Boundaries Affirmed or Adjusted?

By the conclusion of *Emma*, the immediate plot conflicts are happily resolved, but the resolutions themselves carry implications about class structure. Notably, all the marriages that occur (or are imminent) are *socially appropriate*, suggesting an affirmation of the existing class boundaries. Emma Woodhouse marries Mr. George Knightley – this is a union of true equals in rank and understanding, uniting the two principal families of Highbury. There is no breach of class here; rather, it consolidates the traditional gentry leadership (Donwell Abbey and Hartfield join, with Knightley effectively protecting the Woodhouses while taking Emma as his wife). Harriet Smith, after much emotional turmoil, finally marries Robert Martin, the farmer she loved all along. In narrative terms, this is a *satisfying romance*, but in social terms, it is Harriet returning to a match within her proper class. The novel hints that Harriet's parentage, revealed at the end, was not gentry after all but the daughter of a tradesman; thus, her marriage to a solid farmer is completely in line with her actual status. Austen presents this as Harriet's genuine happiness – there is no sense of tragedy in Harriet not "marrying up", but rather a sense of rightness. Critics like Mary Poovey have argued that *Emma*'s ending "draws the boundaries of class" firmly by ensuring that each character "knows their level" and stays within it (with Harriet's brief venture outside her sphere ultimately reined in). Indeed, the "general cry" in Highbury is that Harriet has made an extremely good match *for her*, and now even Emma concedes Robert Martin's worth. In this respect, Austen seems to reinforce the idea that cross-class marriages (especially where one party is significantly higher in rank) are *ill-advised or untenable*. Mr. Elton's ill-fated attempt to pursue Emma (above him) and Frank Churchill's secret engagement to Jane Fairfax (which *is* a fairly equal match in birth, though Jane is an orphan with little fortune) both caused turmoil until resolved within acceptable bounds.

However, while Austen's *plot* ties up with class boundaries intact, her *narrative* throughout the novel has eroded any moral justification for snobbery or arrogance based on those boundaries. Emma's climactic personal growth is marked by her shedding of class conceit and embracing humility and respect for others. When she agrees to marry Mr. Knightley, one of her chief worries is actually about her father and the logistics of *not leaving him* (since Mr. Woodhouse cannot bear change), not about any class issue. Knightley gallantly offers to move into Hartfield rather than take Emma away to Donwell, an extraordinary concession that shows how personal love and

kindness trump societal convention in their relationship. This arrangement subtly upends the usual patriarchal order (where a wife moves to the husband's estate) in favor of accommodating the needs of the vulnerable (Mr. Woodhouse). It is Austen's gentle way of showing flexibility and generosity within the rigid class system. Additionally, Knightley's decision to forego some of his *prerogative* as a landed gentleman (by living at Hartfield, which is of lower status than Donwell Abbey) to marry Emma on terms that care for her father illustrates Austen's ideal of enlightened gentry behavior – prioritizing family duty and compassion over pride of place.

In the case of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, their marriage is an example of class parity eventually rewarding virtue (and ending deceit). Frank, though raised by aristocratic relatives and somewhat spoiled, is the son of Mr. Weston (a gentleman by character, if not wealthy originally). Jane, the orphaned niece of Miss Bates, has no money but is the daughter of an army officer (i.e. a gentleman). Their match, once revealed, is acceptable in class terms (though Frank's guardians initially disapproved due to Jane's lack of fortune). Importantly, throughout the novel, Jane Fairfax's situation casts a sharp light on the hardships faced by a well-educated but portionless gentlewoman – she is on the brink of having to become a governess, a degrading employment for someone of her breeding, described by Jane as entering into a form of slavery. Austen evokes considerable sympathy for Jane's plight, thereby criticizing a society that gives intelligent women of good birth no respectable option to earn a living. The conclusion spares Jane that fate by allowing her to marry Frank. It's a conventional happy ending, but with a satirical twist: Frank's Aunt Churchill, who had been the obstacle due to class snobbery, conveniently dies, removing the class prejudice in their way. Thus, love can triumph, but only after the most resistant bastion of class pride (the aristocratic aunt) is removed. Austen's narrative, here and elsewhere, implies that while she *respects* social order, she has little esteem for those who use rank to behave selfishly or cruelly. Characters like Mrs. Churchill (Frank's aunt, who never appears onstage but is blamed for his secrecy and stress) and Mrs. Elton are tacitly condemned. In contrast, characters who combine gentle birth with generosity – Knightley, the Westons – or those who lack high rank but have intrinsic merit – the Martins, Jane Fairfax – are portrayed with great favor.

The "moral" of *Emma* about class can be interpreted in two complementary ways. On one hand, Austen suggests that *maintaining one's proper sphere leads to social harmony*. Marrying within one's class and fulfilling the duties of one's station (as Emma and Knightley will do together) ensures stability. There is a conservative comfort in seeing Harriet settled with Robert Martin on his farm – a solid, if unglamorous, prospect that promises contentment appropriate to their station. On the other hand, Austen advances a progressive social message on an individual level: high-born persons must *earn* their privilege through good character and cannot assume moral superiority simply from social rank. Emma's journey is one of shedding the illusion that her class status inherently makes her a good judge of others or gives her license to manage their lives. By the end, Emma's improved character – her empathy and self-awareness – justifies her "happy ending" as

much as her birth does. In *Emma*, virtue and sensitivity are Austen's true class markers: Mr. Knightley and even the admirable Mrs. Weston treat everyone with consideration regardless of rank, whereas those lacking these qualities (Emma at first, Mrs. Elton persistently) create discord. As G. Kitson Clark noted about Austen's works, the takeaway is that *qualities like kindness, respect, and propriety "were not the monopoly of…those to whom the world conceded distinguished social positions."* Austen thus subtly democratizes virtue even as she leaves the class structure itself largely in place. In the world of *Emma*, a farmer can be more of a gentleman (in conduct) than a clergyman with a good income – a point proved by Robert Martin versus Mr. Elton.

Discussion

The analysis of class structures in *Emma* reveals Jane Austen's approach as one of nuanced social realism balanced by comedic irony. Austen does not propose revolutionary changes to the class system of her time; instead, she *scrutinizes and gently critiques* the attitudes of those within that system. Through characters like Emma Woodhouse, Austen shows how class consciousness can breed vanity, misperception, and even cruelty – flaws that Austen then corrects through the novel's moral arc. Emma's growth from a "snobbish" young lady into a more self-aware and compassionate figure suggests Austen's belief in the possibility of personal enlightenment within the existing social framework. The novel ultimately endorses values of humility, kindness, and responsibility as the proper ethos of the upper class. Mr. Knightley's role – guiding Emma and embodying the ideal gentleman who uses his privilege benevolently – serves as Austen's model for how those at the top of the social ladder *ought* to behave. In essence, Austen's approach to class is didactic yet subtle: *Emma* entertains with its satirical portrayal of matchmaking and village gossip, even as it imparts lessons about the ethical use of social influence.

One of the striking findings in our analysis is Austen's distinction between economic class and social status, and how both factors interplay in Highbury's society. Paul Delany's insight that Austen differentiates the "axes" of wealth and status is borne out in *Emma*. The character dynamics often hinge on status considerations overruling pure economics. For instance, Emma's objection to Harriet marrying Robert Martin had nothing to do with Robert's *money* (he is financially stable, even improving as a farmer) but everything to do with his *social rank* – or lack of "gentility." This demonstrates Austen's keen awareness of the *twofold nature of class*: material conditions (income, property) and social esteem (family background, lifestyle). Austen shows that in her world, status honor (to use a Weberian term referenced by Delany) – the prestige associated with traditional gentle birth or occupation – imposed "restrictions on social intercourse" and especially on marriage across class lines. The Harriet–Martin subplot exemplifies this: no one denies Robert Martin's respectability or worth as an individual, but Emma (and even Harriet, once influenced) perceives a *marriage status gap* that societal norms would "cry out" against. In the end, when Harriet's parentage is revealed to be solidly middle-class (a tradesman's daughter), even Emma concedes

the match is fitting. Austen thus resolves the tension by aligning *status* with *affectionate merit*, implying that marriages will be happiest when they do not flout deeply ingrained class expectations – a conclusion that could be read as conservative. Indeed, as one study put it, in Austen's society, *"marriage and love relationships are motivated by social class"*, and it was a cultural given that *"the upper class [is] not [expected] to have a love relationship with the lower class"*. *Emma*'s plot follows this rule, as each romantic pairing comes together within the appropriate social tier.

However, Austen's treatment is far from a blunt endorsement of class prejudice. On the contrary, *Emma* is replete with ironies that undercut class arrogance. Mr. Elton, who fancies himself a fine gentleman as a vicar, is lampooned as laughably self-important and mercenary; his snobbish refusal to dance with Harriet is condemned by the narrative and countered by Knightley's gracious example. Mrs. Elton, who tries to *ape* the manners of the elite, is ridiculed for her pretensions – yet through her, Austen perhaps wryly suggests that much of "proper" society's behavior is performance anyway. The difference is that Mrs. Elton performs it poorly. By highlighting her faux pas (like presuming intimacy too soon, boasting of wealth, or treating Jane Fairfax as a project), Austen draws attention to the unwritten rules that govern class interactions. The reader learns these rules alongside the characters. For instance, we see that it is acceptable for a man like Knightley to befriend his farmer tenants (paternalism is allowed downward), but it is outrageous for a parvenu like Mrs. Elton to claim equal footing with long-established gentry. Such nuances show Austen's almost anthropological observation of her class system. She does not overtly question *why* a person like Jane Fairfax must suffer for lack of money, but she makes us feel the injustice of it – our sympathy for Jane and Miss Bates is a tacit critique of a system that values women by their wealth and connections. Beth Fowkes Tobin's Marxian reading of *Emma* even characterizes the novel as exposing class power dynamics: *Emma* portrays how "impoverished gentlewomen" are marginalized and how the *"capacity for unkindness"* can manifest in those holding power (as at Box Hill). Our results align with Tobin's observation that Austen shines a light on those quiet sufferings. The Box Hill incident, in particular, serves as a microcosm of class insensitivity being checked by moral conscience.

In discussing Austen's perspective, it's important to note her artistic strategy: Austen employs *free indirect discourse* and irony in a way that often blurs with Emma's biased point of view, thereby inviting readers to critique Emma's thoughts. For much of the novel, readers with modern sensibilities likely find Emma's class assumptions objectionable – and that is by Austen's design. By crafting a heroine who is flawed yet redeemable, Austen can gently chastise the class attitudes Emma represents while still keeping us on Emma's side. This narrative technique results in a layered approach: Austen does not humiliate Emma (as a more harsh moralist might) but allows Emma to humiliate herself and learn. The reader, privy to Emma's internal errors and subsequent regret, comes to understand Austen's message: good sense and kindness must override vanity and class conceit. The comedic aspects – Emma's matchmaking disasters, mistaken confidences, and

the ultimate irony that Harriet, whom Emma thought too low for Mr. Martin, turns out to be too low even for Mr. Elton's vanity – all reinforce a social lesson. Emma's snobbery is self-defeating, and she ends up championing the very match she once scorned (Harriet with Martin) because experience has taught her the value of authentic affection and respectability over superficial gentility.

Moreover, Austen hints at a broader social commentary: while *Emma* ends in harmony, with each character settled where they "belong," there is an undercurrent of critique about the limited roles and prospects for those not born to wealth. Jane Fairfax's resigned despair at the thought of being a governess or Harriet's vulnerability as an unprotected girl point to systemic issues. Austen's solution in the novel is ultimately personal and local – virtuous and open-hearted individuals like Knightley and Emma (after her reformation) will look after the less fortunate in their community. This reflects Austen's context and perhaps her belief in incremental social improvement rather than radical change. Knightley's landlord-tenant model, shown as benevolent, and Emma's new humility in caring for her neighbors, suggest that a *reformed gentry* can mitigate the cruelties of class. In a way, Austen advocates a kind of enlightened paternalism: those with power (land, money, status) should exercise it with compassion and justice. If they do, people like Miss Bates or Harriet can be content within the status quo. If they do not (as when Emma momentarily lapses, or when others like Mrs. Elton meddle officiously), class differences become a source of pain and discord.

Our research, by avoiding the imposition of later theoretical frameworks (Marxist, feminist, etc.), has tried to let Austen's voice and the immediate 19th-century context speak. Interestingly, even without explicitly invoking modern theory, *Emma* can be seen as addressing many concerns later raised by those theories: the novel deals with economic power and dependency (Marxist themes) in how wealth dictates options for women like Jane; it deals with gender and social constraints (proto-feminist themes) in how Emma's sphere of influence is limited to matchmaking since real power is held by men and inheritance laws; it even touches on meritocracy vs. aristocracy, a key issue in social and political thought. Austen's genius is that she bakes these themes into the fabric of a charming story. *Emma*'s enduring interest for scholars and readers alike lies in this rich subtext beneath the sparkling surface.

In summary, Austen's approach to class structures in *Emma* is characterized by realism, satire, and ethical reflection. She presents the class system as a given backdrop – her characters do not question its existence – but she deftly examines *behavior within that system*. Social mobility is acknowledged but shown to be fraught and often checked by prejudice. Class pride is portrayed as folly when it blinds one to others' merits or one's duties. The outcomes of the novel affirm social norms outwardly, yet Austen invites readers to celebrate the triumph of personal virtue over snobbish values. The implication is that *if* society is to have strict classes, then those at the top

must behave in a way that justifies their position – through generosity, integrity, and respect for the human dignity of those "below" them. Otherwise, as Mr. Knightley warns Emma, they are *cruel and unfeeling*, which is both morally wrong and, in Austen's comedic justice, liable to be corrected through personal comeuppance.

Limitations and Further Research

It should be noted that *Emma* (and Austen's novels in general) focuses almost exclusively on the gentry and their immediate associates; the novel does not depict the lives of the truly poor or working classes (servants and laborers appear only in passing). Thus, Austen's critique of class is internally focused on the manners of her class rather than a systemic analysis of class oppression. This limitation leaves room for further research into how Austen's work was received by contemporary readers in various classes – for instance, did the emerging middle class read her as validating their values against the old aristocracy? Additionally, comparing *Emma*'s approach to class with that in Austen's other works (like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Persuasion*, which handle different social contexts and mobility outcomes) could yield a broader understanding of her social vision. Another fruitful avenue is to examine film and television adaptations of *Emma* to see how they emphasize or soften class issues for modern audiences, thereby revealing our contemporary preoccupations versus Austen's. Despite these limitations, *Emma* remains a seminal case study in how literature can reflect and subtly challenge the class structures of its time. Austen's sophisticated handling of class – never preachy, often comedic, yet fundamentally concerned with questions of worth, equality, and justice – continues to resonate, inviting readers and scholars to discern the enduring humanity beneath the manners of a bygone era.

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Received: 21.05.2025
Revised: 25.05.2025
Accepted: 29.05.2025
Published: 03.06.2025