

***Emma* by Jane Austen, discussion questions**

1. About Emma, Jane Austen famously said, “I’m going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.” Does Austen succeed? How many ways does Emma offend you? Why do you think Austen ‘liked’ her heroine?
2. “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.” It has been said that great novelists introduce the main themes of a book in the first sentence. What themes are suggested in the first sentence of Emma? Is she “handsome, clever, rich, comfortable and happy” as the first sentence states? What other characteristics are missing that become evident as the story progresses?
3. Austen makes an unusual choice by selecting as her main character the most privileged woman in the book, the woman with “little to distress or vex her.” The Jane Fairfax story line has more traditional elements of tension and drama than Emma’s story. Austen’s own publisher said of *Emma*, “it wants incident and romance.” Do you agree? Would you have rather read about Jane?
4. “Altogether, she was quite convinced of Harriet Smith’s being exactly the young friend she wanted--exactly the something which her home required.” Discuss Emma’s choice of friends. Why does she befriend Harriet? Does Harriet benefit from Emma’s friendship? How would you describe Emma’s mentoring skills? Mrs. Elton attempts to mentor Jane; are there similarities?
5. Class issues run through every plot line in *Emma*. Harriet Smith is “the natural daughter of nobody knows whom.” Which fact—her illegitimacy or her undetermined class standing—is more important in effecting her marital prospects? Why does Emma hope to see Harriet married above her expectations? Is it a class issue that causes Emma’s relationship with Harriet to change over the course of the book?
6. Emma tells Harriet she doesn’t plan to marry. But other women, in one way or another, the serious economic consequences of staying single. The book is filled with women at risk such as: Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, Mrs. Elton, Harriet Smith, Miss Taylor. What are their options? Is Austen a feminist?
7. One effect of the hidden (Jane Fairfax/Frank Churchill) story is to undermine the omniscience of the narrator. Some critics have suggested that the narrator controls the reader less in *Emma* than in most Austen books. Would you agree and did this style of writing create confusion, mystery, or something else for you, the reader? What might Austen’s purpose be to ‘hide’ facts?
8. Did you spot any clues that showed an understanding between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill?

9. Were there any persons in the story who were a good judge of character, acted transparently and had reasonable understanding of their status?

10. What point did Austen make by including gypsies and poultry thieves in her plot?

Questions modified from Penguin Random House/Spark notes/JASNA (Jane Austen Society of North America)