

Literature Insights
General Editor: Charles Moseley

Jane Austen

Emma

Neil Wenborn

*“Planet ‘Emma’
has an active
moral geology.”*

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The Author

Neil Wenborn graduated in English from Magdalene College, Cambridge, and worked at the Bodleian Library in Oxford before pursuing a career in publishing, becoming Editorial Director of one of the UK's leading independent publishers. Since 1989 he has been a freelance writer and publishing consultant and has published widely both in Britain and in the United States. His works include biographies of Haydn, Stravinsky and Dvořák. He is co-editor of the highly respected *History Today Companion to British History* (Collins & Brown) and *A Dictionary of Jewish–Christian Relations* (Cambridge University Press). A collection of his poetry, *Firedoors*, is published by Rockingham Press.

Abbreviations

L: Deirdre Le Faye, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 3rd ed. 1995)

Memoir: James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926)

NA: Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923)

PP: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923 and reprints)

Southam 1: B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, Vol. 1, 1811–1870 (London: Routledge, 1968)

Southam 2: B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, Vol. 2, 1870–1940 (London: Routledge, 1987)

SS: Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923)

All page references for *Emma* are to R. W. Chapman's edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923).

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Introduction

Emma is among the supreme achievements of English fiction. If not Jane Austen's most popular work—that accolade would no doubt go to *Pride and Prejudice*—it is surely her most inexhaustible. Written in fourteen months during the closing phase of the Napoleonic Wars, and set in a tight-knit fictional Surrey village, *Emma* is a book completely dominated by the personality of its eponymous heroine. It is famously a novel in which very little actually happens: its drama is above all the psychological drama of Emma Woodhouse herself. But perhaps because its central character is one of the most living, and most divisive, heroines in fiction, *Emma* is also one of the most variously interpreted novels in the language. It has been seen as the story of a woman's humiliation and reform and as a rallying cry for female authority, as a template of the modern detective novel and as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unregulated imagination. It has been read as a book about reading and a book about authorship, and has yielded subtexts on patriotism, health and religious conversion, among many others. People have been writing about *Emma* ever since Walter Scott published the first review almost two hundred years ago, but the novel's rich multidimensionality continues to offer new perspectives and new challenges not only to each new generation of critics, but also to each reader on each new reading. As Reginald Farrer observed in his classic centenary essay on Jane Austen, 'while twelve readings of *Pride and Prejudice* give you twelve periods of pleasure repeated, as many readings of *Emma* give you that pleasure, not repeated only, but squared and squared again with each perusal, till at every fresh reading you feel anew that you never understood anything like the widening sum of its delights'.

Farrer was also among the first critics to draw attention to *Emma*'s unprecedented textural density—what he called 'the manifold complexity of the book's web', in which 'every sentence, almost every

epithet, has its definite reference to equally unemphasised points before and after'.¹ The result is a fabric of astonishing narrative and thematic unity, across which events, scenes, even individual words, resonate with one another as if it were a single sounding-board. One of the main unifying principles, of course, is the mind of Emma Woodhouse herself. The heroine is absent from centre-stage for only a handful of pages, and almost everything we see in the novel we see, or think we see, through her eyes (to such an extent that the trace it leaves in the memory is akin to first-person narrative). In fact, the way Jane Austen manages the relationship between the narrator's perspective and the heroine's is one of the great high-wire acts of English literature. By allowing us, in the words of one critic, 'to share Emma's inner life without being limited by it'² Austen places us simultaneously inside and outside her heroine's consciousness. In a sense, *Emma* thus has two overlapping narrators (indeed, one way of looking at Jane Austen's much-discussed irony is to see it as the principal means by which she regulates the extent of this overlap at any given moment). Emma disposes the lives of those around her just as her author does, and while the cast of characters is identical in both cases, the tension between the two emerging patterns provides much of the novel's narrative and thematic drive, as well as much of its comedy.

The critic John F. Burrows has remarked that every ripple in the surface of Jane Austen's work repays attention.³ Of all the novels, this is truest of *Emma*. As Austen's brother James and his wife were the first to recognize (see 5.1 below), *Emma*'s surface is very different from that of its predecessors. For all the classical balance of the novel's structure, its language is in many respects radically unstable. Gone, for the most part, are the ironically inflected epigrammatism of *Pride and Prejudice* and the quasi-Augustan periods of *Mansfield Park*. In their place is a prose which seems deliberately stripped of

1 'Jane Austen, ob. July 18, 1817' in F. Stafford, ed., *Jane Austen's Emma: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), p.75.

2 A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of her Artistic Development* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p.149.

3 'Style' in Edward Copeland, and Juliet McMaster, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p.187.