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Analysis of the importance of social class in dictating marriage matches in *Emma* by Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT

Analyzing the significance of social class in determining potential matrimony matches. Social class and marriage are two foci and this paper makes an argument about the role that social class plays in establishing nineteenth-century marriage alliances in the novel Emma. The paper discusses the various match-making attempts enlisted in the novel and follows each of them in detail to establish its reasoning.

Keywords— *Jane Austen, Emma, social, class, hierarchy, structure, status, marriage, match*

1. INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen is one of the foremost English novelists of the nineteenth-century with six completed novels to her credit. Renowned for her distinct style of writing, her works defined the era's novel of manners, becoming perennial sources of entertainment and inspiration for generations to come.

Emma (1815), her fourth novel follows the story of Emma Woodhouse a young, pretty, wealthy and self-assured woman who indulges herself in several unguided and meddling attempts at matchmaking business. Her romantic missteps lead her on a path of self-awareness and growth ultimately making her an admirable character.

As is characteristic of Austen's novels she has vividly demonstrated a society where social class plays a paramount role in the daily dealings of life and the setting in this novel is no different. It is a very important theme in the book as Regency England was a very hierarchical society with a rigid social structure that dictated the fate of Austen's characters. Marriage was one of the main aspects of a person's life, that was entirely influenced by their social standing in society. In reading the entire text, one is also of the opinion that Austen maintains and respects such frames of class boundaries as is evident in all her works. Thus, in such fiction stands a testimony that class barriers very well-governed the choice of suitors for the various people concerned in the book and makes a case for this research paper which aims to analyze the inextricable link between social class and the making of a marriage match.

2. MARRIAGE MATCHES

The paper constitutes a list of marriage matches, namely that of, Ms. Taylor, Mr. Weston, Mr. Martin, Harriet Smith, Mr. Elton, Augusta Hawkins, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax, Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley, that present themselves in the book. Each match is analysed to ascertain the role of social class in fixing wedlock.

1. Ms. Taylor and Mr. Weston

The book opens up with the marriage of Emma's former governess Ms. Taylor to a Mr. Weston highlighting the centrality of marriage in the novel. Ms. Taylor's marriage provides for her an opportunity to escape her lower working-class status as well as to achieve material security thus conforming to the custom of marriage being a ticket for most lower-class women to financially secure a future for themselves.

Moreover, the knowledge of Mr. Weston's first marriage with Ms. Churchill described as an "unsuitable connection" that "did not produce much happiness" (Austen, 7) makes it clear for the readers to gauge the chief significance of social class in making a decent and happy marriage match as the marriage between Mr. Weston and Ms. Churchill turned out sour on account of a

mismatch in social class. This leaves him slightly wiser than before and he learns to look for a more even match in social class and also purchases property before proposing to the “well judging and truly amiable woman Ms. Taylor” (Austen 8).

2. Harriet Smith and Mr. Martin

Social class is central to the relationships in the novel as those at the top of this structure control the behaviour of those below them. Emma fancies herself a successful matchmaker and has vowed to find a wife for Mr. Elton, the vicar of Highbury.

At the dinner hosted at the Wodehouse’s estate, she takes Harriet Smith, a young woman of uncertain parentage who boards at Mrs. Goddard’s school, under her wing. This move is influenced both by charity and vanity which are two well-known traits connected to those belonging to the privileged class. Readers slowly see that her friendship with Harriet is not that of equals due to Emma’s superiority in class, education and wealth. Despite her good intentions, she reveals her elitist nature in announcing her disdain for the Martins. She cajoles Harriet into adopting her attitude for the lower classes and beseeches her to consider Mr. Martin well below her standing. On encountering Mr. Martin for a walk, she critiques him as having a “lack of gentility” (Austen 16). This opinion of hers is based on his coarse manners and inferior class. Alternatively, she hastens to bring Mr. Elton to Harriet attention and thus devises a matrimonial match between the two.

Ultimately, she does not allow Harriet to make her own decision and manipulates her into declining Mr. Martin’s proposal and adopting her preferences. She also fears her friendship with Harriet will diminish if her friend was to marry Mr. Martin as she couldn’t possibly be seen in the same company as them. This sheds light on the fact that Emma steers the ship of Harriet’s future and proves how those at the top rung of the ladder often possess the power of shaping the lives of people below them in a way that is most convenient to them. Conversely, Harriet’s extent of dependency on Emma’s judgement is unearthed. Harriet is shown to be so full of admiration for Emma, that she is blinded by it, which brings to the surface both her weak will and the basis of the conditional friendship.

3. Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Elton

At the Weston’s Christmas eve party Austen has laid out the stage for Emma’s unpleasant disclosure concerning Mr. Elton’s true feelings which are directed towards her as opposed to her thinking that he harbours affection for Harriet. The proposal by Mr. Elton that takes place in the carriage and the subsequent declining of Emma’s having encouraged him in any manner provides fodder to this paper’s main argument. Mr. Elton is seen to dismiss Harriet for the same reasons Emma wishes that Harriet dismisses Mr. Martin: he thinks her to be of an inferior social standard and thus takes offence at the presumption of being paired with Harriet. Emma too, is offended at his presumption of thinking of her friend to be below him but she is more outraged at his supposed thinking of him being equal to Emma. Here again, the audience is given another classic example of how society’s social set-up directs the personal lives of its people in choosing their potential suitors.

4. Emma Woodhouse and Frank Churchill

As are the goings-on of a small town, a person’s reputation tends to precede their physical introduction as happens with the character of Frank Churchill who is introduced to the book readers through others impressions of him. Emma has surprisingly taken a liking for him and is seen contemplating him to be a good match for herself. It becomes essential to point out that her views in thinking him to be an apt suitor for herself are founded on the same principles of social values that beset her class: connections, social class, wealth and accomplishments.

5. Augusta Hawkins and Mr. Elton

In the aftermath of the misperceptions of both Emma and Mr. Elton, the book sees his departure from Highbury to Bath to find a suitable wife for himself. He returns victorious in a Ms. Augusta Hawkins. Here, he marries her due to her newfound wealth. However, as Hawkins family is not well established, she is considered to be a “nobody” and the new couple is not welcomed into the high society as expected by Mr. Elton. Emma delights in the knowledge of the new bride being on a no better footing than Harriet’s, although Mrs. Elton comes across as wealthier than her friend. This gives an insight into Mr. Elton’s choice of a wife who serves his purpose of attaining a higher status in society by employing his wife’s riches and airy pretensions to use. This asserts the idea of how economics and social bearing was taken into greater account than romantic attraction when it came to marriage during that time period.

6. Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill

Social class plays its hand in the love life of these two individuals as well. They are obligated to keep their engagement a total secret from everybody until Frank’s aunt Mrs. Churchill’s passing. This is done to maintain his Churchill inheritance as Mrs. Churchill’s discovery of their relationship would have no doubt ended all communication between Frank and Jane as Jane is an orphan. Frank’s social standing is not too strong in itself and is dependent on his inherited wealth. The fear of being stripped away from what he is likely to own one day forces him with no choice but to remain mum till a favourable or rather a pressing moment arrives which commands his being honest about his engagement to Jane.

Emma calls their engagement “a very abominable sort of proceeding” (Austen 242) which is because the social mores of that time saw marriage as not just being between two people but two families as well. Secret engagement meant that their families either did not approve of the match or were kept in the dark which meant lying to everybody around them. This reflected badly on their upbringing and respective families too, making them look hoodwinked. Moreover, Jane’s orphaned status does not sit well in the circles of a well-bred society and she is saved the mortification of life as a governess by Frank’s timely address of the events.

7. Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley

The final match between the protagonist Emma and Mr. Knightley is applauded as a fitting and good one because they are equals. Their mutual fortune, superior lineage and well-established connections in addition to their love for each other results in an ultimately conservative conclusion—an affirmation of class affinity as the foundation of a good marriage. Mrs. Weston regards it to be a meritorious “union of the highest promise of felicity in itself” (Austen 281). Emma herself opines that Mr. Knightley is a better match for her than Frank Churchill which highlights the part that social hierarchy exercises in matters of love in Austen’s era.

3. CONCLUSION

Emma, like most of the author’s other novels, is a study of nineteenth-century English society and the pivotal significance of propriety and social class in the making of people’s lives. As John Halperin describes it: “In genteel households small matters of etiquette were of greater importance than they are today, largely because the eighteenth century gentry belonged to a society more formal than anything we know. There was more outward courtesy and ceremony of manner” (12). *Emma* is a social commentary on two divergent classes of people and their everyday actions which are largely governed by social structure. Readers are made to see how each character’s social standing restricts the true intentions of their actions and behaviors as is most evidently witnessed in the novel’s drama with regards to marriage matches. Though Jane and Frank are engaged to marry soon, the final chapter in the book is devoted to the marriages of Harriet to Mr. Martin, and Emma to Mr. Knightley — two matches of equal standing. This selective focus, in the end, reflects the novel’s morals to be akin to Emma’s perspectives by conservatively advocating for an equal social class as the key to a good match.

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