



## Emma, by Jane Austen

### **In A Nutshell**

Published in 1815, *Emma* was written at the height of Jane Austen's popularity. The novel focuses on a heroine who takes an interest in matchmaking. The Prince Regent, George, did Austen the "favor" of allowing her to dedicate *Emma* to him. Austen probably wasn't so excited about the prospect of dedicating her novel to a man who was, by all accounts, dissipated, drunk, and superficial. George set the standards of "gentlemanlike" behavior during his time. According to him, fashionable men were dandies – the sort who would ride sixteen miles to London just to get a haircut.

Interestingly, Austen's novel also takes up the question of gentlemanly – (and gentlewomanly) behavior – but she comes to very, very different conclusions than the Prince Regent. It might not be a coincidence that Mr. Knightley, the rugged, thoughtful, honest hero of our novel, is also named George. Ironic? Just a little. We like to imagine the good prince squirming in his seat as he read this novel.

*Emma* contains one of Austen's most remarkable heroines. That's a huge claim, we know – Austen is known for her strong, intelligent, amazing women. Emma is, of course, strong and intelligent and pretty amazing – but she's also amazingly flawed. She charges right in to mistake after mistake, convinced that she's somehow impervious to the sorts of errors in judgment which she's so quick to notice in those around her. Misguided heroines are actually pretty common in literature, but rarely do they display the sorts of tenacity and charm that

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Emma exudes. We love her even when she's screwing up – largely because she's able to accurately dissect most peoples' characters even as she remains blind to her own.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Do you think that Emma has given up matchmaking for good?
- 2 Is it possible to imagine a novel like *Emma* in which the heroine *doesn't* get married at the end? (If not, do we ever believe her when she says she won't get hitched?)
- 3 Could a man be the central character of this novel? Why or why not?

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