

IB-DP Extended Essay

English B

How are the concepts of 'social status' and 'marriage' used in Jane Austen's *Emma* to help convey the role of women in the 1800s?

3739 Words

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Introduction

It can be said that Jane Austen is one of the most significant writers of the 18th century who is known for her feminist beliefs and her novels critiquing marriage, social status, and gender inequality. Her novel, *Emma* mainly focuses on social status and marriage and women of the 18th century as well. Doubtless, the women of the 1800s did not have the rights women have today and were not financially independent, so they were bound to marry a man to be entitled to some rights. An unmarried woman could not own any property or have a say in agreements. When a woman is born, they “belong” to their father and when they get married, their husband “owns” them. These marriages were based on social status and some other factors, but generally not love. For two people to be married they needed to be in the same societal rank. Besides, society excluded unmarried women or forced them to marry. The only way a woman could stay unmarried and not be excluded was if they came from an exceptional family or was wealthy. For them, marriage was an option but for others, it was a need. Additionally, in marriages, low-class women were expected to fulfill some expectations like cooking and cleaning, but a high-class woman was not expected to do these things.

In *Emma*, Austen explores the concepts of social status and marriage through three major female characters: Emma Woodhouse, Harriet Smith, and Jane Fairfax. The novel’s protagonist Emma comes from a wealthy family, her social status is higher than most women in her country village Highbury. Based thereon, Emma talks about marriage as an option and not a necessity for a woman. Nevertheless, this is not true for most women in Highbury despite Emma’s claims. Harriet Smith is a 17-year-old girl whose father is unknown so, her social status is unspecified, but she is considered to be lower class. She previously had a romantic

relationship with a farmer named Mr. Martin who was considered appropriate for Harriet as their social status is somewhat equal though, Emma convinces her that Mr. Elton -whose social status is much higher- fancies her. Emma seems to not notice the social status factor in marriage considering that she makes Harriet believe that she can marry whomever she wants to marry. Jane Fairfax is another heroine we encounter later in the novel. Despite being orphaned from a young age, she manages to make a living for herself, get a great education and have manners. Even though she is not as rich as Emma, she has traits that make her social status higher. For this reason, she is able to marry Frank Churchill who is extremely wealthy and has considerably higher social status.

In this essay I will be tackling the question of how the concepts of 'social status' and 'marriage' are employed within the contexts of Emma, Harriet and Jane, in order to portray the role of women in the 1800s. Before my analysis, I will explore the concepts of social status, money, marriage, and women in the 1800s. I will be using John M. Lane's research on marriage, relationships and the struggle for identity in a patriarchal society. This background will shed light on our understanding Austen's writing intentions in bringing up these concepts so often in the novel.

Conceptual Background

1. Women and the Notion of Social Status in the 1800s

In the 1800s, women were seen as servants whose sole responsibility and purpose in life was to serve and praise men, especially their husbands. Women were also forced to marry since an unmarried woman was looked down upon by everyone including other women. Being

unmarried not only caused disdain among people, but also came with legal consequences. An unmarried woman was unable to enter contracts or have personal property. In contrast, married women did have the right to some legal actions, but these privileges came with expectations.¹ They expected to be the “perfect housewife”. This includes tasks like cooking, cleaning, taking care of her children, staying at home most of the time, and many more. The only way that they were praised was through their fertility. It was important for a man to know that he can continue his legacy. Moreover, women were expected to give birth to a male child since he can continue the family’s surname and take on the roles of his father after his passing. A female child was not as precious as a male child. It can be said that women’s repression starts from birth. Women’s roles can be seen clearly in Jane Austen’s *Emma*. Austen uses different female characters with different marital situations to reflect how the roles are. In addition to this, social status played a considerable role in the perception of women. Some women’s behaviors and choices could be seen over because of their social status and family. If a woman comes from a wealthy and respectable family, she is expected to marry a man who is as respectable as she is and perhaps has a higher social status than her. Women whose social status is higher are respected among all the people whose is lower. Marriage is not a “must” for these women since they can support themselves without a husband. In *Emma*, the audience can see that the protagonist Emma Woodhouse’s social status is higher than most of the town therefore, she is respected, and she is expected to be very picky about her husband. However, the other two female characters, Harriet Smith and Jane Fairfax, are deemed to be of a lower class than Emma is, therefore their expectancies are much different than Ms. Woodhouse’s. It is obvious that a woman’s social status determines her life in the 1800s.

2. Women and Monetary Issues in the 1800s

In the 1800s, money was the determining factor for a person's social status. If a family lived in a big mansion, wore expensive clothes, held balls, and had maids, their social status was clearly higher. In the early 1800s, women were not able to have a financial status of their own, they were either connected to their father or their husband. They were not able to enter contracts on their own or have a property under their name. And while "poor" women did not attract notice, "wealthy" women seemed to be living a better life than them and had privileges just because of their wealth. Society always showed great respect to wealthy women while they oppressed others.² Financial status and social status were closely linked at those times and this connection was felt ever more strongly than it is today.

3. Women and the Institution of Marriage in the 1800s

A woman's perspective of marriage can depend on many factors. One significant factor is financial and social status. These are both connected to each other. In the 1800s, women got married mainly because they needed to or were forced to do so. A husband meant more legal rights and a stable financial situation for a woman. Women of lower classes who were struggling financially saw marriage as a must for a good life. They believed that having a husband would rescue them from poverty and wretchedness, seeing it as an escape since they had no other choice.³ So, in most cases, they did not marry for love; they sought social and financial advantages. In the novel *Emma*, Jane Austen reflects these norms through the characters Harriet Smith and Jane Fairfax, but the complete opposite mindset through the heroine, Emma Woodhouse.

Body

In the novel *Emma*, Jane Austen portrays the role of women in the 1800s, through the concepts of social status and marriage within the contexts of three major female characters, i.e. Emma Woodhouse, Harriet Smith, Jane Fairfax. Any reader of the novel knows that these characters are very different from each other. Emma is the younger daughter of Mr. Henry Woodhouse, the most pronounced man of Highbury village. She loses her mother at a young age, and she is raised and cherished by her governess, Miss Taylor. Harriet Smith is a girl enrolled in Mrs. Goddard's boarding school in Highbury village. Her parents are unknown for the majority of the book, making her social status rather vague, but she is accepted to be coming from a lower-class. She is well-mannered and naïve. Jane Fairfax is the niece of Miss Bates, and she is described as a beautiful, talented, and well-mannered woman. yet because of her financial situation, she is still considered to be lower-class.

Emma Woodhouse

1. Marriage

Emma Woodhouse is the protagonist of the novel and the character that the novel's named after. The novel starts off with a description of Emma, "*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*" (1). In this sentence, Austen emphasizes the luxurious and comfortable life of Emma. It is important to note that she also grew up spoiled and had a lack of discipline. "*I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other*" (427), Emma says. Because of her privileges, she is given the option to stay unmarried and still be able to be respected and financially stable. She is also very independent and thus does not want to have

a relationship or get married. Instead, she is known for her famous and successful matchmaking. She “matches” two people and convinces them to get married. She is not completely against marriage when it comes to other people. The reason why these matches end up being successful is that Emma matches people with the same social status. By doing this, Austen emphasizes how marriages and relationships were in the 1800s. Being told that they should not marry someone “out of their league”, people with the same social status were encouraged to get married. Additionally, when Emma explains her matchmaking, she frequently refers to their social statuses. By this, Austen emphasizes the lack of love in these marriages and draws attention to the fact that most marriages depended on “convenience”.

Nevertheless, Emma saw herself as such an independent woman that she did not even think of marrying and settling down with a man. Even though everyone told her to marry someone including her father, she has always refused this idea. Her perception of marriage is clearly put forward in the scene where Emma consults Harriet Smith who has gotten a proposal of marriage from a man who she has planned on marrying by *saying “A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her, and can write a tolerable letter” (47)*. Emma’s idea of marriage and proposals are clearly quite different from the women in their village. Harriet, who was quite happy to get a proposal from a man, was taken aback by what Emma said. For Emma, this kind of proposal is not appropriate. She is used to everyone respecting her and she expects men to do the most. She is not aware of the fact that women from a lower societal rank cannot and does not expect men to do anything. They are bound to the first man that proposes to them.

2. Social Status

Because Emma is the daughter of a well-known and respected man, her social status is much higher than the people of Highbury. She lives in a mansion, wears expensive clothes, and knows how to play the piano forte -which was only an activity for the wealthy- and everyone seems to envy her lifestyle, cleverness, and wealth. Not only that, but her personality and kindness are admired by many. Because her social status is higher than most women, the way that people treat her is different as well. Lower-class people feel the need to obey what everyone in a higher class says or they feel like they must agree with their opinions. In the novel, Emma uses Harriet Smith as a “matchmaking project” and manipulates her into agreeing with who she must be with and marry. Even when she meets her for the first time she thinks she can control her by saying “*She would notice [Harriet]; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners*” (24). Austen underlines how upper-class people control and manipulate lower-class people simply because of their entertainment. The word “improve” shows just how much Emma belittled Harriet.

Harriet Smith

1. Marriage

When Emma decides that she wants to meet new people of the Highbury village, she comes across Harriet. Before getting to know Emma, Harriet is scared and hesitant because of Emma’s reputation. But Harriet quickly becomes fond of her as she admires her, and she saw her as a mentor. In the novel, Mr. Knightly comments on the friendship between Emma and Harriet by saying, “*I think [Harriet Smith] the very worst sort of companion that Emma could possibly have. She knows nothing herself and looks upon Emma as knowing everything*” (49),

proving that Harriet sees Emma as a role model, and she is willing to do anything she says without even questioning. Because Harriet's father remains unknown, there are some doubts about her social status though she is considered to be lower-class. She has a previous romantic relationship with Robert Martin who is a farmer. It seems like she is aware of her social status, and she thinks that Mr. Martin is a suitable husband for her. Her doubts begin when Mr. Martin sends a proposal letter to her, and when she gives the news to Emma. Emma tells her that he is not good enough for her and manipulates her into thinking this as well. She says, "*He is very plain ... remarkably plain, but that is nothing compared to his entire want of gentility*" (42). She alleges that Mr. Martin is "below" her and she could find a better bachelor. Emma saying this does not come as a surprise, simply because she cannot relate to Harriet. Their perception of marriage and their views on independence are very different. Harriet is willing to be a housewife and she needs to be "taken under the wing" of a man since she cannot support herself financially. Emma wishes only the best for Harriet, but it seems like she is unaware of the fact that for some people marriage is a must and it can only work out if both people are in similar status-wise. Emma tells her that Mr. Elton -who was a local vicar- would be a suitable match for her. At first, Mr. Elton seems to be interested in Harriet but only later on in the book do we find out that Mr. Elton is actually in love with Emma. Additionally, Mr. Knightley, a friend of Emma's who is quite wise, tells her that Mr. Elton will only marry a woman with money. By this Austen emphasizes the importance of wealth in marriages. It can be seen that Mr. Elton's only wish in marriage is to marry someone only as wealthy as him. Towards the end of the book, we find out that Harriet's father is in fact a merchant. After learning this, Harriet decides to marry Mr. Martin. Ultimately they get married, and Emma realizes that it is a good match after all.

2. Social Status

Jane Austen uses the character Harriet Smith to portray lower-class women in the 1800s. Because her mother and father are anonymous for most of the book, she is an orphan, and she is staying at Mrs. Goddard's boarding school by herself. Therefore, she is a part of the lower-class population of Highbury. Like most of the lower-class people, she is expected to respect and obey everything higher-class people do or say. Austen represents the class difference and their behaviors toward each other through the relationship between Harriet and Emma. From the first moment Emma and Harriet are met, Harriet expresses her admiration for Emma. When telling this, Harriet seems to be very enthusiastic but also she has this fear of Emma inside of her. She sees Emma as a higher person than her. Not only about social status but her skills and cleverness as well. When she tells this, Emma does not seem surprised or grateful since she is used to hearing things like this from everyone. Not only does Emma see Harriet as a "poor girl", but she also uses her for her own entertainment, using her as a "match-making project". She uses and manipulates Harriet, and her love life and Harriet has no word in it. Because she feared what will happen to her if she stands up to someone of a higher class who seemed to be nothing but kind to her. In the novel, Harriet can be seen praising Emma for befriending her and "helping" her. She calls her "*so partial and kind a friend*" (173) even after she causes her to break up with Mr. Martin who she was in love with. Additionally, Harriet feels the need to agree with everything Emma has to say, and she seems to need her approval since she sees her as a role model. When she introduces Mr. Martin to her right after she asks, "What do you think of him?" and when Emma shares her thoughts about him not being a "real gentleman" Harriet agrees with her saying "*Oh yes!*" and "*Yes indeed!*" (64) even though she does not

really agree with her. By doing this Austen shows how lower-class people were being put upon by higher-class people. They cannot even express their own ideas.

Jane Fairfax

1. Marriage

Emma hears about Jane Fairfax from Miss Bates who seems to not get enough of reading letters from Miss Fairfax to her. For this reason, Emma seems to be tired of hearing about her. However, when she comes to Highbury and Emma gets a chance to meet her and she sees that Jane is extremely talented, well-educated, and beautiful. Therefore, her idea of her instantly changes and she starts to envy her, which is something that Emma usually does not do. Jane Fairfax is not really wealthy; therefore, she is bound to become a governess which Emma despises. When it comes to marriage, the most important thing for a woman is to find a man who can save them from the disadvantageous world of womanhood. Most women marry for convenience which is legal rights and money. Based on this, it can be said that Jane's "secret" marriage to Frank Churchill is a great example of a "marriage of convenience" for Jane. When Emma finds out about this "secret" marriage, despite her seeing Jane as a rival she says, "*Much may be said in her situation to excuse, even that error*" (Austen, 400). From this sentence it can be seen that Emma approaches this case from a different standpoint. After learning about Jane's history, Emma feels more sympathetic toward her. Though, Emma also says "*If a woman can ever be excused for thinking only of herself, it is in a situation like Jane Fairfax's. --Of such, one may almost say, that 'the world is not theirs, nor the world's law.'*" (Austen, 400). In this sentence, it can be seen that Austen refers to a say in Shakespeare's *Romeo &*

Juliet "*The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law*" (Shakespeare, 252). Austen rewords this sentence, nevertheless, the meaning seems to be staying the same. Society opposes the idea of "secret" marriages so does the law. Emma accuses Jane of selfishness, and she thinks that Jane would "use" Mr. Churchill for his money. Though, Emma saying this does have a connection with her being jealous of Jane because Mr. Churchill was interested in her. What Jane seeks out in marriage was financial support, Frank Churchill was able to give her that and she had no other choice. We see later in the novel that this "match" was seriously flawed by the way Mr. Churchill treated a "deserving" woman. He looks down upon Jane because he wanted to marry a rich woman and Jane was not. Even when Jane sees Mr. Churchill flirting with another woman and she simply could not say anything or complain about it. This proves that the marriage was majorly based on financial support on Jane's end.

2. Social Status

Though the characters Harriet and Jane seems to be quite similar when taking into consideration their social and financial status, Jane stands out from other lower-class people through her extraordinary features and talents. Austen describes Jane by saying "*Jane Fairfax was very elegant, remarkably elegant; and she herself the highest value for elegance*" (199). By repeating the word "elegance" Austen emphasizes her gracefulness and delicacy. In other words, even though Jane's financial situation puts her in a lower-class profile, thanks to her qualities, her social rank seems to be a bit higher. Austen describes Jane's social rank as "gentlewoman" but her financial rank as "poor". Austen also illustrates the harsh reality of life for many 18th century women: the gorgeous and accomplished but destitute young lady who is not saved by a good man through the character Jane. Jane was a woman who was able to support herself if she wanted but her qualities were simply not important when it comes to

social status and even though marrying a “rich” man would normally “save” a woman, this was not the case for Jane Fairfax. Towards the end of the novel the audience is able to see that Jane was actually quite unhappy with her marriage despite the financial advantages.

Conclusion

In her novel *Emma* Jane Austen covers the concepts of social status and marriage to help convey the role of women in the 1800s through three major female characters i.e., Emma Woodhouse, Harriet Smith, and Jane Fairfax. It can be seen that these characters are very different from each other regarding their social status and wealth. Because of this the reader can see different social statuses and marriages represented through different characters and this makes the understanding process of the concepts easier. Even though the novel is written from Emma’s perspective, the audience gets to see each character’s life and understand the concepts of social status and marriage.

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