

What: **AP English Literature Summer-Reading Assignment**

For: All students registered for AP English Lit for 2010-11

From: Ms. Cia White – white@stfrancishighschool.com

Again: you will need the Norton Critical Edition of *Emma*, as shown on the xerox copy of the Amazon page distributed last week. If you buy a used copy, be sure that the seller certifies it as clean, not one with multiple notes and highlightings.

Read *Middle Passage*, as well, and do the writing assignment. (It can be found on the website.) These two books cover your SFHS summer reading in English – you don't need to choose a book from the senior list.

Below is the orientation to *Emma* I would like to have had time and opportunity to give you earlier this month. **Please read it attentively before you start reading the novel. Email me when you have read it all. Save these notes.**

Intro . . .

The popularity of Jane Austen and of reverent, romantic costume-drama film adaptations of her novels may stand in the way of your approach to *Emma*. You will quickly see that this is a challenging, unsentimental, and subtle book, its central figure (Emma Woodhouse) a mixed bag, and (most importantly for us as we discuss the craft of the novel in August) its narration rife with sharp submerged irony. Its real subject is not romance. Don't be misled into thinking – by marketing and movies – that this is “chick lit.” The most brilliant writers of the last 200 years, both male and female writers, are lost in admiration of Jane Austen and this novel. You can put *Emma* way down on your list someday, if you must, but not yet: not until you have really taken its measure and understood it. Give it time this summer, be ready for real study of it in the fall, and I feel sure you will enjoy it.

The characters, places, kinship and marital relationships are not easy to get and keep straight, at first. So here's a quick guide for most of them, to get you on your way in Volume I. (Please don't go to Sparknotes or Wikipedia: in AP English Lit, you need to be or get beyond that expediency, which would only serve to give you the roughest direction, and ruin the plot. This is a wickedly cool plot.) I want you to hang out in the text and reread until you get the basics straight, but also I want to help you do that, with this list:

- Emma and her father Mr. Woodhouse live in the Surrey countryside, their place called Hartfield. The nearby village is Highbury.
- Emma's older sister Isabella is married to a man named John Knightley, a lawyer in London. They have children and visit Hartfield sometimes.
- Emma's and Isabella's mother died when Emma was a child, as you learn on page one, and she and Isabella were raised by Miss Taylor, a governess who came to be Emma's friend. As the novel opens, Miss Taylor has recently married a (widowed)

man in the neighborhood, a man named Mr. Weston, and they live a few miles away from the Woodhouses, in a house/estate called Randalls. Miss Taylor is now Mrs. Weston.

- Mr. Weston's first wife (dead) had been a woman from a rich family in northern England (Yorkshire); it wasn't a happy marriage because it turned out that she, his first wife (*née* Miss Churchill) really wasn't satisfied, after all, with his modest wealth. Her rich, self-important family had more or less disowned her when she married him. When she (Miss Churchill/Mrs. Weston # 1) died, their (only) son, Frank, was shipped back, a child, to her brother and his wife, the rich Churchills in Yorkshire, the ones who had been angry about the marriage, and who were childless themselves. (This shipping-off-of-kids-to-rich-relatives wasn't uncommon in this society at the time of this novel: Jane Austen's eldest brother was sent off to richer relatives and renamed, too.)
- So Frank Churchill was raised by his father's dead wife's brother and the dead wife's brother's wife, in their estate, Enscombe. Frank's last name, once Weston, was changed to Churchill when he was adopted by them, and he is now a stylish young man, who keeps saying in letters that he's going to come to Randalls and see his father and his stepmother, but hasn't yet.
- Also in the 'hood (Highbury, as above), in addition to the families at Hartfield and Randalls, is the unmarried man who owns an estate called Donbury Abbey (sometimes called just the Abbey). This is John Knightley's older brother, Mr. George Knightley. He is always called Mr. Knightley, while his brother John is always called Mr. John Knightley.
- (The eldest girl or boy in a family at this time is called Miss or Mr. Whoever; the younger siblings have their first names attached to the surname: Miss Miranda Whoever, Miss Kelly Whoever, Mr. Slucher for Scott, but Mr. Joey Slucher . . .)
- Mr. Knightley is a close friend of Mr. Woodhouse and Emma. He comes over to see them a lot. Emma and Mr. Knightley have a contentious but usually affectionate relationship, like brother and sister. He is 16 years her senior.
- The vicar (the village minister of the Church of England church) is Mr. Elton, whom all the ladies love. He is handsome and suave. He has been serving in Highbury as a minister for two years.
- Emma, in the early chapters of Volume I, takes up as a friend a young woman, Harriet Smith, who has just finished at a mediocre girls' school at Highbury. (The school is called, after its head, Mrs. Goddard's.) Emma is trying to improve Harriet and set her up in various ways, including finding her a husband. This BFF, Harriet Smith, is the unacknowledged "love child" (the Victorian term – the polite one, anyway – is "natural child") of an unknown someone, who was apparently rich enough to provide her anonymously with some education at Mrs. Goddard's, but not interested enough to do much more than that. (No one in Highbury knows who her parents/benefactors are and neither does she.)
- There's a farmer family, the Martins, at the Abbey Mill Farm, close to George Knightley's, a family whom Harriet has spent time with in the past. Robert Martin is the unmarried farmer who is the head of that family.
- Finally, Mrs. Bates, an old war-widow, and her unmarried daughter, Miss Bates, live in shabby quarters in the village of Highbury, doting on their absent

granddaughter/niece, Jane Fairfax, who (like Frank Churchill, above) is a well-educated, elegant person whom we hear about but don't meet right away.

- Jane Fairfax was orphaned, but Captain Campbell (a well-to-do army officer who served with her father who was killed in battle) and his wife have raised her with their own daughter, referred to as Miss Campbell until she marries a man named Mr. Dixon and becomes Mrs. Dixon.
- At 21, shortly, Jane Fairfax is going to have to leave the nice, cultivated life she's had with the Campbells and go be a governess. (See information below on this fate.) At the start of the novel, this has not yet happened.

You may be a little confused by family terminology:

The term "in law" – as in "daughter-in-law," etc. – is often not used in this era. So don't be confused if you think you understand who's who, and it seems the term should be "brother in law" or "son in law," and instead is just "brother" or "son." Also, the prefix "step-" is not used in the novel, so (for example) Frank Churchill is referred to a time or two as Mrs. Frank Weston's "son," although she is (what we'd call) his stepmother.

Historical context: very important!

One of the problems with the Austen-adaptation films is that they have no time for so much of what gives the novels their deepest meanings and least sentimental tones.

While in our day we still pay a lot of attention (in representations and in life) to romance – falling in love, choosing among suitors, breaking up, getting engaged, etc. – there are enormous differences in courtship and marriage between in our time and Austen's. The Austen films in our day focus on the romance, and pull it out of the larger context Austen very thoroughly sets it in; they don't much trouble us with the social and economic contexts that give these "romantic" issues darker and sharper meanings in the novels. As readers now, you are asked to think a little differently about the Austen project – this means that if you love the films and Colin Firth, I ask you to be more analytical and less invested in the romance elements; and if you hate the films and bristle at the very mention of an English garden and top hats, I ask that you try to put aside these easy spurnings.

This early 19th-century English society we are reading about here, as you will see, is rigidly stratified and segregated by class; it is rigidly restrictive for women in the genteel class. (That it was even more so, and in more severe ways, for uneducated working-class women goes almost without saying, and their lives are not depicted in Austen novels.) This society is obsessed with fine gradations of wealth and status. At public crossroads in England at this time, for instance, an elaborate hierarchical system of right-of-way let the fanciest carriages through first, then the next-most-fancy, and so on, down through seven or eight levels of conveyance: imagine if, at a four-way stop, all the Lexuses got to go first and the junkers had to wait. You will read all kinds of snobbery in the book, and observe all kinds of suck-up behavior as people try to improve their own status by befriending richer or more noble acquaintances. (In fact, in British usage, a "snob" is someone flattering a "superior," not someone looking down on others.)

People bragged about their status and connections, tried to one-up each other; social life was relentlessly and openly focused on income. Young people, meeting each other at dances, knew or

quickly found out exactly the amount of the family income of the women or men they might flirt with or court. (Imagine if, going into a party, your friend whispered in your ear that the cute kid on the couch was the son of a man who earned \$675,500 a year. Imagine if you knew that kind of data about everyone you knew.) “Birth” – an “old family name,” multigenerational land-holding, ties to nobility or near-nobility – was also an attraction at a dance, but partly what Austen’s novels register is the new importance of sheer money, as opposed to the older aristocratic ideal of landed property and “birth.” You should notice, for example, the long paragraph in Volume II about the Coles, *nouveaux riches* in Highbury, who desperately want to get the older-money people to come to dinner. You will certainly hear Emma shrewdly and often snobbishly (in the American sense) weighing considerations of old and new money, pretentious and unpretentious people, etc.

The disruptions and depressions attendant on a new stage of industrial capitalism, changes in the viability of the old life in the countryside, had left English people grasping for security, and even people we would see as pretty prosperous were fiercely competitive in this obsessive system. Not just because they were greedy: women absolutely needed husbands with some property and money, often in order just to have a roof over their heads, because they were not educated and because there was virtually no paid work for them; men who were not elder/eldest sons were also on the lookout for some way to keep respectable houses. (Elder/eldest sons in the landowning class inherited the agricultural rents and family’s historic wealth; younger sons needed to marry a woman with a nice dowry or join the officer class or go to university and then be a Church of England clergyman.) For men, it was only marginally acceptable to have income via “trade” – to be a merchant, a manufacturer, to own a business, as it is reported Mr. Cole does. It was barely genteel to be what we’d call a professional – to be a lawyer or a doctor, unless in an elite practice in London. In general, England in the genteel classes was, from the middle of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th – a time frame that has Jane Austen in the middle of it – , mercenary, fiercely exclusive, and snobbish in both English and American senses.

But (to make it all worse) at the same time, the cultural dictates of the genteel classes required at least the appearance of fine, sensitive, “gentleman-like” and “lady-like” manners. You had to chase a moneyed mate, but you had to do it without being seen to run – so to speak.

This tension between bare-knuckled economic competition (and for women, the utter necessity of finding a husband, by hook or crook) *versus* a very finicky and ostensibly refined social code . . . is partly what gives Austen’s novels their energy, their moral passion, and at times their cynicism.

In this Austen novel (unlike the five others she wrote before she died at 41, at the height of her powers), the heroine is rich, has an indulgent father, and is able to choose NOT to marry. But still the much, much more common predicament for women of the educated classes (“gentlemen’s daughters”) in the late Georgian and early Victorian periods in England is that marriage is the only “provision” for women’s adult life. (In *Emma*, the unmarried female characters except the title character are under the obligation to find a husband to support them.)

So what does marriage look like for genteel women of the early decades of the 19th century in England? Married women in this era do not share in the ownership of marital property, can’t

vote, can't sign contracts, can't work for wages and keep their respectability, can't divorce, and lose rights to their children if they are abandoned by their husbands. They are not really educated, cannot attend universities, and their governesses and little schools typically focus on the husband-attracting arts, like singing, piano-playing, watercolor-painting, French-speaking, handicrafts, etc.

But whatever the down sides of marriage, *not* being married was seen as worse. For women, marriage (however restrictive) was the *good* news, and there really wasn't much of a Plan B. (Again, bear in mind that we're talking here about the owner/ middle classes – not the rural workers, not farmers or artisans, not domestic servants, not the new “rough” working class of miners, weavers, etc.) If you could not find a husband, you had to hope your brother was nice and would let you stay on in a little attic bedroom at home. As an unmarried sister, even as an aunt, you would literally be last in line when people processed into the dining-room for dinner. As a spinster in her own fairly nice and sensible family, Jane Austen herself did not order the carriage (i.e., ask for the car) for trips of her own.

So what might seem at first, without knowing context, the frou-frou topic of courtship in the genteel class has a harsh economic subtext, and that reality is often Austen's real and dry-eyed topic, a very narrow set of options she herself lived inside of. Understand that she is not *promoting* these snobbish sayings and doings she portrays, but representing them as a satirist and a moralist, examining them as someone who understood what their real costs were.

One more note on historical context: in this era, genteel women – don't confuse the word with “gentile”: look up both words if you're unclear – who did not get offers of marriage might, in a pinch, become **governesses**. As a Plan B after all, it was a dreaded fate, often very unpleasant, and it constituted a new vexed social category: you could be a governess only if you had some education (could speak French, for example, and teach it to the children you managed); you would have that learning only if you came from a genteel class background; but to preserve a genteel class status as a woman, you could not work for wages, which of course is what a governess does. The scholar Mary Poovey (whose essay in the Norton edition we will read) writes about how troubling the liminal figure of the governess was to the middleclass of the early and mid-19th century: is a governess a servant? No, because by class background she's a “lady,” and “ladies” don't work. But servants aren't educated and don't get to form the manners of the dear children! . . . So, a borderline figure that causes social anxiety when demographics just require more middleclass women to “go out” for work, as this novel puts it. Thus, in Volume II, Mrs. Elton outrages Emma by speaking condescendingly of Mrs. Weston, who as Miss Taylor had been Emma's governess; thus, in Volume III, everyone feels sorry for Jane Fairfax, who might have to go “teach” – i.e., be a governess – in the household of some very awful people.

We will also be discussing what men in this class during these decades could and could not do for money and hope to be respectable.

Reading *Emma* for the start of school

Why assign this novel for summer reading? Because it's long, and would just take too much of our first quarter had you not already read it once. For a first reading, it is more suited to a little couch time than it is to gulping in the hall before class. Please use your summer well.

But there's another, better reason: as C.S. Lewis said, "literary reading is re-reading." Whether or not that is a palatable proverb in your view, it is true that this book especially is one a reader understands best retrospectively. That is, you don't really get it fully on the first reading. It is built, in fact, to mislead you a little until the end. You *get* it by looking back on it and rereading bits if not the whole book again. Don't worry: I am not going to reassign the whole book when we get back to school! But until you've been through it once in the summer, on your own, freely but attentively, in the position of the naïve and delighted reader – enjoying the predicaments and characters and curious to see what happens to them – you're not ready to get down into the weeds of craft when we reconvene.

So – how to read Austen? I guarantee you it cannot be done quickly or in a stressed and last-minute mode. You will need to focus. Austen's surface is a smooth glittery one, but it's subtle, and you have to slip under the polished surface to even know what's *happening* – much less to know what's funny, what's ironic, what disaster is being foreshadowed, what the point of a conversation is. Take your time. Start now. By the end of Chapter 6, the exposition is complete, the whole thing set up: almost all the characters have been sketched, and the problems that are going to ensue have been suggested. So especially pay attention to characterization in the opening chapters.

Writing about *Emma*

It was published originally in three volumes, and this edition preserves those units. (That was the publishing category of the time: "triple-deckers" were bound books people usually rented, like box-set videos. "Triple-deckers" is also what the English ships of the line were called in the wars against France of this time.)

- Write about each volume: you will thus need **three sketchbook entries**.
- **Each should be two to four sketchbook pages long.** Write as well as you can: by that, I mean take care with your word choice – be specific, lively, personal, and not mechanical. (This does not mean lazily slangy or general: it just means don't write like someone has a gun to your head.)
- Do not summarize the plot. Do not summarize the plot. Do not summarize the plot.
- Think and write about one or more of these three elements, below. You may mix and match, writing about characterization in Vol. 1 and irony in Vol. 2, or about a motif or theme in all three volumes, or any such combination or repetition. Thoughtfulness, energy, and *apt quotation* are what matter.

characterization

- Who are these people and what is Austen up to in animating them? When she was planning this book, she herself said she had a heroine in mind whom she felt no one but she (Austen) would like. So pay attention mostly to Emma – what interests and amuses you? What irritates you? Are you on her side? Why and when? Are you on someone else's side? Why? Are there good guys and bad guys among the characters? What seem to be the

principles that distinguish them? (These are questions to start you off, not requirements.)

irony

- Irony is hard to get and hard to write about. But, as you know, the word refers to a discrepancy between two levels of meaning – or (as in dramatic irony) between what a character knows and what we as readers or audience members know. This novel’s core method is irony. Can you find instances? (What’s the point of the irony?)

themes and motifs

- Austen’s notable motifs include, for example, the motif of letter-writing and letter-reading. In a homebound (especially for women) and sheltered country society like the one she lived in and wrote about, an awful lot of stuff happened via and in letters. This novel, like all of hers, features some important letters and some important focus on letter-writing and -reading as a way of characterizing people. Other possible motifs are those of visiting, of gossip, of parenting and quasi-parenting, of dispute, of familial relations . . . Choose one of these motifs or another you notice and track its appearances through the novel, speculating about its significance.
- If you feel inspired to interpret what you understand to be her themes, write about that/them for your final entry of the three.

Expectations about style and format in these responses

These are not drafts of papers. You don’t necessarily need thesis statements, per se. But you need to be going beyond plot recap, thinking on paper, and you need to be drawing conclusions and making inferences. *You especially need to be quoting text in support of your conclusions and inferences.*

These are to be handwritten entries in your sketchbooks. If you are qualified for an accommodation in hand-writing, you will need to get in touch with me soon, and clear that with me. Don’t email or call me in a panic in late July or early August. Don’t bring typed pages and say you didn’t know.

Finally: email me now and let me know that you have read this handout.
white@stfrancishighschool.com