

CONTEXT CORNER I: GYPSIES, FARMERS, GOVERNESSES, AND ORPHANS: CLASS STATUS IN EMMA
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
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1. **The Orphan:** Jane, Emma, and Harriet can be read to represent each of the three orphan definitions: Jane, the orphan with no living parents; Emma, the orphan with one living parent (importantly, her father); and Harriet, the illegitimate child in the custody of a third party. How does each character's unique orphan position impact her development in the novel? How are their interactions with each other and with other characters influenced by their different orphan positions?

2. **The "Illegitimate" Orphan:** Read the following statement made by Emma during a conversation with Mr. Knightley about the propriety of a marriage between Harriet and Robert Martin:

"As to the circumstances of her birth, though in a legal sense she may be called Nobody, it will not hold in common sense. She is not to pay for the offence of others, by being held below the level of those with whom she is brought up.—There can scarcely be a doubt that her father is a gentleman—and a gentleman of fortune.—Her allowance is very liberal; nothing has ever been grudged for her improvement or comfort.—That she is a gentleman's daughter, is indubitable to me; that she associates with gentlemen's daughters, no one, I apprehend, will deny.—She is superior to Mr. Robert Martin'" (Vol. I, Ch. 8, p. 61).

Then read the following passage, which appears at the end of the novel:

"Harriet's parentage became known. She proved to be the daughter of a tradesman, rich enough to afford her the comfortable maintenance which had ever been her's, and decent enough to have always wished for concealment.—Such was the blood of gentility which Emma had formerly been so ready to vouch for!—It was likely to be as untainted, perhaps, as the blood of many a gentleman: but what a connexion had she been preparing for Mr. Knightley—or for the Churchills—or even for Mr. Elton!—The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed" (Vol. III, Ch. 19 (or 55), pp. 450-51).

- How would you characterize Emma's perspective on Harriet's position as an illegitimate child at each point in the novel? What about Mr. Knightley's perspective (see Vol. I, Ch. 8)?
- What brings about the change in Emma's views?
- What does Emma's shifting perspective on the issue of Harriet's birth suggest about her understanding of herself and those within her social circle? What do Mr. Knightley's views of Harriet at the end of the narrative suggest about his development over the course of the novel?
- Are Harriet and Robert Martin a good match? Is their suitability primarily tied to their "class"?

3. **The Governess:** Read the following narration:

"With the fortitude of a devoted novice, [Jane Fairfax] had resolved at one-and-twenty to complete the sacrifice, and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification forever" (Vol. II, Ch. 2 (or 20), p. 155).

Then read the discussion between Jane and Mrs. Elton regarding Jane's entry into the "governess-trade": Vol. II, Ch. 17 (or 35), pp. 279-80, beginning with "*Excuse me, ma'am, but this is by no means my intention...*" and ending with "*...I do not know where it lies.*"

- What are Jane's expectations for becoming a governess? In light of the context talk, are her expectations reasonable?
- How do we read the connection made between the "governess-trade" and the "slave-trade"?
- How does Austen's portrayal of Mrs. Weston and her relationship with the Woodhouses complicate the critical outlook on the governess role as presented by and through Jane?
- Most governesses and women trained for the post would not have had the opportunity to marry (or at least marry so well as Miss Taylor and Miss Fairfax). Why might Austen have chosen to give her governesses unrealistic, but "happy," endings?

4. **The Farmer:** How do we read Robert Martin in relation to the eighteenth-century debate over the basis of individual worth *and* contemporary concerns about social mobility?

In your discussion, compare Knightley's characterization of Martin as "*a respectable, intelligent gentleman-farmer*" (I.8, p. 61) to Emma's initial appraisal: "*His appearance was very neat, and he looked like a sensible young man, but his person had no other advantage; and when he came to be contrasted with gentlemen, she thought he must lose all the ground he had gained in Harriet's inclination. Mr. Martin looked as if he did not know what manner was*" (I.4, p. 31).

Also, consider Knightley's statement to Emma upon learning of Martin's impending marriage to Harriet Smith: "*His situation is an evil—but you must consider it as what satisfies your friend; and I will answer for your thinking better and better of him as you know him more. His good sense and good principles would delight you.—As far as the man is concerned, you could not wish your friend in better hands. His rank in society I would alter if I could; which is saying a great deal I assure you, Emma*" (Vol. III, Ch. 18 (or 54), p. 442).

5. **The Gypsy:** Read the passage on the gypsy confrontation—Vol. III, Ch. 3 (or 39), pp. 311-14: beginning with "*Miss Smith, and Miss Bickerton, another parlour boarder at Mrs. Goddard's, who had been also at the ball, had walked out together...*" and ending with "*It was not possible that the occurrence should not be strongly recommending each to the other.*"

- What is the role of the gypsy in *Emma*?
- Are we expected to read the "party of gypsies" as a real or imagined threat to Harriet and the relatively insular Highbury community?
- Does Harriet's "adventure" with the gypsy "gang" reflect or challenge British cultural stereotypes of the group?

6. **Class Status:** What does Austen's treatment of the orphan, governess, farmer, and gypsy suggest about her social politics?