**3rd year**

**Course name:** 19th Century Prose Fiction, 2nd semester

**Course conductor:** Prof. Nayef al-Yasin

Two novels are required reading for this semester: Jane Austen's *Emma* and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

**Assessment method:** An MCQ exam consisting of 50 questions divided equally between the two novels.

Students need to show that they have read and understood the two novels in terms of the basic elements of setting, plot, character, theme and narrative technique.

## Jane Austen's *Emma*

## Jane Austen (1775 – 1817)

Jane Austen, whom some critics consider England's best novelist, was born in Steventon, England. The seventh of eight children, Austen lived with her parents for her entire life, first in Steventon and later in Bath, Southampton, and Chawton. Her father was the parish rector in Steventon, and, though not wealthy, her family was well connected and well educated. Austen briefly attended boarding school in Reading but received the majority of her education at home. According to rumor, she had a brief love affair when she was twenty-five, but it did not lead to a marriage proposal. Two years later she accepted and then quickly rejected a proposal. She remained unmarried for the rest of her life. Austen died in 1817, at age forty-one, of Addison's disease.

She is known primarily for her six major novels, which interpret, critique and comment upon the British landed gentry (the lower stratum of the land owning class) at the end of the 18th century. Her other novels include: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and *Mansfield Park* (1814). She wrote two additional novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion,* both published posthumously in 1818. Her novels have inspired many films, from 1940's *Pride and Prejudice* to more recent productions like *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Emma* (1996), *Mansfield Park* (1999), *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), *Emma* (2009), *Love & Friendship* (2016), and *Emma* (2020).

*Emma* is a novel written and set in Regency England. The Regency is a period at the end of the Georgian era, when King George III was deemed unfit to rule due to his illness, and his son ruled as his proxy, as prince regent. Upon George III's death in 1820, the prince regent became King George IV. The term Regency (or Regency era) can refer to various stretches of time; some are longer than the decade of the formal Regency, which lasted from 1811 to 1820. The period from 1795 to 1837, which includes the latter part of George III's reign and the reigns of his sons George IV and William IV, is sometimes regarded as the Regency era, characterized by distinctive trends in British architecture, literature, fashion, politics, and culture.

The Regency is noted for its elegance and achievements in the fine arts and architecture. This era encompassed a time of great social, political, and economic change. War was waged with Napoleon and on other fronts, affecting commerce both at home and internationally, as well as politics. However, despite the bloodshed and warfare, the Regency was also a period of great refinement and cultural achievement, which shaped and altered the societal structure of Britain as a whole.

Society during that period was considerably stratified. In many ways, there was a dark counterpart to the beautiful and fashionable sectors of England of this time. In the dingier, less affluent areas of London, thievery, womanizing, gambling, the existence of rookeries, and constant drinking ran rampant. The population boom—comprising an increase from just under a million in 1801 to one and a quarter million by 1820 created a wild, roiling, volatile, and vibrant scene. According to Robert Southey, the difference between the strata of society was vast indeed:

> The squalor that existed beneath the glamour and gloss of Regency society provided sharp contrast to the Prince Regent's social circle. Poverty was addressed only marginally. The formation of the Regency after the retirement of George III saw the end of a more pious and reserved society, and gave birth of a more frivolous, ostentatious one. This change was influenced by the Regent himself, who was kept entirely removed from the machinations of politics and military exploits. This did nothing to channel his energies in a more positive direction, thereby leaving him with the pursuit of pleasure as his only outlet, as well as his sole form of rebellion against what he saw as disapproval and censure in the form of his father.

Driving these changes were not only money and rebellious pampered youth, but also significant technological advancements. In 1814, *The Times* adopted steam printing. By this method it could now print 1,100 sheets every hour, not 200 as before—a fivefold increase in production capability and demand. This development brought about the rise of the wildly popular fashionable novels in which publishers spread the stories, rumours, and flaunting of the rich and aristocratic, not so secretly hinting at the specific identity of these individuals. The gap in the hierarchy of society was so great that those of the upper classes could be viewed by those below as wondrous and fantastical fiction, something entirely out of reach yet tangibly there.

## The Historical Period

Jane Austen is both a Georgian (1714–1830) and a Regency (1811–1820) author, meaning that she lived her life under the reigns of King George III and his son, George IV. Because he became mentally incompetent, George III stepped down and allowed his son to rule in his place as regent. The extravagant George IV was a patron of the arts and a fan of Austen's work, and she dedicated *Emma* to him at his strong suggestion.

The Georgian era was one of great turmoil and upheaval. Austen was born one year before the American Revolution, lived her teen years and beyond through the French Revolution, and toward the end of her life saw Great Britain's defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. The War of 1812 and the first phase of the Industrial Revolution also occurred during her lifetime.

The world of Austen's novels seems to exist mostly outside this chaotic realm, which is especially true in *Emma*. Nonetheless, the author did have some consciousness of the changes going on around her. On the one hand, she upholds the British class structure; and, on the other, she satirizes snobbery and slavish devotion to class distinctions.

## The English Class Structure

Austen occupied herself with the role that class and gender played in the day-to-day life of the "middling classes"—those between the aristocratic nobles (the royal family down through the barons) and the lower classes (craft, agricultural, and factory workers and the poor). The middle class in the Regency period had some fluidity; at the higher end of the

middle were baronets and knights, along with the landed gentry (families with property who made their money from agricultural activities on their estates). Depending on how rich a family was, its members would be more or less involved in the day-to-day management of farming.

In the upper-middle class were clergymen, lawyers, doctors and apothecaries, teachers, builders, successful artists, military men with commissions (officers), and wealthy tradespeople. Many of these gentlemen owned property. People could buy their way into the landed gentry class with new money from successful trade. A peculiarity of the class system was that only sons could legally inherit property, leaving a family of daughters without any financial resources. At the same time, a family could move up in the world when a daughter married a man of property.

Members of the gentry with little or no land faced particular problems. To maintain their social status, they avoided going into business or trade, which left very few occupations open to them. The military was an acceptable profession, as was the law and the church. Those who became vicars in the Church of England usually did not have a spiritual calling; rather, they were educated men who took a "living" from a benefactor - the use of a house (a vicarage) and a modest salary. In exchange, they ministered to the spiritual needs of the community.

Even more difficult was the position of women, who were legally treated as children. Jane Austen knew firsthand the financial difficulties of single women of modest means who relied on relatives for their livelihood. She understood the plight of governesses hired out as tutors and quasi-nannies, the only respectable work a middle-class woman could do. She also observed the dilemmas of women from prosperous families whose entire happiness depended on making a suitable match. These trials and tribulations of the landed gentry, the upper-middle class, and the socially aspiring lower-middle class are the subjects of her comic novels, including *Emma*.

## Austen's Contributions to the Development of the Novel

Austen's works critique the sentimental novels of the second half of the 18th century and are part of the transition to 19th-century literary realism. The earliest English novelists, Richardson, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett, were followed by the school of sentimentalists and romantics such as Walter Scott, Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, and Oliver Goldsmith, whose style and genre Austen rejected, returning the novel on a "slender thread" to the tradition of Richardson and Fielding for a "realistic study of manners". In the mid-20th century, literary critics F. R. Leavis and Ian Watt placed her in the tradition of Richardson and Fielding; both believe that she used their tradition of "irony, realism and satire to form an author superior to both".

Walter Scott noted Austen's "resistance to the trashy sensationalism of much of modern fiction—'the ephemeral productions which supply the regular demand of watering places and circulating libraries'". Yet her rejection of these genres is complex, as evidenced by *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*. Similar to William Wordsworth, who criticized the modern frantic novel in the "Preface" to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Austen distances herself from escapist novels. She eschewed popular Gothic fiction, stories of terror in which a heroine typically was stranded in a remote location, a castle or abbey. Yet in *Northanger Abbey* she alludes to the trope, with the heroine, Catherine, anticipating a move to a remote locale. Rather than full-scale rejection or parody, Austen transforms the genre, juxtaposing reality, with descriptions of elegant rooms and modern comforts. Nor does she completely denigrate Gothic fiction. Instead, she transforms settings and

situations, such that the heroine is still imprisoned, yet her imprisonment is mundane and real—regulated manners and the strict rules of the ballroom. In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen presents characters who are more complex than in staple sentimental fiction.

Richardson's *Pamela*, the prototype for the sentimental novel, is a didactic love story with a happy ending, written at a time women were beginning to have the right to choose husbands and yet were restricted by social conventions. Austen attempted the epistolary style used by Richardson in his *Pamela*, but found the flexibility of narrative more conducive to her realism, a realism in which each conversation and gesture carries a weight of significance. Her narrative style utilises free indirect speech—she was the first English novelist to do so extensively—through which she had the ability to present a character's thoughts directly to the reader and yet still retain narrative control. The style allows an author to vary discourse between the narrator's voice and values and those of the characters. An example of free indirect speech in the novel is this extract from the beginning of chapter XVI of *Emma*:

> The hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. It was a wretched business, indeed! Such an overthrow of everything she had been wishing for! Such a development of every thing most unwelcome!

Austen had a natural ear for speech and dialogue. Dialogue reveals a character's mood—frustration, anger, happiness - each treated differently and often through varying patterns of sentence structures.

Austen's plots highlight women's traditional dependence on marriage to secure social standing and economic security. As an art form, the 18th-century novel lacked the seriousness of its equivalents from the 19th century, when novels were treated as "the natural vehicle for discussion and ventilation of what mattered in life". Rather than delving too deeply into the psyche of her characters, Austen enjoys them and imbues them with humour and wit.

Austen used comedy to explore the individualism of women's lives and gender relations, and she appears to have used it to find the goodness in life, often fusing it with "ethical sensibility", creating artistic tension.

Austen was a literary innovator. In her time, novels were becoming a primary form of entertainment for the middle class. She was one of the first to advance social realism in literature, in which the characters and plots are plausible imitations of real life. She was also an innovator in her refinement of the use of irony and satire in the novel form, using witty dialogue between characters and perceptive narration. In truth, there are few heroes and villains in her stories. She moved the novel genre away from sentimentalism and emotional excess and drew sympathetic portraits of flawed human beings in need of instruction and improvement.

Austen’s novels received little critical or popular recognition during her lifetime, and her identity as a novelist was not revealed until after her death. As admired as Austen’s novels later became, critics have had a difficult time placing them within literary history. She is known for her gently satirical portraits of village life and of the rituals of courtship and marriage, but she wrote during the Romantic period, when most major writers were concerned with a very different set of interests and values. Romantic poets confronted the hopes and failures of the French Revolution and formulated new literary values centered on individual freedom, passion, and intensity.

In comparison, Austen's detailed examination of the rules of decorum that govern social relationships, and her insistence that reason and moderation are necessary checks on feeling, make her seem out of step with the literary times. One way to understand Austen's place in literary history is to think of her as part of the earlier eighteenth century, the Age of Reason, when literature was associated with wit, poise, and propriety. Her novels certainly belong to an eighteenth-century genre, the comedy of manners, which examines the behavior of men and women of a single social class.

Rather than dismiss Austen as a writer who shuns the artistic and political movements of her time, it is perhaps more useful to think of her as an early feminist. Critics have pointed out that the Romantics, who were almost exclusively male, offered a poor model of literary fulfillment for the ambitious woman of the time. While male writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron possessed the freedom to promote their own individuality through wide travel and sexual and military adventurism, women were largely denied these freedoms. For women, the penalty for sexual freedom was social ostracism, poverty, and worse. In *Sense and Sensibility,* Austen describes explicitly the danger that cultivating emotion posed for women of her time.

Austen's commitment to reason and moderation can be seen as feminist and progressive rather than conservative. The intelligence and resourcefulness of her heroines stand in constant contrast to the limits of the constricted world of courtship and marriage defining their sphere of action. Reading *Emma*, it is interesting to consider to what extent Austen accepts or questions the idea that marriage represents a woman's maturity and fulfillment.

### *Emma*

*Emma* falls within the category of classic Regency fiction. This category includes works which were actually written between 1811 and 1820, during the Regency era, which is well known for romantic fiction, including the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Sir Walter Scott, Susan Ferrier, Maria Edgeworth, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Jane Austen, who is perhaps the best-known author from this period, with many of her novels having been adapted into film in recent years. All of these writers published most of their best-known works during this period. While not novelists, the poetry of writers such as Lord Byron, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and John Keats are worth mentioning, as most of their best-known works were also written during the Regency.

Many of these classic Regency writers are also associated with Romanticism, which is an artistic and intellectual movement that originated in Western Europe in the late 18$^{th}$ century. Romanticism expressed a revolt against the aristocratic, social, and political norms of the Enlightenment period which preceded it. Works during this period stressed strong emotion as a source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as anxiety, horror, and the awe experienced when confronting the sublimity of nature. All of these themes are evident in the best-known classic Regency works.

*Emma* is mainly about youthful hubris and romantic misunderstandings. It is set in the fictional country village of Highbury and the surrounding estates of Hartfield, Randalls, and Donwell Abbey and involves the relationships among people from a small number of families. The novel was first published in December 1815, with its title page listing a publication date of 1816. As in her other novels, Austen explores the concerns and difficulties of genteel women living in Georgian–Regency England. It is a comedy of manners that depicts issues of marriage, sex, age, and social status.

Before she began the novel, Austen wrote, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." In the first sentence, she introduces the title character as "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition... and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her." Emma is spoiled, headstrong, and self-satisfied; she greatly overestimates her own matchmaking abilities; she is blind to the dangers of meddling in other people's lives; and her imagination and perceptions often lead her astray.

Some consider *Emma* Austen's best and most representative novel. It is also her longest novel, and by many accounts, her most difficult. Long praised for its rich domestic realism, *Emma* also presents puzzling questions: how can a character as intelligent as Emma be wrong so often? When does Austen expect us to sympathize with Emma, and when does she expect us to criticize her? Is the ending as genuinely happy as it is presented to be, or does Austen subtly inject a note of subversive irony into it? That these questions are on some level unanswerable ensures that *Emma* will be read again and again.