

# *The Presentation and Influence of Power Dynamics in Jane Austen's Emma*

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, literary criticism tries to evaluate the literary work by fitting it into a certain established theory. Instead, this essay focuses on the original “dialogues” in Jane Austen’s novel *Emma* to give a pragmatic testimonial of how revolutionary Jane Austen is in showing the shifting power dynamics between Emma and her friend Harriet Smith through seemingly easy-spoken exchange. By paying attention to three specific passages in the novel, this essay analyses the author’s use of words, tone and punctuation in conversations between the pair of friends. The analysis enables the assessment of their characteristics at different stages of the novel and their consequent change in positions in terms of power dynamics. From Harriet’s initial unsteadiness and Emma’s dominance to obtaining relevant balance, this essay reveals Austen’s construction of power dynamics between characters as variables that maintain conservation. The consequential function of such design is that the establishment of power dynamics helps to distribute authority and exert influences on the characters’ behaviour, thereby presenting the plot development and solid personal growth of characters.

**Keywords:** Jane Austen, *Emma*, power dynamics

## 1. Introduction

The English novelist Jane Austen is well-known for her subtlety in depicting, reflecting, and commenting on the British gentry, social and economic status, and the topic of marriage through her works. *Emma* is Austen’s fourth published novel. It is also the last one to be published during the author’s lifetime before her death in 1817. Published in 1815, *Emma* narrates the story of Emma Woodhouse’s growth from conducting misconceived matchmaking to gaining a more mature perception of love and relationships. The novel’s eponymous heroine is controversial—as stated by the author, someone “whom no one but myself will much like” [1]. In *Emma*, the relationship between the heroine, Emma Woodhouse and her friend, Harriet Smith, plays a central role in connecting and influencing the characters and situations in the story. Readers can notice an interesting phenomenon of shifting power dynamics between the two by paying closer attention to their interactions. As each of them is crucial to the book’s integrity and richness, this essay explores how Austen presents the different status of power dynamics between Emma and Harriet at various stages of the novel. The aim is to understand the underlying intentions and impacts of the two characters’ changing states of individual influences and personalities. In order to do so, this essay decodes the characters’ transitions in attitudes and their speech, focusing on figures of speech, punctuation usage, author’s choice of diction and phrases. By doing so, one is able to learn how the author successfully constructs a

meaningful storyline and builds comprehensive personalities for the characters. With the support of the textual analysis, this essay proposes that elaborate designs on power dynamics in a story calibrate the development of plot and character growth, suggesting that power dynamics have the potential to be used as an effective element for the solid construction of novels.

## 2. The First Stage of Power Dynamics: Emma's Dominance and Harriet's Compliance

The first passage that this essay will discuss is one at the beginning of the novel, where Harriet counsels Emma regarding Robert Martin's proposal. It signifies the first stage of power dynamics between the pair of friends, where Emma's confidence and dominance are at their height, while Harriet is mostly compliant and dependent. Harriet's speech contains a large number of requests for Emma's guidance, mainly in the form of interrogative sentences. For example, "What shall I do?", "Do you think I am right?" [2]. Harriet's constant resort to Emma reveals her unsteadiness of mind, that instead of prioritizing the contemplation of her own affection for Robert Martin, she leaves the decision-making process mainly to Emma's influence, especially when the matter in question is one as important as marriage. On the other hand, while Emma purportedly refuses to give Harriet direct advice, she exerts her influence nevertheless.

In contrast with her companion's indecisiveness, Emma inspects the situation with a highly biased opinion and introduces her "general rule" that "if a woman *doubts* as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him" [2]. The italicized "doubts" applies to both Harriet and Emma. In Harriet's doubts, there is an emptiness of self-awareness and intellect, a trait that establishes her as an artless character who fails to dictate her own narration but is rather shaped by others' notions [3]. In Emma's case, the "doubts" do not mean the difficulty in answering "yes" or "no" for Harriet. Instead, they represent a negative emotion directed towards Robert Martin's proposal, which is driven by a degree of selfishness. With her limited understanding of the economic world, Emma fails to recognize the practicality of a match between Harriet and Martin [4]. Therefore, the selfishness lies in her denial of the proposal simply by seeing it as undesirable for herself [4]. At this stage, Emma has no personal interest to attend to but to procure herself a companion who may supplement the place of Miss Taylor. Hence, she must not allow Harriet to fall into the hands of an inferior society. Looking in retrospect, Harriet Smith and Robert Martin are, in fact, equal in their share of society. All that inequality between them is but a false impression created by Emma's groundless surmise. Therefore, this passage demonstrates that when Emma possesses the ascendancy in power dynamics, her blind confidence tends to employ a selfish aim that renders her influence ill to the weaker and far less assertive Harriet.

Apart from a series of questions, Jane Austen inserts several dashes to consolidate Harriet's waver. For example, "I am sure you are a great deal too kind to—but if you would just advise me what I had best do—No, no, I do not mean that—As you say, one's mind ought to be quite made up—One should not be hesitating—It is a very serious thing.—It will be safer to say 'No,' perhaps.—Do you think I had better say 'No?'" [2]. The five dashes create a stammering effect that reflects Harriet's lack of deliberation on the matter, for she speaks without consistent logic to support her speech. This proof of intellectual inferiority determines Harriet's being subordinate to Emma and results in her subconsciously handing over the power of decision-making to the latter.

The dashes enable readers to perceive that Harriet is in an anxious state, too. One possible source of her anxiety can be the fear of Emma's superiority, originating from their inequality in social status. Since Emma's behaviour coincides with the traditionally proprietorial attitude of men in relation to marriage, some scholars argue that the masculinity of Emma peaks when she interacts with Harriet [5]. Another interpretation of Harriet's anxiety is that it originates from her excitement in receiving Robert Martin's proposal, which Emma's disapprobation very much overcomes. This interpretation further suggests that the proposal brings forward a sense of positive sentiment, that Harriet is indeed

fond of Robert Martin despite her having “no notion that he liked [her] so very much” [2]. It emphasizes the fact that Emma’s influence is so strong that it overpowers Harriet’s personal inclination. This interpretation also sheds light on how Harriet’s insensibility prevents her from comprehending the connection between Robert Martin and her own felicity and, hence, is unconscious of the necessity to defend her desire. Either presumption reflects an unequal balance of power dynamics between Emma and Harriet, where, at this stage, Emma is always the dominator. However, Emma’s opinionated resolution in Harriet’s case does not vouch for herself. Looking at the passage in retrospect, Emma is as blind to her true feelings as Harriet is at this time. Such blindness is key to enabling the storyline’s progress since Emma’s unsuccessful matchmaking can be perceived as failed experiment that helps the characters navigate the realm of relationships by ruling out the wrong choices [6].

Specific words that Austen uses may help readers decode Harriet’s reaction to Emma’s disapprobation of the proposal, too. As Emma prompts Harriet to think of “the most agreeable man”, whom she believes should not be Robert Martin, Harriet blushes [2]. One of the explanations for the verb “blush” is “to become red in the face, (usually) from shame or modesty” [7]. Although blushing is commonly understood to be an expression of shyness, the idea of it containing a degree of shame provides a deeper reading of the scenario. If Harriet is ashamed to see herself eliminate Robert Martin from the position of the most agreeable man, in her opinion, she then experiences a struggle of conscience. There is a conflict between her own willingness to acknowledge and accept Robert Martin and Emma’s endeavour to reject it, where the latter prevails at this stage. The unbalanced power dynamics disturb Harriet’s ability to process her feelings, forcing her to betray her real affection as she is too weak to resist Emma’s will.

Harriet’s response to Emma’s declaring that in marrying Robert Martin, she shall lose her company—“[she] would not give up the pleasure and honour of being intimate with [Emma] for any thing in the world”—is another piece of evidence where diction exhibits the imbalance of power dynamics [2]. “Pleasure” alone is not enough to denote Harriet’s friendship with Emma, for she must add “honour” to refer to it. As she views befriending Emma as an “honour”, Harriet positions Emma in a condescending light, thus providing the view of Emma possessing the higher ground between them from a subjective perspective. By choosing compliance with an honourable friend’s opinion over prioritizing personal felicity, Austen portrays Harriet to be overly dependent on Emma’s direction and lacking judgment of her own. Harriet’s reluctance in parting with Emma in the passage also foreshadows their fate in a reversed way, that instead of retaining their friendship forever at the expense of marital happiness, “Harriet, necessarily drawn away by her engagements with the Martins, was less and less at Hartfield; which was not to be regretted.—The intimacy between her and Emma must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of goodwill” [2]. In between the contrasting intention and reality is the changing power dynamics that eventually lead to the change in intimacy.

By the end of the passage, Emma’s dominance reaches its height as Harriet’s weak determination eventually turns into total compromise. Emma uses the former rule related to doubts as the opening of her influencing process and closes the scenario by putting forward a second rule—“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” [2]. It inflicts the last and most severe blow to Harriet’s already meek willpower to stand her ground. First, Emma’s rule only considers Harriet’s passive condition of being asked and the attachment on Robert Martin’s side; it ignores her friend’s possibility of taking delight in the proposal and wishing to return the affection. Thus, Emma shuts the door to the discussion of returning a favourable answer and restrains Harriet’s opportunity to probe into and reciprocate her feelings. Second, the notion of “a tolerable letter” effectively downgrades Robert Martin and puts Harriet in an embarrassing situation, for an acceptance on her side would then become a decision made based on the awareness that Emma will be sure to “[feel] the bad taste of her friend” [2]. The rule also

implies Emma's manipulative power as she reduces Robert Martin's qualities that might have attracted Harriet to the mere skill of letter writing. By setting up such manipulateness, Austen inserts a degree of dominating antagonism into this heroine, making her a central blocking force that, in turn, drives the plot forward [8]. Harriet's failure to distinguish what is good—Robert Martin's genuine confession—and what is bad—Emma's prejudiced stance—reemphasizes her weakness in terms of discretion and power dynamics.

Apart from Emma's rule, Harriet's response, which also constitutes her last speech in the passage, displays the immediate impact of Emma's enhanced influence. She claims that "nobody cares for a letter" in order to cater to Emma's satisfaction at the expense of her internal appreciation for Robert Martin [2]. This act exposes the unwholesome nature of their friendship, where betrayal of self on one's side is required to appease the other. While Emma views the letter as "[a] bewitching flattery" [2], little does she know that her influence works no better by dictating Harriet. Harriet's response, "I am quite determined to refuse him", is instantly followed by two successive questions, "But how shall I do? What shall I say?" [2]. The questions reveal her preceding depreciation of the letter and the seemingly strong resolution to refuse Robert Martin to be feigned, stressing that she is still heavily reliant on Emma without feeling affronted or being able to recognize her advice as pernicious. As this last speech echoes Harriet's first one in the passage discussed, which ends with two questions as well, it functions as a reminder of Harriet's indecisiveness and dependence in the first passage. Therefore, Emma's introduction of a second rule manifests her lack of sympathy for her friend and her failure to treat Harriet as an equal. It serves as a tool to widen the gap between the two characters in their power dynamics.

### 3. The Second Stage of Power Dynamics: Interchange of Positions

The passage in which Emma realizes that Harriet's object of affection is Mr. Knightley instead of Mr. Churchill and then gets involved in a miserable discussion with her friend in *Emma* marks an interchange of positions in power dynamics between the two ladies. On Harriet's side, there is an increase in resolution. As aforementioned, the previous passage hints at the possible fear that Harriet possesses when facing Emma's superiority. However, in the second passage, Harriet not only answers Emma's question, "Have you any idea of Mr. Knightley's returning your affection", with an attitude that Austen describes as "not fearfully" but also replies with the short yet decisive sentence, "I must say that I have" [2]. The inclusion of the word "must" sharply contrasts with her prior timidity and indicates that she can now direct and speak her mind decisively. Instead of continuing to follow Emma's lead blindly, when Emma attempts to discourage her with a suggestion that "Mr. Knightley might have Mr. Martin's interest in view", Harriet even goes as far as to have "rejected [Emma's] suspicion with spirit" [2]. The ability to reject, especially "with spirit", underlines Harriet's riddance of compliance with Emma. There appears to be a conservation of power between the two, that when Harriet gains, Emma inevitably loses.

As the weaker position changes hands, what is representative of such weakness remains the same. Austen exhibits Emma's loss of influence through her self-criticism, "How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world" [2]. Instead of Harriet, Emma uses interrogative words this time. Together with the usage of triple exclamation marks and the parallel structure, Austen formulates an elaborate presentation of Emma's moving away from the state of always "[thinking] a little too well of herself" [2], which the author describes at the beginning of the novel. However, the interrogative element is not the only one that witnesses an overlap between Emma and Harriet. In Emma's speech, "Might he not?—Is not it possible, that when enquiring, as you thought, into the state of your affection, he might be alluding to Mr. Martin—he might have Mr. Martin's interest in

view?” [2], the insertion of dashes unveils Emma’s nervousness. The use of dashes embodies both Emma’s and Harriet’s anxiety that originates from a realization of affection and the consequential concern about failing to preserve it. However, at this part of the novel, only Emma is left for anxiety’s haunt. While Emma acquires the characteristics that formerly adorn Harriet’s disadvantaged status in power dynamics, on Harriet’s side is the re-emergence of the blush. This time, it is unlikely to apply the idea of shame to Harriet, who now indulges in her newly gained hope and confidence “with great, though trembling delight” [2]. Therefore, the transition of interrogatives and dashes from Harriet to Emma reflects an interchange in their positions in power dynamics.

In the second passage, Austen mentions “a development of self” [2], a phrase that can be applied to both characters’ state of mind at this point. The embodiment of Harriet’s “development of self” is her increased consciousness, a crucial quality for independence that was largely absent before. A series of phrases aid in the presentation of such consciousness, such as “been conscious of”, “be sensible of”, and “had been more and more aware of” [2]. Austen paves the way for Harriet to acquire autonomy by substituting her constantly “confused” state with a conscious and sensible mind [2]. Emma, who appears to have become weak and miserable compared to Harriet at this stage, is not without a beneficial development. As the previous dominant image puts Emma at risk of being less favoured by the readers as the heroine, her weakening status sees a delicate yet gradual convergence between the positions of Emma and the audience [9]. Through introspection, Emma acknowledges that “[her] counsels had never led [Harriet] right” and was eventually able to move her focus from other people to herself [2].

As her modesty increases, Emma steps down from her conceit and gains a clear vision of what is at the centre of her concern—her feelings for Mr. Knightley. As Harriet obtains a confident attitude of “now I seem to feel that I may deserve him; and that if he does choose me, it will not be any thing so very wonderful” [2], Emma becomes the one who misinterprets her own situation instead. For her, “many little particulars of the notice [Harriet] had received from [Mr. Knightley], a look, a speech ... a compliment implied, a preference inferred, had been unnoticed, because unsuspected, by Emma” [2]. As she takes in these particulars as painful evidence for Harriet’s “good ground for hope” [2], Emma essentially neglects the fact that Mr. Knightley has been paying such “little particulars” to herself constantly over the years. Therefore, as Emma’s power dynamics relent, she obtains “a development of self” as she learns to redirect her habitual observation and speculation about others to her own situation. Nonetheless, this essay’s analysis indicates that such development is still in progress, for Emma’s incorrectness in suspicion endures, and she has yet to establish a logical link regarding the relationship between Mr. Knightley and herself.

#### **4. The Final Stage of Power Dynamics: Achieving Balance**

The last passage that this essay will discuss is the first half of the last chapter of *Emma*, which describes Harriet’s return to Hartfield. As part of the concluding chapter in the novel, this passage resolves the imbalance of power dynamics between Emma and Harriet. It begins by stating that Emma as having “an anxious feeling for Harriet” [2]. In the second passage that this essay discusses, Emma’s anxiety comes from her misunderstanding that she might lose Mr. Knightley to Harriet. However, in the third passage, the table has turned, and Harriet becomes the one to face the risk of disappointment. Therefore, Emma’s current anxiety underscores her ability to empathize with Harriet, and the existence of empathy effectively subverts the previous condescending portrayal of Emma. The anxiety also manifests Emma’s growing solicitude for Harriet—especially in comparison with her attitude in the first passage—that though she is secured of Mr. Knightley’s affection, Emma’s conscience is not at peace, and her felicity not perfected without confirming that Harriet is safe and sound from her engagement. On the other hand, Harriet’s acknowledgement that “she had been presumptuous and silly, and self-deceived, before” successfully helps her establish a clear

understanding of self [2]. Her late marriage and the acknowledgment “that Harriet had always liked Robert Martin” marks the lifting of Emma’s manipulative spell on her [2]. From her acceptance of the second proposal, readers see that Harriet is now qualified to wield her authority and make independent decisions. Thus, the once underway “development of self” is now accomplished, and neither of the two characters suffers from any extreme in the power dynamics anymore.

Emma has transformed from the highly conceited mistress who occupies the absolute ascendancy in her relationship with Harriet to the tender bride-to-be who takes delight in her friend’s regained happiness. The transformation mainly consists of increased thoughtfulness, introspectiveness, and empathy, along with a shift from focusing on self-centred matchmaking to considering persistent commitment [10]. In turn, Harriet has grown from an intellectual dependent of Emma to the master of her own felicity. Thus, their positions in the power dynamics have become rationally equal at the end of the novel. However, what accompanies the arrival of such a stable status of the power dynamics is the unavoidable separation of the friends. The plot arrangement of bringing the pair of friends back to separate realms exemplifies the conservative reestablishment of the societal structure that defines the marriage narrative [11]. In this way, it can be interpreted as a hint that there can be no sheer equality in the power dynamics of an intimate friendship. Since shaping individuals to control the kind of characters they evolve into is an inherently gratifying process within Austen’s works, Emma goes on to take up Harriet’s initial position and becomes the ideal subordinate to Knightley’s pedagogy [12]. In this way, one may perceive the power dynamics between Emma and Harriet as having transferred onto that between the former and Mr. Knightley.

## 5. Conclusion

The notion of chaotic power dynamics between Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith in Jane Austen’s *Emma* is phenomenal. Like the heroine herself, the power dynamics can be both lovable and hateful, for Austen grants them the authenticity destined to be imperfect yet appealing. This essay delivers an attempt to decode such duality of the power dynamics between the two characters, which can either be harmful as it twists and twines Harriet Smith’s path to marital happiness or beneficial as it cures Emma Woodhouse’s conceit and motivates her eventual attainment of a happy ending. The limitation of this essay is that it only focuses on one literary work of the author. Therefore, the example of Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith can be exclusive to *Emma* and lacks applicability to a wider range of literary fields. With future studies on a larger sample, one should be able to obtain more solid and possibly more diverse and fruitful research results regarding the usage and influences of power dynamics between characters in novels. In *Emma*, however, this essay shows that it is the changing power dynamics that enable Emma and Harriet to reinforce the individual development on each other mutually, and from there, exert their influence on the rest of the characters and the environment they belong in to complete and perfect the grander story of *Emma*. Therefore, upon the completion of an in-depth textual analysis of Austen’s use of speech and language in three sample passages from *Emma*, this essay provides insight into how the notion of power dynamics can effectively facilitate the construction of character development and plot progression in a story. From there, the essay approves of and advocates the deployment of power dynamics design in novel writing and invites further research into the study of its application.

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