

A Harmonious Blend of Austen's Timelessness with Modern Flair: An Analysis of Emma and Its 2020 Film Adaptation

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Abstract— *This paper explores the adaptation of Jane Austen's Emma in Autumn de Wilde's 2020 film. While maintaining fidelity to Austen's original text, the film updates certain elements to connect with contemporary audiences. By examining the portrayal of characters, narrative structure, and thematic changes, this study highlights how de Wilde's adaptation honors the Regency-era novel while integrating modern sensibilities. Significant differences, such as the portrayal of Mr. Knightley, are discussed to illustrate how they reflect shifts in societal values and expectations. The choice to undertake this research stems from a fascination with how classic literature can be reinterpreted for today's viewers, balancing historical accuracy with contemporary relevance. Through a comparative analysis, the paper sheds light on how classic literature can be reinterpreted for today's viewers, preserving its core essence while adapting to new contexts.*

Index Terms- *Fidelity, film adaptation, Regency era, classic literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

"I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Austen-Leigh 157). This quote, recorded in Jane Austen's memoir by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, reflects the boldness of her writing in Emma.

Set in the early 19th century during the Regency era, Emma was crafted at a time when societal expectations for women were clear and limiting. Despite this, Austen created Emma Woodhouse—a strong-willed, flawed, and independent woman who defies the typical mold of heroines in literature of that era. Austen's use of wit and humor throughout the novel subtly critiques the rigid social fabric of British society, highlighting class disparities and the constraints placed on women (Singh and Soni 1). The Regency period, known for its elegance and strict

societal expectations, was a time when marriage and social standing often defined a woman's life. In this context, Austen's portrayal of Emma stands out as both a product of her time and a subtle critique of it.

Even today, Emma remains relevant. The struggles for identity, personal growth, and navigating social expectations continue to resonate with modern audiences. The 2020 film adaptation of Emma, directed by Autumn de Wilde, brings the story to life with a fresh perspective. While staying true to the essence of Austen's work, the film introduces subtle changes that cater to modern sensibilities. As Jessica Paganini notes, "Wilde expertly plays within the contextual themes of the novel, but she also inserts a few modern twists of her own—most notably, the film's underlying statement about masculinity and the shifting power dynamics of gender roles" (Paganini). Through its vibrant visuals and nuanced performances, the adaptation bridges the gap between Austen's era and ours, making the timeless themes of the novel accessible to contemporary viewers.

Objectives:

This research aims to:

- Explore how de Wilde's Emma balances fidelity to Austen's original text with the need to connect with a modern audience.
- Examine the changes made to characters, themes, and the narrative structure in the adaptation.
- Understand how the adaptation both honors and reinterprets the source material.
- Address the broader question of how classic literature can be adapted for contemporary audiences while preserving the essence of the original work.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2020 film adaptation of *Emma*, directed by Autumn de Wilde, exemplifies a trend of modern adaptations that strive to balance fidelity with contemporary updates. Marissa Martinelli highlights how this adaptation, while more faithful than earlier ones like *Clueless*, still makes notable changes (Martinelli). Jessica Paganini examines how the film modernizes certain elements while aiming to preserve Austen's original essence (Paganini).

Linda Hutcheon's theory on adaptation emphasizes the need for both innovation and fidelity to the source material (Hutcheon, 2006). This theory can be observed in *Emma* (2020), which integrates modern sensibilities while honoring Austen's Regency-era narrative. The analysis by Harsh Vardhan Singh and Dr. Vinita Soni on *Emma* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* offers additional insight into how classic literature navigates themes of gender roles and social expectations, providing a comparative context for understanding the thematic evolution in the 2020 film adaptation (Singh & Soni).

Existing studies focus on the film's modern updates but lack a detailed comparative analysis of how it retains Austen's essence while appealing to today's viewers. This research aims to address this gap by examining the balance between Austen's original text and the film's contemporary elements.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative approach, diving deep into both the 2020 adaptation of *Emma* and Jane Austen's original novel. Initially, the novel was closely examined to uncover its key themes, character depictions, and narrative techniques. Following this, the film adaptation was analyzed to see how it reflected or modified these elements. Comparative analysis was employed to pinpoint similarities and differences between the two versions. The research incorporated critical reviews and adaptation theories to add depth to the findings. By focusing on qualitative data, this study sought to understand how the adaptation navigates between staying true to the original text and appealing to modern audiences.

IV. ANALYSIS OF JANE AUSTEN'S EMMA AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Thought of as a period of romance, elegance, and etiquette, the Regency period lasted nine years from 1811 to 1820 and was named so because it was during a time when the United Kingdom was ruled by a regent instead of a king (Knowles 14). It saw the emergence of numerous female writers such as Jane Austen, whose writing encouraged readers to question the construction of society in both local and personal ways (Mellor 44). On the surface, Jane Austen may have appeared as a female novelist who simply wrote romance novels. In truth, she critiqued the social issues of her time in her novels and by doing so, Austen unveiled the expectations that the nineteenth-century woman was supposed to fulfill. But her novels, most adamantly, focus on society and the significance of nineteenth-century England's social conventions, which women were expected to obey.

The Regency era was a time when women were expected to behave in a certain way and abide by a particular code of social etiquette. These rules of social etiquette were not intended for the women that were already established in society or as part of the old gentry and aristocratic families but instead, they "were aimed at the newly arrived middle class" (Hobson ch. 1). More importantly, these women were expected to marry. Marriage for the upper classes was significant because it would grant families legitimate heirs and for women of all classes, marriage was very important because options were limited when they needed to support themselves (Adkins 3).

Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815) reflects what it means to be a woman during a time of repression and the firm social expectations of 'proper' female behaviour. The main subject of Austen's novels is the relationship of people with the wider society and concurrently, "how a person can be true to oneself and yet negotiate social pressures" (Todd 5). The protagonist Emma stands out in a society that is centered around gender roles and, in her own way, she confronts social norms.

4.1. The Story of the Novel

Jane Austen's *Emma* is a love story in which young men and women who live in the same area meet at

dances, in each other's homes or while walking in the village. Emma, the main character, is a clever, pretty, twenty-one-years old, who lives alone with her father, Mr. Woodhouse, near the village of Highbury. She becomes friends with seventeen-years-old Harriet, who has been abandoned by her parents. Emma decides that she will find a suitable husband for Harriet, but stops her marrying Robert Martin, a local farmer, because she thinks he is not enough for her.

She believes that Mr. Elton, the local vicar, would be a much better match. Her Attempt to make a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton fails miserably but, undeterred, she tries to pair Harriet with Frank Churchill. However, Frank announces a surprise engagement to Jane Fairfax, while Harriet herself believes that Mr. Knightly, a close friend of Emma's, is in love with her. As it turns out, Mr. Knightly is really in love with Emma and asks her to marry him. She accepts and decides to stop interfering in other people's lives. So, when she hears that Harriet has accepted Robert Martin's second proposal of marriage, she wishes the couple all the best. (Blake, p.61)

4.2. Emma and the Characteristics Of the Regency Era:

Austen's title character Emma Woodhouse is an example of a woman who does not abide by the rules. Emma is described as an obnoxious and rude character who feels superior to others. She is a proud outspoken young woman but "her pride engenders self-knowledge" (Moffat 46). Unlike the typical reserved women of her time, Emma boldly speaks her mind without fear of consequences, challenging expectations of female behavior. According to Gregory's conduct rules, her wit and confidence could create enemies, as they contradict the era's standards. Moreover, Emma views herself as equal to men and sees marriage as a choice, not a necessity, due to her wealth. Her financial security empowers her, allowing her to prioritize love over societal pressure to marry.

4.3. Marriage and the Marital Pressures in the Regency Era:

Marriage based on love was becoming more common in the late eighteenth century. A man with a respectable income remained desirable, and "marrying for money and social advantage is a common element in Jane Austen's writing" (Adkins 3). Despite this,

Emma rejects marriage for social advantage, echoing Gregory's view that "nothing renders a woman more despicable, than her thinking it essential to happiness to be married". Emma firmly believes that without love, marriage is not worth pursuing, as reflected in her statement to Harriet Smith: "I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want" (Austen, Emma 82). Emma does not regard marriage as beneficial unless she is in love.

Many events in Austen's novels occur in social settings like assemblies and balls, where behavior is subject to public scrutiny. In Emma, the heroine criticizes Miss Bates's incessant talking. Other form of etiquette expected of ladies during social gatherings was the regulation of their conversation and behaviour towards others during day outings. Along with attending balls, travels to the country and day outings were other social engagements in Regency England that became popular once summer was approaching (Kirk 23). The incident at Box Hill highlights how Regency women were expected to regulate their conversation and behavior. James states that it would have been a display of poor manners to have tried to dominate a conversation (Hobson ch.6). Emma's criticism of Miss Bates reveals how women risked public scrutiny if they spoke too freely. Sutherland observes that Austen's world involves constant judgment of behavior ("Social Judgment"). Emma's view aligns with the notion that women were deemed 'ridiculous' if they were not reserved, as Gregory suggests. Gregory argues that reserved women were considered more agreeable and modest, enhancing their attractiveness. Although Emma respects Miss Bates's kindness, she adheres to societal expectations of modesty and restraint. Austen uses these social interactions to illustrate the constraints imposed on women in the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, the subject of matrimony is critically addressed in Emma and more predominantly, the societal pressures of securing a husband that Austen's society forces upon the nineteenth-century woman. It is evident that Emma Woodhouse has her own non-traditional view of marriage and would risk denying a

man's proposal, a choice that not every woman of the Regency era was able to afford.

Nonetheless, the idea of marrying for romance was slowly becoming more common by the Regency era and Grace states that it was possibly driven by increased novel reading. Marriage based purely on romance, however, was not considered to be correct and domestic compatibility was encouraged instead (Grace 14).

There was a clear distinction between the genders when it came to marrying. A wealthy man might be forgiven for marrying a poorer woman, especially if she was considered beautiful and had good manners. In contrast, a wealthy woman was not as lucky where society was concerned. No matter how attractive or good mannered, if she married a man of lower rank she would be looked down upon (Grace 14). As a wealthy woman herself, this is an opinion that Emma shares with society. Even though Harriet is of lower rank, Emma convinces her to refuse Robert Martin's proposal because he is a farmer, and based on those grounds she considers him a man of lesser means (Austen, Emma 31). She believes marrying a man of better means would provide Harriet with better opportunities in life. Here, Emma reflects the pressures enforced on the nineteenth-century woman to marry and that marrying for love alone was not considered practical in the Regency society.

Grace asserts in this context that "Matches between men and women of unequal social standing were threats to the rigid structure of society" (Grace 12). A young woman was encouraged to marry to increase her social status and to never marry beneath her as Emma believes Harriet Smith would do if she were to accept Robert Martin's proposal. Regardless, the eventual marriage of Robert Martin and Harriet Smith demonstrates the latter's resistance to gender norms and despite societal pressures regarding marriage, this exhibits that marrying for love was becoming more common despite a lack of fortune and the limitations of women. The societal pressures of securing a husband are therefore clearly reflected in Emma. This highlights that women were expected to marry and that securing a spouse could come with a great deal of hardship.

4.4. Social Conduct:

If a woman was friendly towards a gentleman, then it was implied that she was in pursuit of him as her potential husband. Emma Woodhouse, for example, is warned of being too "encouraging" in her communications with Mr. Elton. As a result, Mr. John Knightley expresses to Emma that she should regulate her behaviour and that he thinks her "manners to him encouraging" (Austen, Emma 107). Consequently, Emma soon learns that her brother-in-law is right when Mr. Elton proposes to her and when she rejects him, she is again reprimanded for being overly encouraging, as seen in Elton's words: "No, madam, my visits to Hartfield have been for yourself only; and the encouragement I received" (Austen, Emma 125). Emma does not intend to marry Mr. Elton and never meant to imply that she wanted to through what she thought was merely friendly behaviour. Therefore, if a woman expected to marry, she was required to carefully pay heed to in what tone of manner she communicated with a gentleman for if she did not, she would be accused of being too flirtatious or encouraging by society. This only further showcases the restrictions placed on the nineteenth-century women and how they constantly needed to keep a check on their mode of language and their demeanour towards the opposite gender.

4.5. The Confined Nature of Women's Existence:

The novel's limited, almost claustrophobic scope of action gives us a strong sense of the confined nature of a woman's existence in early-nineteenth-century rural England. Emma possesses a great deal of intelligence and energy, but the best use she can make of these is to attempt to guide the marital destinies of her friends, a project that gets her into trouble. The alternative pastimes depicted in the book—social visits, charity visits, music, artistic endeavors—seem relatively trivial, at times even monotonous. Isabella is the only mother focused on in the story, and her portrayal suggests that a mother's life offers a woman little use of her intellect. Yet, when Jane compares the governess profession to the slave trade, she makes it clear that the life of a working woman is in no way preferable to the idleness of a woman of fortune. The novel focuses on marriage because marriage offers women a chance to exert their power, if only for a brief time, and to affect their own destinies without adopting the labors or efforts of the working class.

Participating in the rituals of courtship and accepting or rejecting proposals is perhaps the most active role that women are permitted to play in Emma's world.

V. ANALYSIS OF EMMA (2020) FILM ADAPTATION

The 2020 adaptation of Emma, directed by Autumn de Wilde and written by Eleanor Catton, presents a visually striking interpretation of Jane Austen's classic novel. De Wilde's directorial approach introduces a bold and distinctive visual style to the Regency period drama. Despite this, the film remains largely faithful to Austen's narrative, centering on the character of Emma Woodhouse (Anya Taylor-Joy) and her ill-fated matchmaking efforts with her new acquaintance, Harriet Smith (Mia Goth).

Catton's screenplay preserves extensive dialogues from the novel, retaining key scenes such as the emotionally charged carriage confession, the enigmatic gift of a piano, and the significant Box Hill picnic. Although the film does not diverge drastically from Austen's original ending, it incorporates several notable variations, particularly in the final sequences, offering a fresh perspective on the conclusion of the story.

5.1. Miss Taylor's Wedding:

Jane Austen's Emma commences with a succinct portrayal of its protagonist a 21-year-old woman described as "handsome, clever, and rich" and quickly transitions to the aftermath of her governess's wedding: "The wedding over, and the bride-people gone, her father and herself were left to dine together, with no prospect of a third to cheer a long evening."

In contrast, the 2020 film adaptation of Emma begins with the familiar opening lines from the novel but alters the sequence by incorporating a scene preceding the wedding of Mr. Weston (Rupert Graves) and Miss Taylor (Gemma Whelan). This adaptation adds a farewell scene between Emma and Miss Taylor, underscoring the latter's significance in Emma's upbringing. Emma, accompanied by her father Mr. Woodhouse (Bill Nighy), attends the wedding, which Mr. Woodhouse remarks as a "terrible day." The scene also features silent old Mrs. Bates and her talkative daughter Miss Bates (Miranda Hart) in the pews. Mr.

Elton (Josh O'Connor), a vicar characterized by his social aspirations, demonstrates his pretentiousness through his mispronunciation of the word "innocence" as "in-no-sense." Additionally, Mr. Weston's son, Frank Churchill (Callum Turner), is conspicuously absent, residing with his often-ill aunt and uncle.

5.2. Emma's Father:

In both the novel and the 2020 film adaptation of Emma, Mr. Woodhouse is depicted as a hypochondriac, perpetually concerned about his health and the potential for exposure to drafts. This characteristic is so pronounced in Austen's text that it leads to his neighbors delaying a party invitation in anticipation of acquiring a folding-screen to shield him from any air currents, thereby increasing the likelihood of his attendance.

The film adaptation amplifies this trait by portraying Mr. Woodhouse (Bill Nighy) as obsessively rearranging furniture to guard against perceived drafts. This behavior culminates in a scene where a collection of fire screens creates a private space for Emma (Anya Taylor-Joy) and Mr. Knightley (Johnny Flynn) to engage in a romantic moment, which does not occur in the novel.

The film also highlights the role of the Hartfield servants, who are depicted as diligently catering to Mr. Woodhouse's demands, often with subtle expressions of exasperation. Screenwriter Eleanor Catton described this portrayal as an effort to reveal the extent of Emma Woodhouse's obliviousness to the dependence her privileged existence has on those beneath her notice. Catton and de Wilde, drawing inspiration from screwball comedies of the 1940s and 1950s, employ a highly stylized approach to underscore the absurdity of the characters' social privileges. Despite these embellishments, Mr. Woodhouse in the novel is depicted with some degree of empathy towards his staff, including arranging employment for his coachman's daughter, a detail that is somewhat muted in the film adaptation.

5.3. The Declaration of Love:

In the 2020 film adaptation of Emma, the scene in which Mr. Knightley confesses his love to Emma largely adheres to Austen's novel, including the iconic line, "If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about

it more.” However, while Austen's narrative leaves Emma's response to this confession somewhat ambiguous, suggesting she reacts as any proper lady would—the film adaptation presents a more explicit portrayal. Onscreen, Emma responds with distress, asserting that she cannot marry Mr. Knightley due to Harriet's ongoing affection for him. In Austen's novel, although Emma briefly entertains the notion of denying Mr. Knightley for Harriet's sake, this idea is not as prominently developed.

Additionally, the film introduces an unexpected element: Emma suffers from a nosebleed during this pivotal moment. This detail is absent from Austen's text, which does not indicate that Emma is prone to such ailments. Director Autumn de Wilde revealed to RadioTimes.com that her personal experience with nosebleeds influenced this choice, aiming to subvert the romantic idealization of the scene and underscore Emma's flawed, human nature, aligning her with Mr. Knightley's own imperfections. This creative decision contributes to the film's broader thematic exploration of character vulnerability and authenticity.

5.4. Class Issues:

In the 2020 film adaptation of *Emma*, significant attention is given to the theme of class and its impact on character interactions. A notable departure from Austen's novel occurs when Emma and Mr. Knightley decide to persuade Robert Martin, a farmer whom Emma had previously deemed unworthy of Harriet, to propose once more. Emma volunteers to deliver this message, approaching the task with a sense of dramatic reluctance, which underscores her internal struggle with class prejudices. Catton introduces a new layer of humility for Emma by having her make a formal apology to Mr. Martin and his family, acknowledging her previous misjudgments.

Additionally, the film introduces a new scene where Harriet reveals to Emma that her biological father is not a gentleman but a tradesman from Bristol. Emma's subsequent invitation to Harriet's father to Hartfield and the reconciliation that follows further illustrate Emma's growth and her efforts to rectify past class-based prejudices.

This narrative adjustment represents a significant deviation from Austen's original text. While Austen's

novel critiques class prejudices, it does not fully challenge the entrenched British class system. In the novel, Emma's acceptance of Harriet's engagement to Robert Martin is portrayed through a lens of condescension, reflecting her own social biases. Harriet's engagement is conveyed to Emma indirectly, and while their relationship remains amicable by the novel's conclusion, it is not portrayed as entirely reconciled. The film adaptation, therefore, not only revises Emma's character arc but also amplifies the thematic exploration of class issues and personal growth.

5.5. Visual Elements:

The film incorporates visual elements such as costume design, fashion, and architecture that align with the Regency Era. It meticulously represents Regency fashion through the use of empire-waisted gowns for women, characterized by high waistlines just below the bust and lightweight fabrics like muslin and silk. These dresses, adorned with floral accessories, create a quintessentially Regency silhouette. Men's attire features tailored suits with long tailcoats, high-collar shirts, knee-length trousers, and cravats, complemented by hats and high boots. Despite the subtle differences in clothing between the upper and lower classes, the film accurately reflects the period's sartorial distinctions through costume design, contributing to the film's authenticity.

The film's architecture reflects the Regency period through the use of pastel colors, floral wallpaper, and brocade curtains, which evoke the era's aesthetic. The depiction of Emma Woodhouse's home includes classic elements such as columns and a grand entrance, alongside high ceilings, large windows, and elegantly furnished rooms. These elements not only represent the social status of the characters but also immerse the audience in the period's ambiance.

Therefore, the visual elements in *Emma* serve to both resonate with the Regency Era and captivate modern viewers, reinforcing the film's connection to Jane Austen's novel while enhancing its historical accuracy and visual appeal.

In conclusion, the 2020 adaptation of *Emma*, directed by Autumn de Wilde and written by Eleanor Catton, offers a visually dynamic and faithful representation

of Jane Austen's classic novel. Through a meticulous attention to Regency-era fashion, architecture, and social nuances, the film not only honors the historical context but also provides a fresh perspective on the narrative. De Wilde's bold visual style and Catton's thoughtful screenplay preserve key elements of Austen's story while introducing novel adaptations that enhance the characters' depth and address class issues more explicitly. The film's detailed portrayal of Regency costumes and architecture effectively immerses audiences in the period, simultaneously appealing to contemporary viewers by highlighting both the grandeur and the subtleties of the era.

By integrating these visual and thematic elements, the film maintains a strong connection to Austen's original text, while also offering a modern interpretation that enriches the audience's understanding of both the novel and its historical backdrop.

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

6.1. Similarities Between Emma (Novel) and Emma (2020 Film Adaptation):

The 2020 film adaptation of Emma does a commendable job of staying faithful to Jane Austen's original novel. As Martinelli states, 2020's Emma remains largely faithful to Austen's story of meddling Emma Woodhouse (2020). While modern adaptations often take liberties, this version remains rooted in the source material, capturing the heart of Austen's story. The film mirrors the novel in:

- **Emma Woodhouse's Character:**
One of the strongest similarities between the novel and the film lies in how Emma Woodhouse is portrayed. In both versions, Emma is shown as a wealthy, clever, and somewhat self-assured young woman who, despite her good intentions, tends to meddle in other people's affairs especially in matters of the heart. The film captures her well-meaning but misguided attempts to matchmake Harriet Smith with Mr. Elton, just as Austen intended.

Take, for instance, the moment in the film when Emma arranges for Harriet to meet Mr. Elton. The scene plays out almost identically to the novel, with Emma's confidence and misjudgment of Mr. Elton's true

intentions shining through. It's a faithful depiction of how Austen crafted her protagonist flawed yet likable.

- **Faithful Plot Progression:**
The movie doesn't shy away from sticking to the main plot points of the novel. Significant events, such as Emma's friendship with Harriet, her misinterpretation of Frank Churchill's intentions, and the ultimate realization of her feelings for Mr. Knightley, are all closely mirrored from the book.

For example, the pivotal Box Hill scene, where Emma carelessly insults Miss Bates, is almost a direct translation from the novel. The tension and regret that follow are as palpable in the film as they are in Austen's original narrative. This consistency ensures that the film retains the core of the story that Austen crafted, making it recognizable to fans of the book.

- **Themes that Transcend Time:**
Austen's exploration of social class, marriage, and personal growth remains intact in the film adaptation. The critique of the rigid class structure of Regency England is subtly woven into the narrative, just as it is in the novel.

Emma's relationship with Mr. Knightley also remains a focal point in both versions, with Mr. Knightley serving as a grounding influence on Emma. His role as her moral guide and eventual romantic partner is just as significant in the film, keeping the thematic core of the novel alive. The film does justice to Austen's commentary on the complexities of human relationships and societal expectations.

- **Austen's Language Preserved:**
Another aspect that stands out in the film is its dialogue. The filmmakers have preserved much of Austen's original language, particularly in the interactions between Emma and Mr. Knightley. As Martinelli states, Catton leaves long stretches of dialogue from the book near-untouched, and the essential vignettes from the story are all there (2020). Their witty exchanges and deeper conversations carry the same weight and charm that they do in the novel.

Consider the moment when Mr. Knightley gently chastises Emma after the Box Hill incident. The dialogue is lifted directly from the book, with the same emotional resonance that Austen intended. This preservation of language helps maintain the Regency-

era atmosphere, making the film feel both authentic and respectful of its literary roots.

- **Character Relationships:**

The dynamics between the characters in the film mirror those in the novel closely. Whether it's Emma's affectionate yet sometimes exasperating relationship with her hypochondriac father, Mr. Woodhouse, or her somewhat imbalanced friendship with Harriet Smith, the film stays true to these intricate relationships.

For instance, the bond between Emma and her father is portrayed with the same warmth and care that Austen described, showing Emma's protective nature and Mr. Woodhouse's dependency on her. Similarly, Emma's interactions with Harriet reveal both her affection for her friend and the social divide that complicates their friendship, echoing the complexities of their relationship in the novel.

Therefore these similarities underscore that the 2020 adaptation of Emma is not only faithful to Austen's original work but also successfully captures the spirit and essence of the novel. The consistent portrayal of characters, themes, and key plot points ensures that the film is a true reflection of the source material, appealing to both Austen enthusiasts and contemporary audiences.

6.2. Differences Between Emma (Novel) and Emma (2020 Film Adaptation):

Although Wilde expertly plays within the contextual themes of the novel, she inserts a few modern twists of her own — most notably, the film's underlying statement about masculinity and the shifting power dynamics of gender roles (Paganini 2020). These changes, though subtle in some cases, contribute to the film's modern sensibility.

- **Characterization Tweak:**

One of the most notable differences is the slight adjustments made to the characters, particularly Emma herself. In the novel, Emma's flaws that are her meddlesome nature and occasional arrogance are more pronounced. The film, however, softens her character, making her more likable and relatable from the outset. This change ensures that modern viewers, who might not have the patience for a more overtly flawed protagonist, can still connect with her journey.

For example, in the novel, Emma's manipulation of Harriet Smith is portrayed as somewhat more calculated and self-serving. In the film, her actions come across as less devious and more rooted in misguided but genuine concern for her friend. This shift in characterization helps to create a more sympathetic portrayal of Emma, aligning with contemporary expectations for a protagonist who, while imperfect, remains endearing.

One of the most talked-about differences between the novel and the film adaptation is the characterization of Mr. Knightley. One of the biggest changes to Emma in the movie adaptation is the fully-realized characterization of Mr. Knightley (Paganini 2020). In Jane Austen's novel, Mr. Knightley is depicted as a wise, morally upright, and somewhat paternal figure who often serves as Emma's guide and conscience. His role is to correct Emma's misguided actions and help her realize her mistakes, positioning him as an authoritative figure who ultimately steers her toward maturity.

In contrast, the 2020 film adaptation presents Mr. Knightley as a more vulnerable and emotionally expressive character. He is less of a mentor and more of an equal partner to Emma. The film emphasizes his humanity and emotions, portraying him as someone who is not always in control and who can be awkward or unsure, especially when it comes to his feelings for Emma. This shift in characterization makes Mr. Knightley more relatable to modern audiences, who may prefer a romantic lead who is less authoritative and more emotionally accessible.

- **Visual and Stylistic Innovations:**

The film also embraces a more stylized aesthetic, with its use of bright colors, sharp cinematography, and meticulous attention to Regency-era fashion. These visual choices, while not entirely inconsistent with the period, introduce a level of stylization that was not present in the novel. The film's heightened visuals help create a more vibrant and engaging world, drawing in modern viewers who are accustomed to visually stimulating content.

This choice is particularly evident in the costuming. While the novel describes Regency-era clothing in more functional terms, the film turns these outfits into

visual spectacles. The lavish dresses and carefully curated color palettes emphasize the wealth and status of the characters, making the film visually appealing to today's audience, who often seek both authenticity and allure in period pieces.

1. Pacing and Structure Adjustments:

In adapting the novel to film, some narrative pacing adjustments were necessary. Austen's *Emma* unfolds slowly, with much of the story driven by character interactions and internal monologues. The film, however, accelerates certain plot points to maintain audience engagement, trimming down or condensing scenes that might feel too drawn out for modern viewers.

For instance, the build-up to Frank Churchill's arrival and the subsequent revelations about his engagement to Jane Fairfax are paced much more quickly in the film. In the novel, these developments take their time, allowing Austen to explore the subtleties of social interaction. The film, on the other hand, opts for a brisker narrative, ensuring that contemporary audiences remain invested in the unfolding drama without becoming restless.

1. Modernized Gender Dynamics:

Another significant difference lies in the portrayal of gender dynamics. While the novel reflects the norms of its time, the film subtly updates these dynamics to resonate with modern sensibilities. For instance, Emma's relationship with Mr. Knightley is portrayed with a greater emphasis on mutual respect and partnership, rather than the more paternalistic dynamic that can sometimes be inferred from the novel.

In the film, Mr. Knightley's advice and criticism of Emma come across as more of a conversation between equals, rather than a lecture from a wiser, older man. This adjustment makes their eventual union feel more balanced, aligning with contemporary views on relationships where both partners are seen as equals.

1. Humor and Satire:

Although Austen's prose is lauded for its wit, irony and social satire that often lands somewhere between ridicule and reverence, the newest adaptation of *Emma* interposes its own sly jabs and slapstick humor into the story (Paganini 2020). The humor in the film is more pronounced and, at times, more overt, catering to modern audiences who might appreciate a lighter

touch. Certain characters, like Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates, are given slightly exaggerated portrayals to emphasize the comedic aspects of their personalities, making the film more entertaining for viewers who expect a blend of humor and drama.

For instance, Mr. Woodhouse's hypochondria is played up to almost absurd levels in the film, providing comic relief that might not be as prominent in the novel. This emphasis on humor helps balance the film's more dramatic moments, ensuring it remains enjoyable for a wide range of audiences.

• Addressing Contemporary Sensibilities:

Some elements of the novel, particularly its treatment of social class and marriage, are presented with a more nuanced approach in the film to avoid alienating modern viewers. The film subtly critiques the rigid class structures of the Regency era, but it does so with a lighter touch, ensuring that it doesn't come across as overly didactic.

For example, Harriet Smith's status as the illegitimate daughter of an unknown merchant is treated with more sensitivity in the film. While the novel often highlights the vast social divide between Harriet and Emma, the film downplays this aspect, focusing instead on their genuine friendship. This shift makes the story more palatable to contemporary viewers, who might find the novel's stark class distinctions jarring.

6.3. Why Certain Elements Were Changed and What They Reveal About the Transition Between Eras?

The transformation of *Emma* from a Regency-era novel to a modern film adaptation highlights the cultural and societal shifts that have occurred between the two eras. The changes made to certain elements were necessary to make the story resonate with contemporary audiences, reflecting the evolution of values, expectations, and norms.

• Updating Social Etiquette and Gender Roles:

One of the most notable shifts between the two eras is the portrayal of social etiquette and gender roles. In Austen's time, strict codes of conduct governed behavior, particularly for women. Emma, as a character, is a product of her time i.e. privileged, yet confined by societal expectations. In the novel, her actions are often limited by these constraints, which shaped the story's original conflicts and resolutions.

The film, however, adapts these aspects to fit modern sensibilities. While the regency-era decorum is maintained visually, the interactions between characters are given a contemporary flavor. For example, the film presents Emma and Mr. Knightley's relationship as more of a partnership than the mentor-mentee dynamic seen in the book. This change in their relationship dynamics mirrors contemporary gender expectations, where equality and mutual respect are more valued.

- **Humanizing Characters and Emphasizing Emotional Depth:**

Another reason for these changes is the contemporary audience's preference for characters with more emotional depth. Modern viewers expect characters to be multi-dimensional and relatable, with vulnerabilities and inner conflicts that align with current views on mental health and emotional expression. As mentioned earlier, Mr. Knightley's character was adapted to be less of a moral authority and more of an emotionally expressive individual, reflecting a shift in how masculinity is portrayed in media today.

This transition from the reserved, stoic male lead of Austen's time to a more open and emotionally available character showcases how our expectations of male protagonists have evolved. The adaptation does this by emphasizing his insecurities and moments of doubt, making him more human and less idealized, which resonates better with a contemporary audience that values authenticity.

- **Highlighting Class Distinctions in a Subtle Manner:**

The regency era was marked by a rigid class structure, which is a recurring theme in the novel. While the film retains the emphasis on social class, it does so with a more nuanced approach. In the novel, characters like Miss Bates are often openly pitied or looked down upon due to their lower social standing. In the film, however, these interactions are softened, perhaps as a reflection of contemporary views on class and the increasing awareness of social justice issues.

For instance, the scene where Emma humiliates Miss Bates at the picnic is slightly less harsh in the film compared to the novel. The film adaptation chooses to focus more on Emma's immediate regret and attempts

at reconciliation, which highlights modern values of empathy and kindness over social status.

- **Bridging the Gap Between Past and Present:**

These changes, while updating the story for a modern audience, also serve to bridge the gap between the regency era and the present. The film retains enough of the original's period-specific elements—such as the setting, costumes, and certain dialogue—to transport viewers back to Austen's time. Yet, by making these strategic updates, the adaptation allows contemporary viewers to connect with the story on a deeper level, highlighting the timelessness of Austen's themes while also making them accessible to those unfamiliar with the strictures of the 19th century. Wilde and Catton empower the film's leading female characters with a refreshed mindset of equality and agency, and offer an evolved representation of masculinity (Paganini 2020).

In essence, the adaptation serves as a bridge between the past and present, preserving the essence of the novel while ensuring that its themes, characters, and social commentaries are relevant and engaging for today's audience.

CONCLUSION

In wrapping up this exploration of de Wilde's Emma, it's evident that the film skillfully navigates the fine line between fidelity to Austen's timeless novel and the demands of a modern audience. The adaptation succeeds in translating the essence of Austen's work into a form that resonates with today's viewers. While the film remains anchored in the core narrative of the novel, it introduces significant alterations that refresh the story for contemporary sensibilities.

The character portrayals in de Wilde's adaptation offer a fresh take compared to the novel. Emma Woodhouse, in particular, is portrayed with a modern sensibility that underscores her flaws and growth more explicitly than in Austen's text. This nuanced representation aligns with current views on personal development and self-awareness, making her more relatable to today's audience.

Similarly, Mr. Knightley's character undergoes notable changes, reflecting a shift in how romantic ideals and gender dynamics are perceived in the

modern era. These alterations highlight the film's attempt to bridge the gap between historical context and contemporary values.

Examining the film's narrative structure reveals how it honors the original while introducing elements that enhance its appeal. The adaptation retains the essential plot and themes but reworks the pacing and certain plot points to suit cinematic storytelling. This approach not only preserves the integrity of Austen's work but also adapts it to a format that engages current viewers.

The film's modernized elements such as updated dialogue and contemporary settings, demonstrate a thoughtful reimagining of classic literature, ensuring that the adaptation feels both authentic and relevant.

In addressing the broader question of how classic literature can be adapted for contemporary audiences, de Wilde's *Emma* stands as a testament to the enduring power of Austen's work. By retaining the novel's core themes while embracing modern storytelling techniques, the film showcases how classic texts can be revitalized without losing their original charm. This adaptation serves as a valuable example of how literature can evolve and remain significant across different eras, making it clear that the essence of Austen's *Emma* endures, even as its presentation adapts to the changing times.

Overall, the film's success in balancing fidelity with modernization underscores a broader trend in literary adaptations. It highlights the potential for classic works to be reinterpreted in ways that honor their original spirit while also making them accessible and engaging for today's audience. The interplay between tradition and innovation in de Wilde's *Emma* exemplifies how adaptations can offer both respect for the source material and a fresh perspective that resonates with contemporary viewers.

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