



# A Comparison Of Male And Female POV On Feminism: A Study Of Jane Austen's Emma And Charles Dickens's Bleak House

Allene Lisa Franklin

B.A. (Hons.) English

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

## Abstract

This paper examines feminist themes in Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–1853) to explore how gender influences the portrayal of women's autonomy, societal expectations, and empowerment in 19th-century literature. While Austen presents feminism through Emma Woodhouse's self-awareness and agency, Dickens critiques institutionalized patriarchy but often reinforces traditional gender norms. Comparing these perspectives highlights the contrasting approaches of male and female authors in representing feminist concerns.

## I. Introduction

The 19th century was pivotal in shaping feminist discourse in literature. While women's autonomy was largely restricted by patriarchal norms, literature became a vehicle for both reinforcing and challenging these limitations. Austen and Dickens, two of the most influential writers of their time, offer distinct perspectives on gender and agency. Austen, writing from a female viewpoint, crafts a protagonist who navigates and subtly resists societal expectations, while Dickens, as a male writer, critiques structural injustices but often presents women through a paternalistic lens. This paper compares *Emma* and *Bleak House* to examine how each author engages with feminist ideas and the role of gender in shaping narrative perspectives.

## II. Feminism and Female Autonomy:

### Emma Woodhouse: A Proto-Feminist Heroine

Emma Woodhouse is an unconventional protagonist in Austen's oeuvre. Unlike many 19th-century heroines, she is wealthy, independent, and initially uninterested in marriage. Claudia Johnson (1988) argues that Emma embodies early feminist ideology by resisting stereotypical female roles and pursuing self-realization rather than male approval. Through *free indirect discourse*, Austen provides intimate access to Emma's thoughts, allowing readers to witness her growth as she navigates societal constraints.

While Emma's autonomy is evident, her privilege limits her understanding of the struggles faced by women of lower social standing, such as Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith. This class-based disparity reflects Austen's nuanced engagement with feminism—acknowledging women's agency while critiquing the economic dependence forced upon them.

### Esther Summerson and Lady Dedlock: Contrasting Representations

In *Bleak House*, Dickens presents two contrasting female figures: Esther Summerson and Lady Dedlock. Esther, the novel's moral center, embodies Victorian ideals of womanhood—self-sacrificing, nurturing, and modest. Despite her resilience, her self-effacing narrative voice aligns with the period's expectations of women's humility. Critics like Hilary Schor (1999) note that Dickens, while sympathetic to women's struggles, reinforces patriarchal norms by portraying Esther's virtue as defined by her submission rather than her autonomy.

In contrast, Lady Dedlock's tragic downfall highlights the double standards imposed on women. Her secret past and subsequent disgrace underscore how patriarchal morality punishes female transgression while excusing men. Dickens's critique of gendered injustice is compelling, yet his tendency to portray women as either virtuous angels or fallen figures limits their complexity as fully autonomous individuals.

### III. Marriage as a Feminist Battleground

#### Austen's Reimagining of Marriage

Marriage is a central theme in *Emma*, not as an inevitable goal but as a space for mutual respect. Marilyn Butler (1975) notes that Austen critiques the traditional notion of marriage as a woman's ultimate purpose. Emma's initial rejection of marriage stems from her desire for independence, challenging societal expectations. Her eventual union with Mr. Knightley is not a surrender but a partnership built on equality and personal growth.

#### Dickens's Critique of Victorian Marriage

In *Bleak House*, marriage often represents entrapment rather than fulfillment. Lady Dedlock's past illustrates the consequences of deviating from rigid moral codes, while Esther's prospects are shaped by patriarchal expectations. Dickens exposes the hypocrisy of Victorian marriage laws, but his female characters remain largely defined by their relationships to men. Unlike Austen, who redefines marriage as an egalitarian institution, Dickens critiques its failings without offering a transformative alternative.

### IV. Social Class and Feminist Thought

#### Austen's Intersectional Feminism

Austen's engagement with feminism is deeply intertwined with class. Emma enjoys privileges unavailable to women like Jane Fairfax, whose lack of fortune limits her options. Edward Copeland (1997) argues that Austen critiques the economic structures that enforce women's dependence on marriage for security. However, by portraying Emma's realization of her own privilege, Austen suggests that class and gender inequalities are interconnected.

#### Dickens's Focus on Systemic Injustice

Dickens extends his feminist critique to class disparities, highlighting the vulnerabilities of lower-class women. Characters like Jenny and Miss Flite in *Bleak House* illustrate the compounded oppression faced by impoverished women. However, as Sally Ledger (2007) points out, Dickens often reduces female characters to symbols of societal decay rather than giving them individual agency. While Austen's feminism is

introspective and personal, Dickens's is external and structural, yet both acknowledge the intersections of gender and class.

### The Influence of Authorship on Feminist Representation

The gender of the author significantly shapes how feminism is portrayed in these novels. Austen, as a female writer, offers an intimate and nuanced depiction of women's struggles, using *free indirect discourse* to center female agency. Dickens, as a male writer, critiques institutional injustices but often does so through an external lens that reinforces traditional gender roles.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) describe this as a "*double-voiced discourse*," where female writers subtly challenge patriarchal narratives, while male writers, even when sympathetic, often fail to fully dismantle gender hierarchies. This distinction is evident in *Emma* and *Bleak House*, where Austen's protagonist actively navigates her own agency, whereas Dickens's female characters often remain constrained within the male-dominated structures they critique.

### V. Conclusion

The feminist themes in *Emma* and *Bleak House* reflect both the limitations and progress of 19th-century literature in addressing gender inequality. Austen's portrayal of Emma Woodhouse challenges traditional gender norms by presenting a heroine whose journey is centered on self-awareness rather than submission. Dickens, while exposing systemic injustices against women, often reinforces patriarchal ideals through his depiction of female virtue and sacrifice.

This comparative study highlights how male and female authors engage with feminist ideas differently—Austen from an internal, lived perspective, and Dickens from an external, structural critique. Both approaches contribute to the evolving discourse on feminism in literature, demonstrating how gendered authorship shapes the portrayal of women's autonomy, agency, and resistance within patriarchal societies.

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