

The figure in the margins: A case of the Gypsies in *Emma*

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<p>Received: 27 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 23 May 2026; Accepted: 27 May 2026; Available online: 31 May 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Jane Austen, Emma, Gypsies, Nineteenth Century England</p>	<p><i>In this article I intend to explore the phenomenon of what has often been called the “Gypsy Problem” in nineteenth-century Britain. Although the Gypsies have been in Great Britain at least since 1505, interest in the Gypsies exploded in the nineteenth century, and mainstream British Legislators, scholars and writers all found themselves fascinated by this mysterious people whose origins, language and customs were unknown to people outside of the tribe. Jane Austen’s novel Emma clearly portrays the world of the gypsies. The contemporary literature in English is flourishing as a result of the development of cultural pluralism and globalization. In such multicultural context, it is necessary and significant for scholars to make a study of the representations of the Gypsies in the margins and the need for the integration of these people to the mainstream of the society. The developing world of Austen with the industrial advancement, was in need to utilize all social resources, including their population effectively and strategically. Though the community of Highbury is not industrialized yet the growth of trade class and the yeomanry reflects the changing time of the nineteenth century. In my paper, I am interested to explore that Harriet Smith’s encounter with a group of gypsies reveals a great deal about perceptions of gypsies in the early part of the nineteenth century, and it will shed light on Austen’s preoccupation with a social system, understood as England undergoing change.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

“Once upon a time there was a king named Bahram V Gor, of Sasania a Persian country. Towards the end of his reign he learned that the poor could not afford to enjoy music. So he asked the king of India to send ten thousand lute playing experts, men and women for his country. When they arrived the king gave each one an ox, a donkey and a donkey load of wheat so that they could live on agriculture and play music for the poor. But they ate up the oxen and the wheat and came back a year later. The king

got angry with them and their action of wasting what he had given them. He ordered them to pack up their bags on their asses and go wandering around the world”.(Shahnameh: The Epic of Kings)

This is a legend reported in ‘Shahnameh’ national epic of Iran, written by a Persian Poet Ferdowsi. This very story reveals the history behind the migration of that group of people known as Gypsies. This is not a single story there are lots of stories relating to the history of the Gypsies. Just like some historians argue that the Gypsies are actually a

group of soldiers who moved to west with their families after being defeated in the raids by Mahmud of Ghazni. Even the process of their naming is indicative of the lack of information. Charles G. Leland in his book *The Gypsies* (1882) also showed that they were initially known as "Egyptians" from which the term "Gypsies" is derived because their place of origin was unknown or misconstrued and a myth was projected upon them.

Although early Legislation (the 'Egyptian Act' of 1530, passed by Henry VIII, banned the Romanies from England entirely; 'the Vagabonds Act 1547' was a statute passed under Edward VI entitled 'an acte for Punishment of Vagabondes and for the relief of the poor and impotent Parsons'; and 'the Vagrancy Act 1824' that makes it an offence to sleep rough or beg.) reflects concerns about their act of thievery and vagrancy, little factual historical information exist about them. Most hypothesis about Gypsies are based on modern linguistic theories and genetic studies. And we find a number of stories regarding their origin. Their identity is constructed in British discourse in large part by their functions in literature. In much of the art, music and literature of the 19th Century we find the description of Gypsies.

English literature best reflects a real picture of the gypsies. In Shakespeare's plays we find diverse description of gypsies. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* and Jane Austen's novel *Emma* clearly portray the world of the gypsies.

II. HARRIET AND THE GYPSIES

Austen's use of the alien dark-skinned gypsies in Chapter III of volume III gave rise to an unexpected event. Harriet was taking a walk along the Richmond Road in the company of a friend, Miss Bickerton, when a gipsy woman and her children "half a dozen children, headed by a stout woman and a great boy, all clamorous and impertinent(229)" came in front of them. The novelist reports that by being approached by a small Romani child, Harriet's companion Miss Bickerton became excessively frightened and ran away from the scene. But Harriet was left absolutely powerless and exceedingly terrified and was unable to follow her friend because

she suffered very much from cramps after dancing at the crown Inn Ball.

The gypsies have done very little but their presence has severely alarmed these young woman. Harriet gives these people a token gift but we find that 'her terror and her purse were too tempting, and she was followed, or rather surrounded by the whole gang demanding more'. Harriet is soon rescued by Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley takes the charges to save the area from the gypsies. The novelist next points out that 'the gypsies did not wait for the operation of justice; they took themselves off in a hurry'. And Highbury quickly recovers its calm and the gypsies soon migrate to another location.

This brief moment in the novel dramatizes the threat posed by the black nomades to the young, fair skinned, blue eyed female. Gypsies were seen as a major problem in England in Austen's time. Even conversing with gypsies was considered as a hanging offence. Sarah Emsley in her essay "The Gypsies in Emma" presents an incident of 1782, when a fourteen-year old girl was found in the company of gypsies was hanged though she was desperately protesting for her innocence. Austen's novel shows the lack of settlement of gypsies. The gypsies are presented not far from the civilization but they are also not allowed inside the parameters of the village. Austen presents them 'about half a mile beyond Highbury on a broad patch of greens ward deeply shaded by elms on each side', nearer to nature. They lived without fixed abode or employment. The gypsies maintain wandering existence with dirty and uncultured life style rejecting the normal life style of Highbury. Their transitory movement is not accepted by the English people as it differs from their tradition and disrupts their contribution to the growth of national economy and culture.

We find a clear and alive but slight different picture of the gypsies in fielding's novel *Tom Jones*. In Book XII, chapter XII we see, the encounter of a group of Egyptians by Tom and Patridge, by approaching the suburbs of a large city, in a rainy night. Tom and Patridge hear voices singing in the distance and Patridge is greatly worried that these voices could belong to witches.

'Merry - making, sir!' Cries Patridge;
'Who could be merry making at this

time of night and in such a place, and such weather? They can be nothing but ghosts or witches or some evil spirits or other, that's certain'.

Jones smiles at the fear of Patridge and advances towards the light, the sound of human voices. The assemblage is a group of gypsies, celebrating a wedding. The king of Gypsies is present. Tom treats him with great respect. The king explains about the well governed people of his group. He says that they have abandoned the system of lords and made everyone equal. He explains that their society does not use capital punishment, but use 'Shame' as a weapon for punishment. Such type of description shows the reforming, changing nature of the gypsies who can be incorporated in society.

But the next moment we find that Patridge becomes tempted by the solicitations of a gypsy woman. And her husband who notices that now wants him to be punished. The king wisely reveals that the whole affair was just a trap to get money from Patridge. The king then punishes the husband to wear horns on his head for a month and his wife is labeled a whore. The king then explains how gypsies and non-gypsies operate- 'my people rob your people, and your people rob one another'. Fielding makes some social criticism through the gypsies, the world of gypsies is admired and respected here unlike Emma.

In Emma the gypsies are imagined as both biologically and culturally black. This dark appearance makes them anti-Christian and relates them to evil and the lowest of social outcasts in the eye of the people. The gypsies are also not at all interested to improve themselves or to co-operate in the political, economic or cultural growth of the country. The gypsies are not educated; they don't know the manners of English society and uses thievery as the only means of income. The world of Austen's text is strongly influenced by the earlier negative opinions of the nomadic people. Here Highbury wants to reform Harriet and to educate in proper English tradition but the village seems to have no interest in integrating the Gypsies.

In the novel *Tom Jones* we also find a clear picture of the reformation of the hero Tom. The

parentage of Tom Jones is unknown like the origin of the gypsies is unknown. Tom Jones is presented as an extremely handsome, well formed, brave, generous and kind man. The goodness of heart is his main quality. Gradually he also controls his animal passions, loves Sophia and marries her. His parentage is also revealed towards the end of the novel. We see the transformation of Tom Jones, who himself is willing to be a part of the progress of the society.

Like Jones, Harriet is also included in the society of Highbury. Austen's first presentation of Harriet shows her unknown origins. She is introduced as 'the natural daughter of somebody'. The novelist describes her as a very pretty girl "short, plump and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features and a look of great sweetness". Harriet appears as the anonymous and archetypal Anglo-saxon female, complete with the traditional physical qualities.

Through this initial sketch of Harriet, Jane Austen points out the differences between the dark skinned gypsies and the white Harriet and also exposes an important similarity between them. Both are 'natural'. Neither Harriet nor the gypsies have a definite origin or social position. She is unable to escape from the gypsies origin. But the whiteness of Harriet visually differentiates her from the gypsies. Though the gypsies try to cover the natural daughter in their nature, she is saved only for her Englishness and good manners.

We also find a good comparison of the gypsies and Will Ladislaw in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*. Will Ladislaw has been portrayed (1,9) as a tall, slim and agile youngster. He has studied at Rugby and lived abroad as much as in England. He likes painting and poetry but does not wish to take up a fixed job. He is quite indifferent to class distinctions and mixes freely with the poor children everywhere. He does not follow the conventional manners and restrictions. Will reveals in his status as an outsider: "he was a sort of gypsies, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class"(5,46). And the conservative townspeople of Middlemarch question about his family history.

This novel like *Emma* takes place just some years after the end of the French Revolution. And

revolutionary ideas were still spreading across Europe. Many English people were afraid of such bloody revolution and revolutionary ideas. This is why it was important to know well about everyone, the neighbours also about their origin and homeland, so that they will no more be dangerous. A single change from conventional manners of a person threatens the people.

Ladislaw is not fully known of his family history. He only knows that his grandmother ran away from her family to marry the man she loved and lost her fortune. And his mother ran away from the family fortune finding that as dirty money.

People of Middlemarch judge him unfairly by his heritage instead of his true character. Just like Harriet is judged by Mr. Elton. Mr. Hawley a prominent townsperson comment about Will just like a conservative English man of that time "Any cursed alien blood, Jew, Corsican or Gypsy" (7,71,719).

But Dorothea acknowledges his true character. And his love and respect for Dorothea directs him to move towards improvement, reformation. He plans to study law to prepare himself for public service. He becomes a member of parliament at the end.

Like wise in Jane Austen's novel *Emma* both Mr. Knightley and Emma understands Harriet's charm. Emma who often gets amused by 'English - Verdure, English culture, English comfort' is now attracted by the Englishness of Harriet. Emma feels that Harriet deserves encouragement and her soft blue eyes, all natural graces should not be wasted.

The developing world of Austen with the industrial advancement, was in need to utilize all social resources, including their population effectively and strategically. Though the community of Highbury is not industrialized yet the growth of trade class and the yeomanry reflects the changing time of the 19th century. And Harriet now with her Englishness joins to the main stream of national growth with the help of Emma and Mr. Knightley.

The ball at the Crown Inn is one of the significant gatherings in the last part of the novel. The novelist shows us a picture that is like this:

the two last dances before supper were begun, and Harriet had no partner; the only young lady sitting

down; - and so equal had been hitherto the number of dancers, that how there could be anyone disengaged was the wonder(3,11)

Like the gypsies she is disconnected from the activities of Highbury. However, the very next moment the appearance of Mr. Knightley leads to a happy ending. As Mr. Knightley stepped forward and requested Harriet for a dance. Mr. Knightley gallantry towards Harriet suggests her active involvement in the society through the help of Emma also.

III. CONCLUSION

Through *Emma* and Knightley we see the changing attitude of English people towards the outsiders, non-english people. They spread the message that if properly trained and assigned a specific cultural function, even orphaned young woman and uncivilized aliens could become valuable social resources. The idea is not forced upon the reader but it is clearly suggested. And the marriage of Harriet and Mr. Robert Martin shows the necessity of the unity of the two class traders and farmers for a prosperous future of individual and the country.

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