

## INVISIBLE BARRIERS OF CLASS IN *EMMA* MOVIE BY AUTUMN DE WILDE

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Received:  
11 September 2025

Revised:  
23 October 2025

Accepted:  
28 November 2025

Published:  
27 February 2026

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Azizah, F. N., & Candraningrum, D. (2026). Invisible barriers of class in *Emma* movie by Autumn de Wilde. *Frasa: English Education and Literature Journal*, 7(1), 39-48. <https://doi.org/10.47701/frasa.v7i1.5592>

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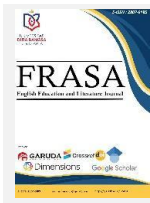
### Abstract

*Social class remains a central theme in literature and film, reflecting persistent inequalities in human relations. While most studies on Jane Austen's Emma (2020) emphasize adaptation, gender, or historical settings, limited research has explored how class hierarchy operates ideologically in Autumn de Wilde's 2020 film adaptation. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the invisible barriers of class in Emma (2020) through a Marxist framework. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, ten selected scenes were analyzed to reveal how clothing, marriage arrangements, and social interactions construct class distinctions. The findings indicate that Emma Woodhouse, representing the bourgeoisie, exercises ideological and cultural authority over Harriet Smith's decisions, while Harriet's compliance exemplifies lower-class subordination. Visual markers such as costumes and rituals like dances further reinforce symbolic hierarchies that sustain inequality. This study contributes a novel perspective by integrating Marxist theory with visual and narrative analysis to uncover how cultural and symbolic capital perpetuate class domination. The results highlight the film's critical value for cultural and film studies, offering insights into how class ideology continues to shape representations of power and privilege in modern adaptations of classic works*

**Keywords:** *Emma (2020), Inequality, Marxist Analysis, Social Class*

### INTRODUCTION

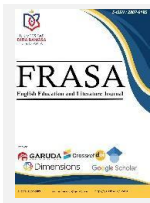
Class distinctions have long been a central theme in literature and film, shaping both narrative trajectories and character dynamics, as literary and cinematic works often function as reflections of social realities and power relations. Studies by Wulandari and Murtiningrum (2025) show that films frequently represent social hierarchy through character interaction, narrative structure, and visual symbolism, allowing class ideology to operate subtly within everyday life. They further explain that cinematic discourse embeds implicit values such as authority, dominance, and social stratification through dialogue and contextual settings. Autumn de Wilde's *Emma* (2020), an adaptation of Jane Austen's 1815 novel, revisits this



theme by exposing subtle yet rigid class barriers that govern relationships and social behavior. Through its visual and narrative design, the film reinterprets Austen's critique of hierarchical society, revealing how privilege and propriety function as instruments of exclusion. These invisible barriers, expressed through costume, manners, and marriage conventions, make *Emma* a compelling object for Marxist analysis of class ideology in cultural representation, as discussed by Ulfiani and Permatasari (2026).

Although many studies on *Emma* (2020) emphasize gender representation, adaptation strategies, or historical realism, only a few have examined how social class operates as an ideological system that shapes character behavior and reinforces hierarchy. Previous research in film and literary studies tends to focus on surface elements such as narrative themes, character development, or moral values without critically examining how social class sustains unequal power relations in everyday interactions. This tendency is also evident in broader film analyses reviewed by Wulandari and Murtiningrum (2025), where class often appears as a secondary aspect rather than a central analytical focus. This limited attention to invisible barriers, understood as subtle social mechanisms that preserve inequality, constitutes the main research gap addressed in this study. Prior research by Manuel Figueiredo et al. (2022), Moore (2023), and Walker et al. (2023) analyzed costume and setting as indicators of class position but did not investigate how these visual and cultural codes ideologically reinforce domination in interpersonal relations.

Additional scholarly works published in the same journal further demonstrate the prevailing tendency to emphasize psychological, communicative, and moral dimensions rather than structural class ideology in film analysis. For instance, Setiawati et al. (2024) analyzes maxim violations in *All the Bright Places* (2020) using Grice's theory and identifies various violations of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner to explain emotional nuance and interpersonal dynamics. However, the study primarily focuses on conversational strategy and character psychology without addressing how communicative practices may reproduce broader social hierarchies. Similarly, Fitri Wulandari and Fahiratunnisa (2024) examine gender stereotypes in *Mulan* (1998) through Erikson's developmental psychology framework, highlighting the psychological impact of patriarchal norms on female identity formation. While their study reveals the influence of social structures on individual development, it centers on gendered identity rather than class-based ideological domination. In another study, Murtiningrum et al. (2024) investigate personality traits and social interaction in *Avatar* (2009) using Costa and McCrae's personality theory and Tischler's social interaction theory, concluding that personality traits shape social behavior, yet the analysis does not extend to structural power relations embedded in social systems. Likewise, Romadhoni et al. (2021), in their examination of educational values in *Bad Genius*, and Larasati and Jamilah (2021), in their analysis of educational values in *The Nun*, both employ qualitative descriptive approaches to identify moral and character-building elements within cinematic narratives. Although these studies contribute significantly to film studies by emphasizing educational, ethical, and psychological dimensions, they do not critically interrogate how ideology functions to naturalize and sustain class hierarchy within cinematic representation. Therefore, the present study differentiates itself by foregrounding Marxist social class theory to uncover the invisible mechanisms through which class power and ideological control operate in



*Emma* (2020). Similarly, Hanafi et al. (2026) examine the psychosocial development of Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde* (2022) using Erikson's theory of psychosocial stages. Their qualitative study analyzes captured scenes to identify stages such as Identity versus Role Confusion and Intimacy versus Isolation, emphasizing psychological struggle, identity crisis, and emotional instability rooted in childhood trauma. While the research provides valuable insight into character development and human experience, it primarily focuses on individual psychological growth rather than structural social inequality or class-based ideological control. This tendency reflects a broader pattern in film studies where psychological interpretation often receives more attention than critical socio-economic analysis.

Marxist theory provides a critical framework for understanding inequality as a product of material and ideological structures. Marx conceptualized society as divided between the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, who must sell their labor power, resulting in structural class inequality (Nurhajjah et al., 2023). Beyond economic exploitation, Marxist scholars argue that ideology plays a crucial role in legitimizing class dominance by naturalizing social hierarchy through cultural practices and belief systems (Roberts & Ibrahim, 2023). In cinematic representation, ideology is often conveyed through narrative positioning, character authority, and visual hierarchy, as noted by Larasati and Jamilah (2021). In *Emma* (2020), these dynamics are evident in *Emma* Woodhouse's authority over Harriet Smith, her attempts to regulate Harriet's marital prospects, and the visual separation of characters through costume and social setting. These interactions illustrate how class power operates not only economically but also symbolically within everyday social relations.

By focusing on the subtle operation of social hierarchy, this study situates *Emma* (2020) within current debates on class representation in film and cultural studies. Accordingly, this research investigates the invisible barriers of social class portrayed in *Emma* (2020) and explores how Marxist social class theory explains the representation of social hierarchy and ideological control within the film.

## METHOD

### Respondents

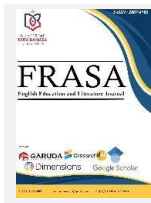
The respondent of this research is the film *Emma* (2020), which acts as a cultural text that represents social class and ideological relations through visual and narrative structure. Ten film scenes serve as the sample of analysis.

### Instruments

The researcher acted as the main instrument supported by several tools of data collection including:

- 1) observation sheets for scene identification and timestamp recording,
- 2) transcription notes for dialogue and narrative elements,
- 3) screenshot documentation of visual evidence,
- 4) analytic memo for coding and thematic interpretation.

These instruments enabled systematic capturing of visual and verbal indicators of class inequality.



### Procedures

The data were collected through document analysis and non-participant observation. Document analysis was conducted by reviewing the film as a cultural artifact that encodes ideology (Bowen, 2009). Repeated close viewings were performed to identify scenes that:

- 1) show visible class differences,
- 2) illustrate authority, control, or submission, and
- 3) display restricted social mobility or exclusion.

Each selected scene was recorded with timestamps, transcribed dialogue, screenshots, and interpretive notes. The scenes were then grouped into three thematic categories to ensure focus alignment with research questions.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles et al. (2014) interactive model:

- 1) Data Reduction – Initial coding of timestamps and dialogue segments.
- 2) Data Display – Thematic matrices were constructed linking:
  - Theme
  - Analytical subtheme
  - Scene evidence (dialogue + screenshot)
- 3) Conclusion Drawing – Interpretation using Marxist concepts of domination and symbolic capital.

Table 1 below illustrates the simplified coding template used in analysis.

Table 1. Illustration of Simplified Coding Template

Theme	Subtheme	Scene Code & Timestamp	Evidence Type	Meaning
<b>Class Domination</b>	Control of marriage	S2 — 15:00–15:15	Dialogue	Upper class dictates decision
<b>Symbolic Representation</b>	Attire distinction	S1 — 14:34–14:39	Visual	Costume marks hierarchy
<b>Ideological Submission</b>	Self-silencing	S7 — 1:37:37–1:37:58	Behavior	Normalization of inferiority

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses how invisible class barriers are constructed and maintained in *Emma*. Through close textual analysis of selected scenes, the findings reveal that class inequality in the film operates not through overt discrimination or physical segregation, but through subtle symbolic distinctions, ideological control, and internalized submission. The barriers are “invisible” because they are embedded in everyday interaction, politeness, and emotional dependency.

### 1. Symbolic Representation as a Naturalization of Hierarchy

One of the most immediate representations of class difference appears through costume and visual composition. In the early interaction between *Emma* and Harriet, the contrast in clothing visually encodes hierarchy before any verbal reference to status is made. *Emma's* refined silhouette, carefully structured dress, and composed posture signify cultural authority and inherited privilege. Harriet’s simpler appearance, by contrast, subtly positions her as socially inferior.



Figure 1. *Emma* and Harriet's contrasting costume as symbolic class marker (*Emma* (2020), min. 00: 14:34 – 00:14:39)

This visual distinction functions as symbolic capital. The hierarchy does not need to be explained; it is seen. The aesthetic difference becomes a legitimizing device that naturalizes inequality. Through costume and mise-en-scène, the film constructs class as an organic and unquestioned order rather than as a socially produced system. In this sense, symbolic representation performs ideological work: it teaches the audience how to read superiority and inferiority.



Figure 2. Harriet excluded during the ball (*Emma* (2020), min. 1:13:00–1:13:13)

The ballroom scene further reinforces this mechanism. Harriet's marginal positioning within the spatial arrangement visually isolates her from the social center. No character explicitly states that she does not belong; however, framing, distance, and body orientation communicate exclusion. The absence of verbal hostility makes the exclusion more powerful because it appears normal and socially acceptable. Thus, visual structure becomes a tool of class stratification.

## 2. Class Domination Through Benevolent Guidance



Figure 3. *Emma* arranging Harriet's marriage direction (*Emma* (2020), min. 00:15:00 – 00:15:15)



Figure 4. *Emma* persuading Harriet to pursue Mr. Elton (*Emma* (2020), min. 00:15:40 – 00:15:48)

Class domination in the film is exercised primarily through influence rather than coercion. *Emma* repeatedly directs Harriet's romantic decisions, discouraging her relationship with Mr. Martin and encouraging her to pursue Mr. Elton. Importantly, this control is framed as friendship and care. *Emma* does not force Harriet; instead, she shapes her perception of what is desirable and socially appropriate.

This reflects an ideological form of domination in which power operates through consent. Harriet gradually adopts *Emma's* standards as her own. The limitation of her autonomy is therefore internal rather than imposed. Her potential upward or downward mobility becomes regulated by upper-class expectations disguised as refinement.

The discouragement of Harriet's relationship with Mr. Martin is particularly significant because it represents the protection of class boundaries. A cross-class union would destabilize the hierarchy. By preventing it, *Emma* unconsciously safeguards the social order. Marriage in this context functions as a mechanism of class reproduction rather than purely romantic fulfillment. The film thus illustrates how private relationships become sites of ideological control.

### 3. Ideological Submission and the Internalization of Inferiority



Figure 5. Harriet depending entirely on *Emma's* judgment (*Emma* (2020), min. 00:21:30 – 00:21:37)

Ideological domination becomes complete when it is internalized. Harriet's total trust in *Emma's* judgment demonstrates how subordination is willingly embraced. She does not question *Emma's* authority because she perceives it as legitimate. This acceptance illustrates how class hierarchy sustains itself through belief rather than force.



Figure 6. Miss Bates self-silencing after humiliation (*Emma* (2020), min. 1:37:37–1:37:58)

The case of Miss Bates intensifies this pattern. After being publicly humiliated, she repeatedly apologizes and minimizes herself. Her excessive politeness reflects the normalization of inferiority. Instead of resisting, she reinforces the hierarchy by disciplining her own speech. Her self-silencing shows how ideological power becomes embedded in subjectivity.

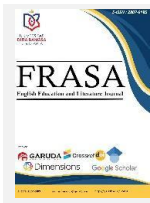
In these moments, inequality appears as proper etiquette. Respect and humility function as behavioral codes that stabilize class difference. The oppressed subject participates in reproducing the very structure that marginalizes her.

Interestingly, *Emma's* later apology to Miss Bates introduces a brief moral rupture. Although the broader hierarchy remains intact, the apology reveals a moment of ethical awareness. This nuance complicates the narrative by suggesting that ideological systems, while dominant, are not entirely immune to self-reflection. Nevertheless, the structure itself does not fundamentally change.

This study reveals that invisible class barriers in *Emma* (2020) are constructed and maintained through symbolic representation, interpersonal domination, and ideological submission. The findings indicate that inequality in the film does not operate through explicit economic oppression, but through subtle cultural mechanisms embedded in daily interaction, social etiquette, and emotional influence. This supports the Marxist view that power is sustained not only through material structures but also through cultural reproduction and ideology (Nurhajjah et al., 2023).

First, symbolic representation appears through visual markers such as costume contrast, posture, spatial positioning, and aesthetic refinement. The difference between *Emma's* elegant attire and Harriet's simpler appearance visually encodes hierarchy before it is verbally expressed. Costume here functions as symbolic capital that legitimizes social superiority, reinforcing the argument that visual aesthetics in period films serve to naturalize class hierarchy (Moore, 2023). The hierarchy becomes visually normalized, making inequality appear culturally appropriate rather than imposed.

Second, class domination is evident in *Emma's* influence over Harriet's romantic decisions. *Emma* shapes Harriet's perception of Mr. Elton and discourages her relationship with Mr. Martin, effectively limiting Harriet's autonomy. This form of domination is not coercive but persuasive. *Emma* frames her control as guidance and improvement. This form of relational domination is consistent with Manuel Figueiredo et al. (2022) who argue that within Austen's narrative framework, marriage operates as a socially regulated institution



shaped by upper-class ideology. Consequently, romantic choices are not merely personal or emotional matters but are structured by class interests and social expectations. The findings of the present study further indicate that persuasion and cultivated refinement function as subtle mechanisms of control, illustrating how social power in the film is exercised through interpersonal authority rather than overt coercion.

Third, ideological submission is reflected in Harriet's unquestioned trust in *Emma* and Miss Bates's repeated self minimization. These behaviors illustrate internalized inferiority, where lower status characters accept unequal positioning as normal and proper. This confirms Nurhajah et al. (2023) claim that dominant ideology is maintained through cultural beliefs that shape obedience and compliance. The subordinate characters in the film do not openly resist hierarchy; instead, they reproduce it through politeness, gratitude, and self restraint. This indicates that ideological submission is the most durable mechanism sustaining class barriers.

The findings also resonate with adaptation studies which argue that modern cinematic adaptations often retain the ideological structure of the original text despite aesthetic modernization (Walker et al., 2023). Although *Emma* (2020) employs vibrant cinematography and stylized visual design, the underlying class stratification remains intact. The modernization of visual form does not dismantle hierarchy; instead, it refines and beautifies it. This reinforces the idea that contemporary adaptations can reproduce historical class ideology through updated aesthetic strategies.

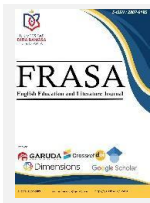
However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that class ideology in *Emma* (2020) operates significantly within intimate friendship rather than solely in formal public settings. Domination appears affectionate and benevolent. *Emma* does not perceive herself as oppressive, yet her guidance restricts Harriet's social mobility. This nuance complicates earlier interpretations that focus primarily on structural hierarchy. The film suggests that inequality is most powerful when embedded in emotional closeness and everyday interaction.

A significant moment occurs when *Emma* apologizes to Miss Bates. This scene introduces moral reflection and briefly disrupts hierarchical certainty. Nevertheless, the apology does not dismantle the structural class order. It merely softens its interpersonal expression. Therefore, the film ultimately preserves the system while presenting it as ethically negotiable.

Overall, the discussion confirms that invisible class barriers in *Emma* (2020) are sustained through aesthetic symbolism, persuasive authority, and internalized obedience. The inequality portrayed in the film is subtle yet persistent. It operates through cultural codes that appear natural, refined, and morally justified. These findings strengthen the relevance of Marxist cultural analysis in examining contemporary literary adaptations and contribute to a deeper understanding of how cinema reproduces class ideology through everyday social performance.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigates how invisible class barriers are represented in *Emma* (2020) through symbolic representation, class domination, and ideological submission. The findings



demonstrate that class inequality in the film is not constructed through overt economic conflict, but through subtle cultural mechanisms embedded in everyday interaction, aesthetic distinction, and emotional influence.

Symbolic representation appears through costume contrast, spatial positioning, and refined social manners that visually encode hierarchy. These aesthetic elements function as cultural markers that naturalize class difference. Class domination operates through *Emma's* persuasive authority over Harriet's romantic and social decisions, showing that power is exercised relationally rather than coercively. Ideological submission is reflected in the acceptance of inferiority by lower status characters, particularly Harriet and Miss Bates, who internalize hierarchy and reproduce it through politeness and self restraint.

The study concludes that the durability of class inequality in *Emma* (2020) lies in its invisibility. Hierarchy is maintained not through explicit exclusion but through normalized cultural codes that appear refined, moral, and benevolent. The film presents domination as guidance and submission as respect, thereby disguising structural inequality within everyday social performance.

Theoretically, this research reaffirms the relevance of Marxist cultural analysis in examining contemporary literary adaptations. It demonstrates that modern cinematic aesthetics do not eliminate class ideology but often repackage it in visually appealing forms. By highlighting how power operates within intimate friendship and emotional influence, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how class hierarchy is reproduced in subtle and culturally legitimized ways.

For future research, comparative studies across different adaptations of Austen's works may further reveal how representations of class shift across time and media while maintaining underlying ideological structures.

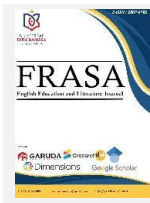
## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—Original draft preparation.

Author 2: Supervision, Validation, Writing—Reviewing and Editing, Methodological guidance.

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