

"Badly done" - using sarcasm

"Emma" by Jane Austen

Excerpt from chapter 43: Emma is a triple-threat: "handsome, clever, and rich." At a gathering, she makes a joke to casually insult family friend Miss Bates as over-talkative and foolish. When Miss Bates gets it, she blushes: "I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend." Later:

While waiting for the carriage, she found Mr. Knightley by her side. He looked around, as if to see that no one were near, and then said,

"Emma, I must once more speak to you as I have been used to do: a privilege rather endured than allowed, perhaps, but I must still use it. I cannot see you acting wrong, without a remonstrance. How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible."

Emma recollected, blushed, was sorry, but tried to laugh it off.

"Nay, how could I help saying what I did?—Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me."

"I assure you she did. She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it—with what candour and generosity. I wish you could have heard her honouring your forbearance, in being able to pay her such attentions, as she was for ever receiving from yourself and your father, when her society must be so irksome."

"Oh!" cried Emma, "I know there is not a better creature in the world: but you must allow, that what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her."

"They are blended," said he, "I acknowledge; and, were she prosperous, I could allow much for the occasional prevalence of the ridiculous over the good. Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation—but, Emma, consider how far this is from

being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!—You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her—and before her niece, too—and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*,) would be entirely guided by *your* treatment of her.—This is not pleasant to you, Emma—and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will,—I will tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now."

What is the difference between Emma's "negative feedback" to Miss Bates and Mr. Knightley's feedback to Emma?

What is Mr. Knightley's method and reason for approaching Emma with this rebuke? How can they be a model for us in giving feedback?

Describe Emma's first defense of her behavior. What does she mean, "Nobody could have helped it?" How is this related to self-control?

Why does Emma think it was "not so very bad?" What does Mr. Knightley counter was the impact on Miss Bates?

Emma argues that "you must allow" that Miss Bates truly can be ridiculous. Why does Mr. Knightley say that doesn't matter?

What is sarcasm? What can be the consequences of using it?

When and how are we tempted to use Emma's self-defense?

I couldn't help it

It wasn't that bad

It was true

What does Mr. Knightley say are the consequences of sarcasm ...

To the target?

To the observers?

To the person making the sarcastic remark?

What are the circumstances that can make sarcasm "badly done?"

Can it be properly done?

What are practical ways to avoid hurtful words?