

Doing Close Reading



Activities • Anthology • Analysis

An EMC Advanced Literature Resource

Acknowledgements

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Introduction and Notes

People often talk about close reading being a key element of literary critical activity and of the academic study of English Literature. At every level, from GCSE to undergraduate study, one hears complaints about students' lack of expertise in close reading. Yet there's very little support for this vital aspect of the subject discipline and little clarity about what good close readings consist of, or what good close readers actually do. This publication seeks to provide advanced level English Literature students with:

- an understanding of what close reading is
- models of good close reading
- a set of practices and a methodology that they can confidently use
- texts that provide students with plenty of opportunities to do close reading, drawing on a wide range of different genres
- activities to develop and hone skills of close reading, in different ways
- ways of doing close reading on unseen texts, in exam conditions.

Anthology

The choice of texts

Doing Close Reading – Activities, Anthology, Analysis includes extracts from prose fiction, poetry, drama and non-fiction, ranging from the canonical to the contemporary, and from the very well known to the more unusual. All have been chosen as offering students the chance to read and analyse texts which are interesting generically and stylistically, providing an opportunity for students to develop their skills of close analysis.

Contexts for the texts and extracts

Details of the passages, including whether they are the complete text or an extract, are given on pages 8-14. You may decide to contextualise the text extract for your students or, on occasions, to withhold this information, asking students whether they have any ideas about its likely position in the text (beginning, end and so on). You could also vary whether or not you provide any of the other information given about the text.

Analysis – the Readings

The readings included in the publication not only provide insights into the particular text, but demonstrate the different ways in which one might approach a close analysis. Many of the academics, critics and teachers also comment on their approach to close reading.

Student readings – 'Same text, different readings'

The three readings of a chapter from Edith Wharton were written by students who entered an *emagazine* close reading competition in January 2014. They are the winning entry and the writing by the two runners-up.

The winning entry for the student close reading competition was the writing by Eleanor Holton on page 156.

Using the material

Doing Close Reading – Activities, Anthology, Analysis is photocopiable to allow students to annotate the passages. Several of the activities require students to select a passage or close reading to work on. While it is not necessary to provide each student with the complete resource pack, they will need access to a selection of the texts. You may want to create different selections at different stages of the course.

The CD (see inside front cover) includes:

- a PDF of the full publication
- an A4 PDF of the anthology texts to allow you to print your own selections
- an A5 PDF booklet which could be printed off for each student, to allow them to range across and dip into the complete collection.

To print this file as a booklet, please select '2-sided printing' and 'Short side binding (bottom)' in your printer options.

Ranging across and selecting texts to focus on

Giving students a degree of choice and control is a good way of encouraging them to think independently and confidently about texts. The more they can apply broad thinking, common sense and over-arching concepts to texts, the less likely they will be to zoom in on random details or leap to judgements too quickly.

Comparative thinking seems to us to be at the heart of literary study. For experienced adult readers, one's understanding of how an individual text works is always coloured by one's reading of other texts in the genre, expectations either fulfilled or challenged, recognition of what's special or unique, memories of similar or strongly contrasting treatments of the same theme or content. Developing an advanced level students' ability to see a text in relation to the textual world that it is part of, is key to an apprenticeship in literary studies.

General Approaches to Dealing with the Texts in this Collection

Here are some activities that you could do on *any* of the texts in the collection. It would be worth doing a range of them, to vary your approach, doing some that are more structured and involve discussion and reflection, and others that help you to build up confidence in tackling texts independently or in the context of exams.

Timed readings

- Do a timed essay of one of the texts.

Sharing readings

- Do a timed essay of one of the texts. Share your reading with one or two other people and comment on differences both in what was said and how it was said. Focus particularly on what seemed most successful. Share particularly good bits with the rest of the class.

Stepping back

- Do a close reading of a text and then step back to reflect on the approach you took. Write a short paragraph explaining your focus and your approach, how it worked and whether you might tackle the piece differently another time.

Annotate and talk – don't write

- Work on one of the texts, annotating it and then talking about your observations and the ideas that spring from these. Start by working individually, then share ideas in discussion, to build up your confidence in approaching unseen texts on your own.

Write a first paragraph

- Just write a first paragraph, so that you can share different ways of making the leap between reading and thinking and putting your ideas down on paper.

Learn from the published readings

- Do your own close reading of one of the texts which has an accompanying reading by an academic, teacher, writer or student. Do your close reading either in discussion or as a piece of writing, then read the accompanying readings. Reflect on the approach taken by the other writer, the ideas he or she raises and what each of your readings has revealed about the text. Think also about what the writer's approach has taught you, that you'll take with you into your future work on close reading.

Comparative close reading

- Take two texts from the collection that have some things in common, such as a common theme, or an aspect of genre, or something similar about their tone (humour or irony, for instance). Write a comparative close reading which draws out the key points of similarity and difference in these two texts.

Activities in the publication

- Do some of the other activities in this publication, that are designed to develop particular skills in close reading. (See pages 27-53.)

Reading Like a Writer

In her book *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose explores the process of close reading, demonstrating the discoveries a reader makes once he or she pays really close attention to the words a writer uses. Francine Prose, who is addressing creative writing students, suggests that the best way to develop your ability to write is to read closely, carefully, with a writer's eyes. As you develop your own skills of close reading and your ability to write effectively about a text, you might consider how useful an idea 'reading like a writer' is for literature students.

In the extract on pages 19-20, Francine Prose reads closely the first paragraph of Flannery O'Connor's short story 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'.

- Read the opening paragraph from the story and briefly talk about it in pairs or as a class.

The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the *Journal*. 'Now look here, Bailey,' she said, 'see here, read this,' and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. 'Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed towards Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did.'

- Now read Prose's analysis. Share your first response to it. Did the close analysis reveal anything you had not noticed? Or did it give you a completely different view of the opening paragraph?
- Read the analysis again, this time focusing on what it is that Prose is doing. Highlight two or three examples which strike you as particularly illuminating about the opening paragraph or the process of close reading.
- If Francine Prose were asked to write a short definition of the process of close reading, what do you think she would say? Draft a definition, along the lines of those offered by the contributors to this resource on pages 16 and 17.

Close Reading – Different Ways of Doing It

Although all close readings have in common their detailed and careful attention to the text, different readers do take different approaches. For example, while some readers develop a personal response to the text, others focus on patterns in the language; some readers focus solely on the words on the page, others bring in their knowledge of the literary, cultural – even biographical – context.

As a class, choose one of the texts which also has a close reading by a critic, academic or teacher.

- First read and talk about the text extract being discussed, then talk about the written response.

Below are some statements describing the approach a reader might adopt when undertaking a close reading.

- Which statements best describe this reader's approach?
- Of the statements you've chosen, which strike you as most important?
- As you read other close readings – and try doing some yourself – you might like to use these statements to reflect on the different approaches taken by the readers.

- A. This reader brings to bear his or her personal experience.
- B. This reader focuses only on the text in front of them.
- C. This reader brings to the text his or her knowledge of the complete text.
- D. This reader focuses on patterns, individual words and phrases.
- E. This reader begins with a big picture view of the text – a wide-angle long-shot – before moving in for an extreme close-up.
- F. This reader offers a wide-ranging discussion of the passage and its possible meanings.
- G. This reading is informed by literary theory.
- H. This reading is informed by knowledge about the author or the wider literary context.
- I. This reading is informed by other disciplines, for example linguistics or philosophy or history or psychology.
- J. This reader moves through the passage word by word, sentence by sentence.
- K. This reader works out what their interpretation of the passage is through the process of writing about it.
- L. This reader has a clear interpretation of the whole passage, which they argue through close analysis of the language.
- M. This reader focuses on broad concepts, such as voice, viewpoint, structure and so on.
- N. This reader focuses on the reader and the way we make sense of a text.
- O. This reader takes a particular angle on the passage.

A Methodology for Close Reading

Here is one (not the only!) way of developing the processes involved in close reading for yourself. It gives you an approach that a good close reader might use, showing what he or she is likely actually to do with a text. Each stage of the methodology is exemplified with an invented text, to give you an idea of the kinds of things you might be thinking about, or jotting down for yourself.

- Try out these stages over a period of time, to help you develop your own approach to close reading.

Stage 1

- Try following the process once, as a whole class, with everyone focusing on the same text.
- Talk about whether it worked for you, or whether you might want to adjust it, add to it or simplify it in any way, to take into account your own ways of thinking and going about reading closely.
- As a class, or individually, you could fine-tune it to make changes, if these seem helpful.

Stage 2

- Having tried using the methodology on a text from one genre, use it for a different genre.
- Think about whether the methodology was equally applicable to both genres, or whether a slightly different approach might be needed depending on the genre of text.
- As a group, talk about this issue and make suggestions for how the approach might be tweaked or refined for different genres.

Stage 3

- Put the methodology to one side and try drawing on what you've learned from it in tackling an unseen text in timed conditions, without any explicit reference to it.
- Reflect on which elements have become successfully embedded in your way of approaching texts and which seem a bit less useful. Think about whether you did anything else in your approach that you found helpful, that you'll explicitly try to do in future close readings.

Patterns and Connections, Created and Broken

The poet Michael Rosen refers to poetry as having ‘secret strings’, in other words ways in which words and phrases connect with each other in a whole range of different ways. The strings that connect words might be to do with sound, or word groups (lexical fields), or repetitions, or contrasts. They set up echoes and reverberations, working on the reader in relation to each other.

Looking for Rosen’s ‘secret strings’ and for the places in a text where the string is suddenly cut, or a new set of connections is created, can be an excellent starting-point for exploring both the way texts work and the underlying ideas.

- Start using this approach with short texts like poems, or short prose extracts, where it’s possible to look deeply and in detail. Then apply a similar approach to longer texts, where you have more material to deal with and have to be more selective and make judgements about which are the most significant patterns you’ve noticed, and which sections really merit this sort of close attention.

An example of one reader’s secret strings and commentary

Here’s one example of a text, annotated with the connections that one reader has observed, to show you the kind of things you might notice.

Langston Hughes: A Wooing

I will bring you big things:
|| Colors of dawn-morning,
|| Beauty of rose leaves,
○ And a flaming love.
□ But you say
Those are not big things,
That only money counts.
○ Well,
○ Then I will bring you money.
○ But do not ask me
|| For the beauty of rose leaves,
|| ○ Nor the colors of dawn-morning,
|| ○ Nor a flaming love.

Use of 1st-person voice & 2nd-person address is consistent but change of tone in use of imperative in final stanza. (Underlined)

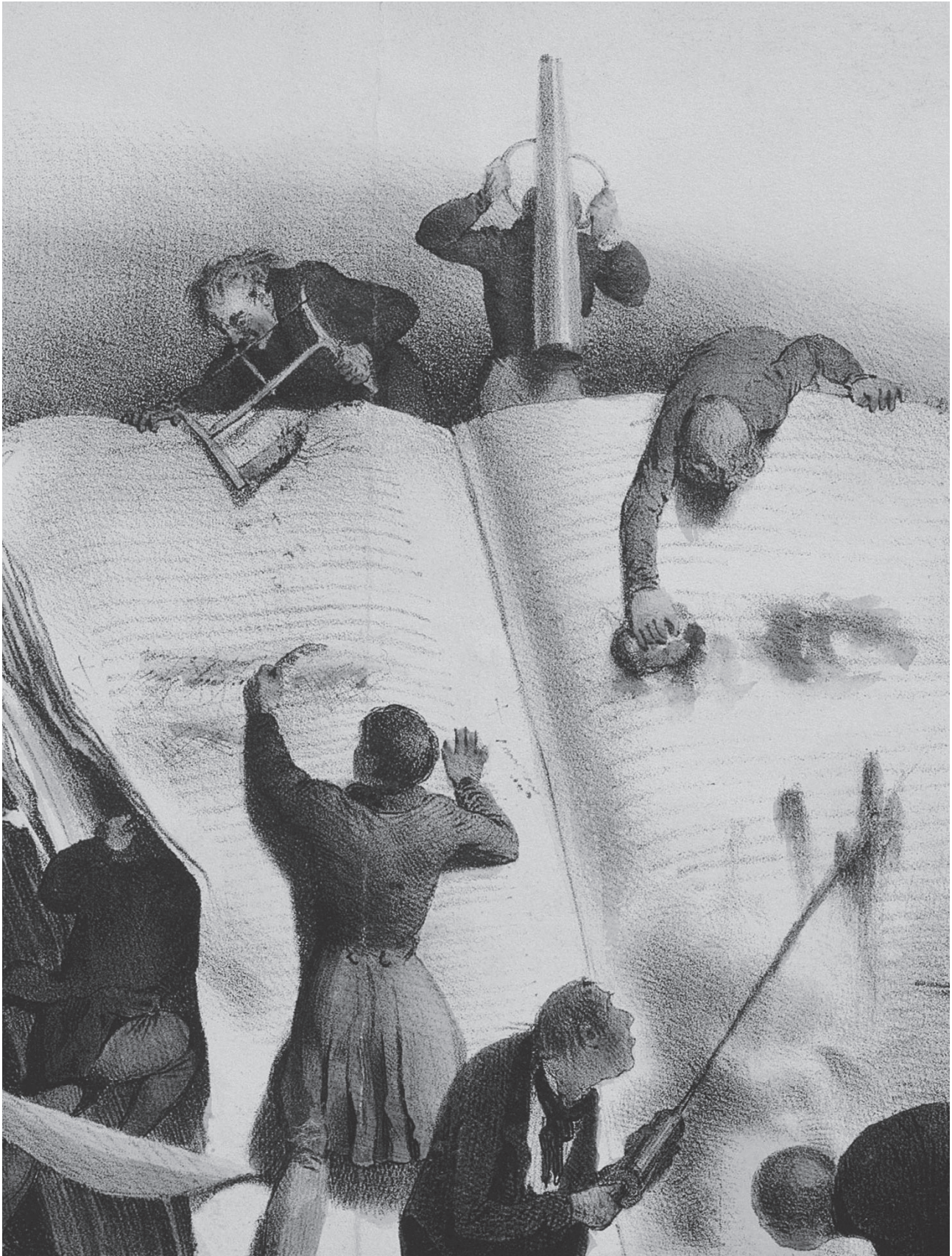
Parallelism of these lines but change emphasised by use of ‘Nor’ and the changing of the order of the lines. (Parallel lines)

‘Big things’ contrasted with ‘not big things’ at the heart of the poem. Childish simplicity of lexis.

‘But’ signals change of pattern – secret string to ‘And’ and ‘Well’ and ‘Then’. (Circled)

Patterns in use of definite and indefinite article. ‘Dawn morning’, ‘rose leaves’ but ‘a flaming love’. Why? And why use of definite article ‘the beauty’, ‘the colours’ in final stanza? (Dotted underlining)

The Anthology



Jane Austen: Emma (1815)

Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of.

A week had not passed since Miss Hawkins's name was first mentioned in Highbury, before she was, by some means or other, discovered to have every recommendation of person and mind; to be handsome, elegant, highly accomplished, and perfectly amiable: and when Mr Elton himself arrived to triumph in his happy prospects, and circulate the fame of her merits, there was very little more for him to do, than to tell her Christian name, and say whose music she principally played.

Mr Elton returned, a very happy man. He had gone away rejected and mortified – disappointed in a very sanguine hope, after a series of what appeared to him strong encouragement; and not only losing the right lady, but finding himself debased to the level of a very wrong one. He had gone away deeply offended – he came back engaged to another – and to another as superior, of course, to the first, as under such circumstances what is gained always is to what is lost. He came back gay and self-satisfied, eager and busy, caring nothing for Miss Woodhouse, and defying Miss Smith.

The charming Augusta Hawkins, in addition to all the usual advantages of perfect beauty and merit, was in possession of an independent fortune, of so many thousands as would always be called ten; a point of some dignity, as well as some convenience: the story told well; he had not thrown himself away – he had gained a woman of 10,000*l.* or thereabouts; and he had gained her with such delightful rapidity – the first hour of introduction had been so very soon followed by distinguishing notice; the history which he had to give Mrs Cole of the rise and progress of the affair was so glorious – the steps so quick, from the accidental rencontre, to the dinner at Mr Green's, and the party at Mrs Brown's – smiles and blushes rising in importance – with consciousness and agitation richly scattered – the lady had been so easily impressed – so sweetly disposed – had in short, to use a most intelligible phrase, been so very ready to have him, that vanity and prudence were equally contented.

He had caught both substance and shadow – both fortune and affection, and was just the happy man he ought to be; talking only of himself and his own concerns – expecting to be congratulated – ready to be laughed at – and, with cordial, fearless smiles, now addressing all the young ladies of the place, to whom, a few weeks ago, he would have been more cautiously gallant.

The wedding was no distant event, as the parties had only themselves to please, and nothing but the necessary preparations to wait for; and when he set out for Bath again, there was a general expectation, which a certain glance of Mrs Cole's did not seem to contradict, that when he next entered Highbury he would bring his bride.

During his present short stay, Emma had barely seen him; but just enough to feel that the first meeting was over, and to give her the impression of his not being improved by the mixture of pique and pretension, now spread over his air. She was, in fact, beginning very much to wonder that she had ever thought him pleasing at all; and his sight was so inseparably connected with some very disagreeable feelings, that, except in a moral light, as a penance, a lesson, a source of profitable humiliation to her own mind, she would have been thankful to be assured of never seeing him again. She wished him very well; but he gave her pain, and his welfare twenty miles off would administer most satisfaction.

The pain of his continued residence in Highbury, however, must certainly be lessened by his marriage. Many vain solitudes would be prevented – many awkwardnesses smoothed by it. A *Mrs Elton* would be an excuse for any change of intercourse; former intimacy might sink without remark. It would be almost beginning their life of civility again.

Of the lady, individually, Emma thought very little. She was good enough for Mr Elton, no doubt; accomplished enough for Highbury – handsome enough – to look plain, probably, by Harriet's side. As to connexion, there Emma was perfectly easy; persuaded, that after all his own vaunted claims and disdain of Harriet, he had done nothing. On that article, truth seemed attainable. *What* she was, must be uncertain; but *who* she was, might be found out; and setting aside the 10,000*l.* it did not appear that she was at all Harriet's superior. She brought no name, no blood, no alliance. Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol – merchant, of course, he must be called; but, as the whole of the profits of his mercantile life appeared so very moderate, it was not unfair to guess the dignity of his line of trade had been very moderate also. Part of every winter she had been used to spend in Bath; but Bristol was her home, the very heart of Bristol; for though the father and mother had died some years ago, an uncle remained – in the law line – nothing more distinctly honourable was hazarded of him, than that he was in the law line; and with him the daughter had lived. Emma guessed him to be the drudge of some attorney, and too stupid to rise. And all the grandeur of the connexion seemed dependent on the elder sister, who was *very well married*, to a gentleman in a *great way*, near Bristol, who kept two carriages! That was the wind-up of the history; that was the glory of Miss Hawkins.

Could she but have given Harriet her feelings about it all! She had talked her into love; but, alas! she was not so easily to be talked out of it. The charm of an object to occupy the many vacancies of Harriet's mind was not to be talked away. He might be superseded by another; he certainly would indeed; nothing could be clearer; even a Robert Martin would have been sufficient; but nothing else, she feared, would cure her. Harriet was one of those, who, having once begun, would be always in love. And now, poor girl! she was considerably worse from this reappearance of Mr Elton. She was always having a glimpse of him somewhere or other. Emma saw him only once; but two or three times every day Harriet was sure *just* to meet with him, or *just* to miss him, *just* to hear his voice, or see his shoulder, *just* to have something occur to preserve him in her fancy, in all the favouring warmth of surprise and conjecture. She was, moreover, perpetually hearing about him; for, excepting when at Hartfield, she was always among those who saw no fault in Mr Elton, and found nothing so interesting as the discussion of his concerns; and every report, therefore, every guess – all that had already occurred, all that might occur in the arrangement of his affairs, comprehending income, servants, and furniture, was continually in agitation around her. Her regard was receiving strength by invariable praise of him, and her regrets kept alive, and feelings irritated by ceaseless repetitions of Miss Hawkins's happiness, and continual observation of, how much he seemed attached! – his air as he walked by the house – the very sitting of his hat, being all in proof of how much he was in love!

Had it been allowable entertainment, had there been no pain to her friend, or reproach to herself, in the waverings of Harriet's mind, Emma would have been amused by its variations. Sometimes Mr Elton predominated, sometimes the Martins; and each was occasionally useful as a check to the other. Mr Elton's engagement had been the cure of the agitation of meeting Mr Martin. The unhappiness produced by the knowledge of that engagement had been a little put aside by Elizabeth Martin's calling at Mrs

Goddard's a few days afterwards. Harriet had not been at home; but a note had been prepared and left for her, written in the very style to touch; a small mixture of reproach, with a great deal of kindness; and till Mr Elton himself appeared, she had been much occupied by it, continually pondering over what could be done in return, and wishing to do more than she dared to confess. But Mr Elton, in person, had driven away all such cares. While he staid, the Martins were forgotten; and on the very morning of his setting off for Bath again, Emma, to dissipate some of the distress it occasioned, judged it best for her to return Elizabeth Martin's visit.

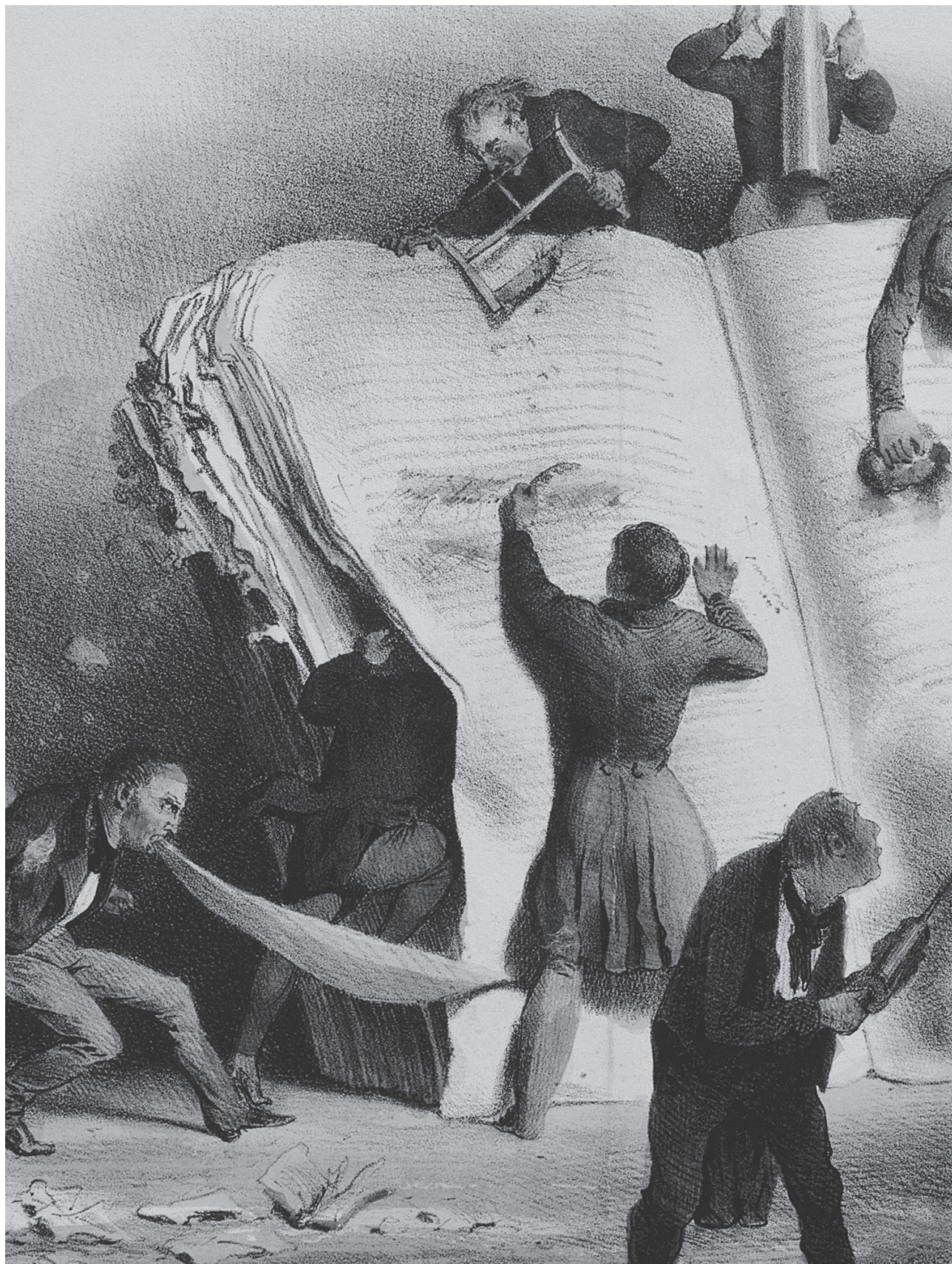
How that visit was to be acknowledged – what would be necessary – and what might be safest, had been a point of some doubtful consideration. Absolute neglect of the mother and sisters, when invited to come, would be ingratitude. It must not be: and yet the danger of a renewal of the acquaintance! –

After much thinking, she could determine on nothing better, than Harriet's returning the visit; but in a way that, if they had understanding, should convince them that it was to be only a formal acquaintance. She meant to take her in the carriage, leave her at the Abbey Mill, while she drove a little farther, and call for her again so soon, as to allow no time for insidious applications or dangerous recurrences to the past, and give the most decided proof of what degree of intimacy was chosen for the future.

She could think of nothing better: and though there was something in it which her own heart could not approve – something of ingratitude, merely glossed over – it must be done, or what would become of Harriet?

You can read a close reading of this text by Professor John Mullan on page 154.

Analysis



Jane Austen: Emma (See page 55)

Reading by Professor John Mullan

This passage from a novel is divided between different points of view. The first five paragraphs reflect the collective point of view of the inhabitants of Highbury, and the self-image of Mr Elton, who has returned to Highbury to boast of acquiring a fiancée. In the village a consensus about the qualities of Mr Elton's intended bride seems to be reached very readily, and the narrative mockingly echoes this. In the second part of the passage another point of view predominates, that of Emma, a character of strong opinions that we, as readers, are invited to question.

The narrator conveys these points of view with considerable irony, but without explicit comment or criticism. We must infer the truth beneath the polite phrasing. It is there in the very first sentence, with the sardonic balance of 'a young person, who either marries or dies' – as if the two things are equivalent. The folk of Highbury relish marriages and deaths, presumably because of the uneventfulness of village life. The satire is the sharper because of the thought of a 'young person' dying – so much more 'interesting' than the demise of an old person.

The passage continues to report the views of the locals about Mr Elton's intended, with the platitudinous phrasing ('every recommendation', 'perfectly amiable', 'perfect beauty') sounding asinine, if we listen carefully. After all, these people have not even met the luminous Miss Hawkins. This author uses intensifiers like 'perfectly' to make us doubt what they seem to emphasise. Rarely has the lethal word 'very' been used to such undermining effect: 'very happy', 'very wrong', 'very ready'. When 'very' is used, something is wrong. In that last instance, Miss Hawkins being 'very ready to have him' (that is, to marry him) means that she is all too ready to come to an arrangement. 'Vanity and prudence were equally contented': it sounds as if the narrator is reporting Mr Elton's happiness. Yet if, as so often in this passage, we ask what this actually means, we sense a deadly implication: he has hastily ('the steps so quick') identified a woman with money (his 'prudence'), whose rapid acceptance of his advances tickles his self-regard (his 'vanity'). The deal is done.

Those whom Mr Elton wishes to impress are fools to be impressed. Yet when Emma's far more critical and perceptive views take over, from the sixth paragraph, we are still expected to notice what she does not. Notice, for instance, how that ironical use of 'very' continues: 'very much to wonder', 'very disagreeable feelings', 'She wished him very well'. These are the emphases in Emma's thoughts and require the reader to see what lies behind them. 'She wished him very well' means that she wished he would simply disappear.

Now the very rhythm of Emma's thinking takes over. 'Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol – merchant, of course, he must be called'. That dash is Emma, pausing before the word 'merchant' to give it a sarcastic emphasis. Emma suspects that the unknown Mr Hawkins is some vulgar tradesman, and 'merchant' is a euphemism for his source of wealth. Perhaps she is right, but the narrator does not tell us. That 'of course' is Emma's unspoken phrase, and we might notice how it echoes the description of Mr Elton finding the woman who accepts his proposal to be 'of course ... superior' to the woman who has rejected him. In this latter case, 'of course' merely parrots Mr Elton's desire to convince himself. Emma too ('of course') is trying to convince herself.

Just as the villagers persuade themselves of Miss Hawkins' qualities on the basis of no evidence, Emma decides on her lineage without any grounds. Her uncle, she guesses, is 'the drudge of some attorney, and too stupid to rise'. This is her invention, but is uncorrected by the narrator. The narrative shares the character's wrong-headedness, which by the end ('something of ingratitude' is Emma's concession) even she seems to half-glimpse. The comedy and delight of the narration come from seeing what we are not told.