

Jane Austen's *Emma*

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A Close Reading Companion, Volume I

By

Kenneth R. Morefield

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INTRODUCTION

I don't typically read introductions until I have finished the book, so I confess to finding explanations of what the reader is about to encounter (or has just encountered) somewhat superfluous. Unlike Emma Woodhouse, however, I do not assume that everyone thinks and acts as I do. That being the case, I will offer a brief explanation of what is contained in this volume, starting with the title: what exactly is a "close reading companion"?

My perceived need to explain is part of my justification for doing this project. Close readings are increasingly hard to come by. They used to be—perhaps still are—the foundation of most good literary analysis. To do "close reading" is simply to attend carefully to what the literary text says before using logic or research to unpack its meaning. We live in an academic age dominated by critical theory in which ideological and sociological critical templates are commonly applied to works of literature. Faculty and, increasingly, students are bombarded with a dazzling and daunting array of secondary criticism filtered through various disciplines and ideologies. I am not complaining; I have participated in and contributed to this rise of theory, first as a graduate student with a specialization in the history and practice of literary criticism and later as a faculty member preparing my students for advanced study. I love theory, but I have striven throughout my career to make it a potent complement to close reading rather than a substitute for it.

My primary goal in writing this book was to advocate for and model close reading. That requires a text. Close reading is a practice, not a subject. In deciding to cover an entire novel rather than create an anthology featuring effective close readings of different texts, I was influenced by my familiarity with Bible commentaries, a genre of reference work with no parallel in literature. I suppose Roland Barthes's *S/Z* bears a familial resemblance, but that work seems more theoretical than actually practical, even if I did once attempt to read it from start to finish. I wanted to create a reference work in which those new to Austen, particularly students, could find explications of particular passages. I also hoped to provide a commentary that would spark further thought or discussion among those already familiar with Austen's work. Having two sets of potential readers in mind gave me pause but turned out to be less problematic than I feared. My only real concession to the new reader has

been to avoid academic jargon. I hoped that the ideas discussed in the close readings would be sufficiently valuable to keep the interest of experienced readers. The truth is, it is sometimes easier to apply theory in a comprehensible way than it is to summarize it. If I have been successful, perhaps some readers skeptical of theory might come to recognize its value by seeing it in practice rather than hearing one more person advocate for it in the abstract.

The comprehensive, chapter by chapter, structure of this book makes it admittedly bulky and, I have been told (more than once) a marketing nightmare. Is it folly to expect to sell an introductory companion to an already dense novel that is as long as the novel itself? Is it not possible to have too much of a good thing—even when that thing is discussion of Jane Austen? Most of all, is not the notion that literary criticism should itself be a clear, lucid, and pleasurable reading experience, just a tad...quaint? I hope not. The notion may be old fashioned, but I have forced myself through too many dense—that's the politely academic way of saying "impenetrable"—essays requiring specialized training to decipher not to take at least one shot at writing the kind of book I have always wanted to read. This book is that one shot. Worst case scenario, I had a semester to indulge in daily close readings of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Best case scenario, I find out that enough readers out there shared my desire for this kind of book, and I will be back before too long with Volume II.

Since there is something old fashioned about close readings, I may as well conclude my introduction with another old-fashioned and diminishing practice: the expression of thanks. I was not long into this project before I realized that it was larger in scope and more challenging than I anticipated. That I have broken the companion into three volumes to match the original volumes of Austen's novel attests to the fact that a close reading companion cannot simply be dashed off in one's spare moments. If Jane Austen had a secret for getting work done while living a full-time life devoted to other people and pursuits, it was not a secret I have yet discovered. I needed help.

The first debt of gratitude belongs to Campbell University and my colleagues in the English Department. The former granted me sabbatical, an increasingly rare professional gift when universities are facing financial challenges and every penny counts. The latter not only supported me in my application for sabbatical but protected that time at the cost of increasing their work load. The professorate is often a lonely and isolated profession, but I have been blessed with colleagues who believe in my work and in me.

Elizabeth Morefield and Ernie Astin provided me with a writer's haven for a large chunk of that sabbatical. I cannot imagine a more ideal set-up than the apartment they lent me, free of charge. Because of their generosity, I was free to spread out my work, let dishes and distractions pile up in another room, and keep odd hours as the muses alternately danced with me and held me at arm's length, all while warm and well fed.

Dr. Sherry Truffin gave me many suggestions for improving the style and content of this work. Stephanie Bailey and Rachel Davis performed the often tedious job of proofreading, and they gave my manuscript the same loving attention they would give their own. Errors no doubt remain, and I own responsibility for all of them. If they are fewer and farther between than in some of my other writings, I credit the help of my colleagues and friends.

It would be impossible to discuss a novel one has read and taught numerous times without mining one's memory as well as one's imagination. When specific people have informed my interpretation, I have of course tried to acknowledge them by name. To those who have discussed the novel with me over the years both in and out of the classroom, you may be too numerous to name individually, but I am nevertheless grateful for the fruit of your own reading and the seeds that only later came to fruition long after I had forgotten that you were the ones who planted it.

CHAPTER ONE

SOME OF THE BEST BLESSINGS OF EXISTENCE

Emma begins with, well, Emma. We are told that she *is* "handsome, clever, and rich" but only that she "*seemed*" to unite "some of the best blessings of existence." The negating effect of "seemed" is tantalizingly ambiguous. Do money, looks, and wit only "seem" to be blessings, or does Emma only "seem" to unite them (either with each other or with something else)? More ambiguous still is the transition between the first paragraph, where we are told that Emma has lived "twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her," and the second paragraph, where we are told that "her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses."

The juxtaposition of these jarringly contradictory statements is too archly delicious to be anything other than intentional, coming as it does in the novel's opening chapter. What do we make of it, then? That things aren't always what they seem is a staple in Austen's fiction, and it makes an early appearance here. Beyond that, though, the order of these statements strikes me as telling. The words "handsome," "clever," and "rich" are bold words, and they create a near immediate impression. By the time we are told about Emma's mother, we have already been subtly made envious of and frustrated at her. Why should Emma have all the seemingly best blessings of existence?

Why indeed? Is there a satisfying answer to that question, or are we all by nature prone to envy? Part of Austen's achievement in this novel, as we shall see, is that she stacks the deck in Emma's favor and then makes us feel guilty for our natural reactions. She does this, in part, by letting us see how little sympathy we afford to those we envy. Miss Taylor had "fallen little short of a mother in affection," but the gulf between a mother's caresses and the excellent service of a governess, exemplifying as it does the "very little" that has distressed or vexed Emma, ought to make us wary right off the bat of taking anything the narrator says (especially about Emma) at face value.

And a word about Emma's father--he is "affectionate" and "indulgent," two seemingly benign (or fortuitous) adjectives. Given, however, that

Emma's condition of having too much her own way is described as "evil" and that although Mr. Woodhouse is amiably high maintenance, he is high maintenance indeed, we have yet another example of first impressions being less than trustworthy.

What are the best blessings of existence--of ours or someone else's? We act as though we know, and we pursue the answers that come to mind with relentless vigor. Oftentimes, however, the conditions or material things that we most desire are the most injurious to us, while those we most fear are portals to richer blessings still.

Mr. Knightley makes his appearance at the end of Chapter One, which is pretty early for a love interest to show up, especially in a Jane Austen novel. It is a convention of the romantic comedy, that descendant of the comedy of manners, that the love interests "meet cute," or cross paths through some carefully articulated set of circumstances designed to show that Fate wants them to be together if only they can see that *this is the moment of destiny!* Mr. Knightley's introduction is the first of many ways that *Emma* is unconventional as a love story. The characters do not meet cute. He is "a very old and intimate friend of the family." The word "friend" is clearly an important one in this work. It (or some variation such as "friendly") is used twelve times in the first chapter alone. Some key examples include:

- Miss Taylor is called "a friend and companion such as few possessed."
- Knightley is called "a very old and intimate friend."
- Knightley opines that "every friend of Miss Taylor must be glad to have her so happily married."

At Box Hill, the emotional and moral climax of the novel, Knightley will profess his *friendship* to Emma. Indeed, his words will suggest that it may be harder to be a true friend than a devoted lover. Much of Volume I deals with Emma's befriending of Harriet Smith, and the question of whether or not Emma acts as a true friend by recommending that Harriet refuse Robert Martin is the source of disagreement between her and Knightley and the conflict that permeates the first third of the novel.

The reason every friend of Miss Taylor "must" be glad, as Knightley explains, is that her marriage is so clearly to her advantage--both economically and emotionally. The true friend, then, rejoices in the good to her friend even if that good comes at the expense of hardship to herself. What is interesting about this concept of love and friendship is how much contemporary mores have reversed it. *Love* is putting the other first.

Friendship is enjoying another's company. In Christian circles, C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* has alerted many readers to the fact that in New Testament Greek, words all translated as "love" can denote different things. "Eros" is erotic love, "philia" is brotherly love/friendship (hence the nickname for Philadelphia), while "agape" is the selfless, Christian love that most approximates the love of God.

That friendship is more than amiable companionship is a lesson Emma has not yet learned. It may very well be *the* lesson she has not yet learned, since learning it leads to the realization that friendship and love are built on the same foundation. Emma says of Knightley: "Mr. Knightley loves to find fault with me you know--in a joke--it is all a joke. We always say what we like to one another." (Is this yet more foreshadowing of Box Hill? There, too, Emma will insist that her words are just a joke.) This is not entirely true. In fact, no part of it is true. Knightley does find fault with Emma, but he doesn't "love" to do so. Knightley never jokes about moral faults or instruction. And while Emma may say whatever she likes to Knightley, he apparently has a great deal of difficulty saying exactly what he would like to say to her.

The most obvious example of Knightley's difficulty in saying what he wants comes at the end of Volume III, where Emma must--against her misperceived self-interest--encourage him to say what he wants. Because Emma's misperception appears so early in the novel, absent to any contradictory evidence, readers can easily be lulled into treating her characterizations as facts. Part of the richness of Austen's writing is how texts open themselves to different nuances on repeated readings. This is one reason why a meaningful commentary cannot avoid plot spoilers. So much of a first reading is getting our bearings, and most of those initial bearings are tied to Emma's perceptions, since she is both the character who is most open (we'll say more about that when she meets Jane Fairfax) and the character with whom the narrator is semi-omniscient. The narrator does say, "Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma...." The use of "in fact" constitutes the second time in the first chapter (along with the previously mentioned use of "real" to describe the evils of Emma's situation) the narrator has seen fit to contradict something Emma says or believes with an assertion of fact from that omniscient point of view. We may have to wait awhile before we get contrary evidence, but attentive readers should be alert from the get-go to the narrator's hints not to take Emma's perceptions as gospel.

I digress from my main point, however, which is that attentive readers ought to pick up on the fact that Emma uses words differently not only from Knightley but also from the narrator. When the narrator says that

Knightley was an old friend of the family, her (I always think of the narrator as a she) use of the word, unless we think it duplicitous or inaccurate, is closer to Knightley's than Emma's. Emma's father is, to be sure, beloved for "the friendliness of his heart," but it is Miss Taylor who acts in the office of friend by promoting Emma's welfare: "Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse's family, less as a governess than a friend." The office of a friend is something different from, and requires something different than, friendliness (or amiability). Mr. Woodhouse is beloved for his friendliness, but to whom is he a friend, and who is a friend to him? (Knightley, we might note, is a friend of the "family," suggesting that his service to Woodhouse promotes the good of all members of the family--for example it relieves Emma of some of her tedious duties--more so than it challenges Woodhouse to grow personally.)

The other thing we are told about Knightley is that he is a "sensible" man. The contrast between Knightley's "sensible" nature and Emma's "clever"ness comprises one of the thematic foundations of the novel. When Emma boasts that she made the match between Taylor and Weston, her response to Knightley's claim that it was a lucky guess is telling: "And have you never known the pleasure and triumph of a lucky guess?--I pity you.--I thought you cleverer--for depend upon it, a lucky guess is never merely luck. There is always some talent in it." Maybe, maybe not. But it is telling that the "clever" party here speaks primarily of "pleasure" and "triumph" wrought by "talents" while the man of sense speaks primarily of "merit" demonstrated by "worthy employment" and culminating in "success."

Emma and Knightley are speaking the same language, but they have very different working vocabularies. (Knightley will describe the distinctives of "women's language" in Volume III, Chapter Eighteen.) For Emma, making matches is "the greatest amusement in the world." It may be too easy, though, to read Knightley as always right. Usually there is a germ of truth in what Emma says, and here I see it in her claim that Weston was "comfortable" as a widower and may not have pursued Taylor had not Emma given "many little encouragements." Already in Chapter One we see a gender pattern emerging. Each of the men described, Weston, Woodhouse, Elton (and, so, perhaps it is hinted, Knightley) is comfortable. Perhaps they are withdrawn not because of sense or virtue but simply by temperament, and perhaps Emma does perform the office of a friend by drawing out Weston, making him momentarily less comfortable but in the long term more happy. That her motivations are not always or completely altruistic doesn't make her actions any less that of a friend. Certainly promoting another's success at some cost to ourselves

might be more virtuous than promoting it at no cost to ourselves, but that doesn't mean there is no virtue or sense or friendship in helping another when our interests coincide.

Emma will begin to get into trouble, however, when she cannot distinguish her interests from those of another. Her guess has, in fact, been "lucky." But lucky in the sense that she wields power and influence that can be exercised in injurious rather than helpful ways, and, therefore, must be used judiciously. Still, as her friendship with Harriet will demonstrate, it isn't so much that Emma is unwilling to learn this lesson as that she has never had to do so. It's not that she can't ever put others before herself, only that she is careless in her assumptions about what others want or need.

CHAPTER TWO

SOME SCRUPLES AND SOME RELUCTANCE

The first half of Chapter Two introduces Frank Churchill indirectly through the story of Mr. Weston's first marriage. The second half of the chapter repeats some of the information about Mr. Woodhouse's idiosyncrasies, particularly his response to the Weston-Taylor marriage. Mr. Weston's family had "been rising into gentility and property." Austen's novel belongs to a place and time marked both by increasing fluidity in the class system and resistance to class change. The idea of "rising" into gentility and property is a relatively new idea.

Emma is a book of contrasts, and this chapter introduces the first part of a subtle one. The Churchills (the family of Weston's first wife) regard Weston and his family as too far below them to marry their daughter. Their concern will mirror that of Emma when she doesn't wish Harriet to be married to Robert Martin. The birth of a grandson paves the way, as it often does, to some reconciliation between the young couple and the parents, and when the first Mrs. Weston dies young, the Churchills adopt Frank. He takes their name.

The surface of this chapter's narrative lays the groundwork for a condemnation of Frank. To be sure, his failure to visit his step-mother is a breach of manners only partially mitigated by the fact that his adopted parents are apparently asserting some sort of negative influence on him. I say "apparently" because unlike Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Churchill never makes an appearance in person in the novel. Her unreasonableness is accepted at second hand and, we must suppose, communicated primarily through Frank. Frank's unreliability as a source of information will become apparent, but few readers ever seem to consider that Mrs. Churchill's characterization might be among Frank's many half-truths or a convenient excuse for other, less excusable reasons for postponing decisions about which he is insecure.

In describing the adoption process, the narrator says of the biological father, "Some scruples and some reluctance the widower-father may be supposed to have felt; but as they were overcome by

other considerations, the child was given up to the care and wealth of the Churchills, and he had only his own comfort to seek and his own situation to improve as he could." Does "may be supposed to have felt" provide a hint that, perhaps, Mr. Weston didn't actually feel many scruples or much reluctance in giving up his son? When I ask students about Mr. Weston, most describe him as a generally good guy who, rightly or wrongly, honestly thinks that it is in his child's best interest to be brought up in wealth. There is, however, more than a slight hint of resentment in the narrator's language. Weston is worse off than before the marriage, but not destitute by any means, and seeking his own "comfort" might suggest that he chooses out of expediency rather than necessity.

Subsequent to giving up his son to his in-laws, Weston quits the militia and enters into "trade." (It is curious that Emma views the Martins—yeoman farmers—as beneath her notice but has no scruple maintaining a relationship with Miss Taylor, who marries into a family whose wealth comes from trade.) We are told that his brothers provided him a "favorable opening," enabling him to make enough money to spend "leisure" days and allow the next eighteen to twenty years to pass "cheerfully" away. When he marries Miss Taylor, it is not as though he has finally erased a deficit that his marriage placed him in. He has achieved a comfortable station in life and has enough to marry a "portionless" woman while still maintaining a "life according to the wishes of his own friendly and social disposition."

Might this chapter be suggesting that Frank is less the spoiled child than the child sacrificed to the comfort of the older generation? Nowhere does this paragraph indicate that Weston, once he achieved more solid footing (assuming that his motivations for giving up the child were fiduciary to begin with) sought to be an active presence in Frank's life. Perhaps he was honoring Churchills's wish that he give up claims on Frank once and for all. Nevertheless, from a certain point of view, Frank may be less an ungrateful child who bafflingly refuses to honor his parents and more an abandoned child suddenly called on to show filial devotion to a parent who has never expressed much interest in him to begin with and then acts hurt and bewildered when that child cares more about his own comfort than making up for lost time. One can almost hear Harry Chapin's "The Cat's in the Cradle" playing in the background: "He'd grown up just like me..."

The odd thing is that so few readers and friends of the family see it that way. The last line of Weston's description talks of his "friendly and social disposition," and we seem to be back to where we were

when speaking of Mr. Woodhouse's "amiability." There is a superficial friendliness that passes for manners but isn't an adequate substitute for it. Weston is a "good guy" if by "good guy" we mean "pleasant to be around."

Of the first Mrs. Weston we are told that she had "one sort of spirit" but "not the best." She has "resolution enough to pursue her own will" but "not enough to refrain from unreasonable regrets." The phrase "unreasonable regrets" reminds me of the "gentle selfishness" mentioned earlier. Our attitudes towards people are influenced by the way in which they are described. What is "unreasonable" about her regrets? The implication is that because she knew going into the marriage that her family disapproved, it is unreasonable for her to regret their response. Regrets are, for the most part, emotional responses, and controlling them is the hallmark of a maturity far beyond that demonstrated by most of the characters in the novel who are described with less censure. To be sure, she apparently feeds these emotions and manifests them to a degree that pressures Weston to live beyond their means in order to be content. I'm not saying the first Mrs. Weston is without fault, rather that her story (brief as it is) provides another contrast between those who are censured for their faults and those who have their faults excused or rationalized. Thus far, it seems that women are portrayed more judgmentally for their faults than men, and youth more severely than the middle-aged or elderly.

CHAPTER THREE

MISS BATES AND MISS GODDARD

Chapter Three begins with yet more justification of Mr. Woodhouse. He likes company "in his own way" and to have friends "come and see him." His horror of late nights limits him to company who would visit him "on his own terms," but fortunately he can "command" visits due, in large part, to "his fortune, his house, and his daughter."

That Emma is treated rhetorically here as another of Woodhouse's possessions is apparent. Lest we miss the point, we are told in the next paragraph that while "real, long-standing regard brought the Westons and Mr. Knightley" to visit, Mr. Elton came largely to enjoy Woodhouse's drawing room and "the smiles of his lovely daughter." Once again, though, potential criticism of Woodhouse is defrayed by and placed onto his daughter.

The company of Elton, Knightley, and the Westons is not sufficient to meet Woodhouse's desire for fellowship "on his own terms," and so Emma cultivates a "second set" of acquaintances. This set includes Mrs. and Miss Bates and Mrs. Godard, acquaintances whose company Emma "fearfully anticipate[s]." Their "quiet posings" make for a long, dull evening. Why then does she cultivate them? "Happy she was, for her father's sake [...] she was delighted to see her father look comfortable [...]" Knightley has suggested that by marrying, Miss Taylor went from having to please two people (Emma and Mr. Woodhouse) to having to please only one (Mr. Weston). This chapter, however, suggests that pleasing Mr. Woodhouse means that Emma must please a much larger circle. Her environment starts to look a little more constricting than it appeared at first glance.

Miss Bates, like Emma, cares for an elderly parent, but with none of Emma's advantages. She was "neither young, handsome, rich, nor married." She is, however, "happy." The narrator states this astonishing fact point blank, but slips it into the middle of the paragraph, making it easy to dismiss. "She loved everybody, was interested in every body's happiness [...] thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings..." Even the language here echoes the opening paragraph, inviting us to see her as a foil for Emma. The word "blessings" here

harkens back to Chapter 1, which states that Emma seemed to unite some of the "best blessings" of existence. There is no "seemed" here. Or is there? We are not told that Miss Bates was a fortunate creature but only that she "thought herself" one, and the conjunction "and" also suggests that she "thought herself" surrounded with blessings.

Perhaps this suggests that one's frame of mind is more important than one's circumstances. Anything can be a blessing if one can only see it as such. I tend to think, however, that the narrator is ambiguous here to place a choice before us. Do we accept them as blessings? Do we think of Miss Bates as fortunate? We have as much trouble thinking of Miss Bates as fortunate as we do thinking of Emma as unfortunate. Might we suspect, on some level, that an orthodox Christian valuation of blessings and evils is just rhetoric, that "blessed are the meek" is a bone thrown to those who missed out on the blessings we would choose for ourselves?

No one names Miss Bates "without good will," which is not quite the same thing as saying that everyone feels good will towards her. Does this subtle distinction hint that everyone knows they are supposed to like her more than they do? Later Emma will confess that she can't quite figure out why she doesn't feel more affinity for Jane Fairfax. Her dislike for Miss Bates seems easily explained by the woman's chattering tongue and tedious nature, but might some of it also be explained in the same way Knightley characterizes Emma's motivation for disliking Jane? Might Emma see in Miss Bates's felicity an accomplishment she, with more advantages, cannot attain?

We are told twice in her description that Miss Bates is "harmless." If noblesse oblige, reaching back to the age of chivalry, involves treating the weak with the respect they (unlike Mr. Woodhouse) cannot command, then Miss Bates's harmless nature marks her almost immediately as a person, like Harriet, whose acquaintance places greater moral demands on Emma than does that of a self-sufficient friend or powerful adversary. Miss Bates and Mrs. Goddard are described as ladies of a type that Emma "found herself very frequently able to collect." The word "collect" suggests a patronizing, impersonal attitude. The phrase "found herself" suggests that the exercise of her own power is something Emma has not yet examined, even if she has cultivated and refined it. Once again we get a glimpse that Emma's social development and manners are fairly keen, while she is still in a formative stage morally and intellectually.

The second half of Chapter Three introduces Harriet Smith, whose acquaintance will help form the outline of the plot that drives the novel. Harriet is brought by Mrs. Goddard to dine at Highbury for one of those evenings with Mr. Woodhouse that we have heard described already—

amiable but rather taxing. Mr. Woodhouse has some problems as host not because he is inhospitable but because of a genuine (if misguided) care for his guests' health. The narrator reinforces Emma's social graces and amiable character yet again in the remark that she "had particular pleasure in sending them away happy." The word "pleasure" suggests that as with her father, Emma genuinely desires to make other people happy. Her good intentions may not protect her from mistakes of judgment, but they ought surely to temper our judgment of her character.

Emma's interest in Harriet is clearly less altruistic than she makes out, and Austen may be laying a trap for readers by making it so easy for them to see this. Certainly the reader can be so delighted at a quick discovery of Emma's mixed motives that it is easy enough to neglect the larger point that she is doing Harriet a real service without requiring of her the sort of slavish devotion or appreciation that someone like Mrs. Elton would require of Jane Fairfax. Harriet shows "so proper and becoming a deference" that she "must have encouragement." It is also said (as filtered through Emma's perception, I think) that Harriet is "artlessly impressed," meaning that her appreciation of and esteem for Emma is free of self-conscious flattery.

That Harriet's company provokes Emma's vanity is also suggested in the line "her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired." That the next line begins "she was short, plump, and fair [...]" hints that the sort of beauty that Emma particularly admires may be the sort that complements (or compliments) her own. Not that Harriet is portrayed as ugly. Her "blue eyes" are mentioned three times. We are told that "those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted" and that Emma was busy in "admiring those soft blue eyes."

Were one so inclined, one might speculate about a possible connection between Emma's stated disinterest in marriage and her pleasure in being able to "collect" ladies into whose soft blue eyes she can stare long enough to be distracted. But I'm just being glib, really. The word "collect" indicates to me, if anything, a tendency to depersonalize and dehumanize her company that makes Emma's interest in Harriet appear more aesthetic than untoward. I don't think we are supposed to read Harriet as unattractive—just not as attractive as Emma, who is more "handsome" than "elegant" or "beautiful" and preternaturally conscious of pecking orders of all sorts and her place in them.

Emma's narcissism shows more clearly in the language used to convey her response to Harriet's deference. In describing Emma's assessment of Harriet's situation and resolution to better it, Austen three times uses the word "must" and twice uses the word "should." As George Justice

discusses in "Must and Ought: Moral and Real Conditions in Emma," the word "must" carries with it a connotation of moral imperative. Here, its strident repetition indicates that Emma doth protest too much (methinks). There is certainly nothing wrong with a young woman of a higher class taking an interest in and socially helping someone of Harriet's condition, but the language suggests more duty more than charity: "[Harriet] *must* have good sense and deserve encouragement. Encouragement *should* be given" (emphasis added).

This tendency to elevate inclination to the plane of duty and opinion to the level of certainty would be quaint but not too dangerous were it only attached to a benign enterprise. Unfortunately it extends to her estimation of the Martins as well: "very good sort of people" who nevertheless "must" be doing Harriet harm.

Is Emma carried away here, or is she deliberately shaping her estimation of the Martins to justify conduct towards them that she instinctively knows is wrong? The narrator tells us that Emma "well knew by character" the Martin family and "knew Mr. Knightley thought highly of them." That's two "knows" in one paragraph—a pretty forceful declaration of fact for a narrator who generally eschews declaration for suggestion. Emma's quick dismissal of Knightley's regard (a thing not easily gained, as she knows) is a strike against her but may also be an indication that she is less duplicitous than scatterbrained. Emma seems remarkably capable of sustaining contrary impressions or opinions (contrary to each other and contrary to evidence), and her claim that the Martins "must" be harming Harriet, although apparently based on nothing substantial, is nevertheless presented, I think, as a sincere delusion—much like her certainty that Harriet is the daughter of a natural gentleman.

This passage helps to round out some of Austen's meaning in describing the "power of having rather too much her own way" as an evil. Unchecked power, even when well intentioned, can cause real damage. Perhaps because so many of Austen's heroines are themselves victims of unchecked power, we can understand both the accomplishment of Emma in (eventually) becoming able to discipline herself and Austen's fear that many readers might not like Emma. It is always easier to root for the underdog and to see in her victimization some mirror of our own.

The passage that best expresses Emma's mix of vanity and sincerity is that which describes the lead up to the supper table:

...the evening flew away at a very unusual rate; and the supper table, which always closed such parties, and for which she had been used to sit and watch the due time, was all set out and ready, and moved forward to the fire, before she was aware. With an alacrity beyond the common impulse

of a spirit which yet was never indifferent to the credit of doing everything well and attentively, with the real good will of a mind delighted with its own ideas...

We are often reminded, in the opening of the novel, of the many dreary nights Emma has to spend watching "due time." Once again that which is exceptional in her—a spirit never indifferent to the credit of doing everything well and attentively—is dismissed as undeserving of much praise. Here it is called a "common" impulse, but it is not an impulse I have found common. Still, the word "real" accompanying "good will" is telling. When Emma is not delighted with her own ideas but only cognizant of the credit of doing everything well, she can rise to meet the challenge. Her good will in those instances isn't quite real, though. The difference may not be perceptible (or even important) to those who are the objects of her manufactured good will, but it is hard to sustain such practices through discipline alone.

If this is a defect in Emma, I stop to wonder what sort of defect it is. One can hardly manufacture "real good will," and in its absence the ability to earn the credit of doing things well and attentively is nothing to sneer at. I have a hard time counting it a moral failure that Emma's powers of self-delusion do not extend to convincing herself that she genuinely looks forward to or enjoys nights of insubstantial conversation around a dinner table. It certainly cannot be said (yet) that she allows her lack of deeper affection or good will to interfere with her duties as hostess or that she is anything less than generous in performing them.

As someone who often finds myself restless in social situations that privilege superficial surface discourse over intimate or substantial conversation or activity, I can relate to Emma's restlessness and understand her pleasure at having found that time has passed more quickly than she anticipated. Nor can I really fault her for wanting more of Harriet's company to alleviate some of the tedium that I can well imagine Emma feeling on such nights. It is no surprise, then, that the next chapter will open by telling us how quickly Harriet becomes a regular fixture at Hartfield.

CHAPTER FOUR

A MUTUALLY SATISFYING FRIENDSHIP

Emma, we are told in the beginning of Chapter Four, lost no time in "inviting, encouraging, and telling [Harriet] to come very often." The escalation of rhetoric here gives us a glimpse of one possible interpretation of Emma—nice enough when things go according to (her) plan but more overtly demanding when they don't. Is that the hallmark of immaturity or diplomacy? We must not forget that Emma is doing Harriet a real service and that Harriet is satisfied with her companion as well.

Even so, the opening paragraph is filled with language that depersonalizes Harriet and makes Emma's motives look venal. The sentence "As a walking companion, Emma had very early foreseen how useful she might find her" suggests that Emma is looking for someone to meet her needs and is not particularly interested in Harriet as a person. At the end of the same paragraph, we are told that "a Harriet Smith [...] one whom she could summon at any time [...] would be a valuable addition to her privileges." The use of the article "a" before Harriet Smith is damning. Emma needs not Harriet but "a Harriet," someone of the category of Harriet, who can provide for Emma what she needs. Thinking of Harriet as a "valuable addition to her privileges" both commodifies Harriet and reinforces Emma's bossiness.

Austen uses two significant words, "elegant" and "clever," to contrast the two friends. Harriet was "not clever" but had the "power of appreciating what was elegant and clever." On the surface this suggests that Harriet appeals to Emma's vanity, which is true. At the same time, the word "elegant" subtly hints that we are getting only Emma's perception. This word is rarely used by the narrator to describe Emma (it is more often attached to Jane Fairfax), so this sentence can be read to suggest that Harriet reinforces Emma's self-conception, even when it isn't based in reality. This reading is reinforced by the next sentence, which tells us that "altogether she was quite convinced of Harriet Smith's being exactly the young friend she wanted." The word "wanted," with its dual, conflicting meanings of "desired" and "lacked," is perfectly crafted by Austen to

simultaneously underline and hide the conflict between Emma's sensibilities and her own.

Emma's first attempt to assist Harriet is an "endeavor" to find out about Harriet's parents, an effort which consists of grilling Harriet, who knows nothing, and going no further. A close reading of Austen shows, I think, how strongly language can shape our views, and the introduction of this paragraph with a word like "endeavor" (from Emma's perception) can lull us to sleep and prevent us from noticing that the subsequent description (from the narrator's more neutral perception) is not at all in keeping with the label given to it.

We are also told that "she could never believe that in the same situation she should not have discovered the truth." Emma, apparently, does not believe in social environmental determinism, but what handsome, clever, and rich person ever does? Modern readers might be trained to think "there but for the grace of God go I," meaning if I were in another's situation, I might be susceptible to the same forces that caused him or her to make the decisions he/she did. Not so, Emma. She can't believe she would ever be any different and thus (it is implied) can't understand why anyone, despite their circumstances, does not act like her.

Using this passage, I would like to suggest that Emma's primary fault is a lack of a particular form of imagination. She interprets actions to mean what they would mean if she were to do them and thus unthinkingly makes her perceptions the standard for reality that ought to govern all judgments. It is precisely this inability to place herself in another's position that will cause her to misjudge Elton and insult Miss Bates. Similarly, she will be portrayed at her best when fearful of losing her just-realized true love yet capable of seeing things from another's perspective.

Finally, it is hard for me to decide how Austen would have us feel about Harriet. The most obvious answer is that Harriet is not too bright and we regard her the way Emma does—with a sort of benign condescension. One wonders, sometimes, though, whether this is the real Harriet or a role she is (and has been) conditioned to play. Most people of all classes, education, and ages have some sort of radar that tells them when friends are genuinely interested in them and when they are being used. Is Harriet's broken? Is it not developed? Is she an innocent savant seeing good in Emma that we do not yet see? Or is she, perhaps, complicit in her own humiliations, willing to play the role of sycophant in exchange for the valuable addition of privileges that an Emma Woodhouse brings to the table?

The more they see of each other, the more their "satisfaction in each other" increases. Perhaps Harriet is just obtuse or easily satisfied, but

perhaps Harriet is aware on some unspoken level that she is striking a bargain. It is easy enough to read Harriet throughout the novel as being the naively trusting party hurt by Emma's constant (if well meaning) meddling. Is it equally possible to read Harriet as playing a role—of making a conscious decision to try to parlay her friendship with Emma into something better for herself? What strikes me as odd about these two readings is that they are so diametrically opposed to one another and yet, in their own ways, so equally plausible.

I tend to think of the conversation between Emma and Harriet about Robert Martin and his family as the first major scene in the novel. There is the brief dialog between Knightley and Emma that ends chapter one, but for the most part there has been expository scene-setting. With Harriet's entry into an intimacy with Emma, the text begins moving forward rather than simply looking back or painting the present.

When Harriet expresses surprise that Emma has not noticed Robert Martin, Emma replies:

A young farmer, whether on horseback or on foot, is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it.

This is an odd little speech, which can be confusing, especially to American readers unfamiliar with both the social rules governing class interaction and the ways in which Emma is tweaking them. In "I am a Gentleman's Daughter": A Marxist-Feminist Reading of *Pride and Prejudice*," Johanna M. Smith provides a handy chart giving a simple overview of the class distinctions in Austen's day. She places the yeomanry in the same category as, but below, other members of the gentry, who are defined as landowners whose income does not derive from manual labor. The line between yeoman and other gentry is indistinct because the yeomen work the land themselves, thus engaging in manual labor.

Emma's point here, then, is not that social propriety forbids her from noticing or meeting the Martins. Knightley, as we know, takes an interest in and interacts with the family. Rather, it is that interactions with the family would validate their position in the gentry class, and Emma has no desire to do so. The closer a family or person is in rank to her, the more Emma insists upon keeping clear the hierarchy established by social class.

Exercising clear charity does not threaten to further blur the line between gentry and worker since it will be seen only as magnanimity on her part, but exercising familiarity with the yeomanry validates any claims that such a family (or people socially on the level with them) might have to equality with Emma, which is a claim she is not yet willing to grant.

The term "gentleman" in our own day is a social designation more than an economic one, but in Austen's day it was still very much the latter. We see in *Emma*, perhaps, the very early rumblings of class change that are forged economically by the advent of personal wealth acquired by the middle class as a result of industry and trade and socially by the awareness that the nouveau riche and middle class sometimes act more like gentlemen than do the landowners. Being a gentleman is no guarantee of acting mannerly, and many who are not ladies may still act like them.

This passage also reinforces Emma's disturbing quality, already elucidated, of thinking of people first in terms of category and only secondarily as individuals. "A young farmer" is "the last sort of person" she would notice. Just as Harriet is thought of as "a" Harriet Smith earlier in the chapter, Robert Martin will be referred to later in it as "a" Robert Martin. To the extent we can depersonalize people, we find it easier to justify our prejudices towards them. This is why it grates when we hear people characterize African-Americans or Hispanics or gays or Christians or Republicans or Americans or blonds or engineers or whatever, even if the characterization is benign. There is something inherently condescending in relegating a person's primary identity to that of group member and something inherently jarring to contemporary sensibilities in governing our conduct first by their membership to that group rather than to their actions towards us.

Emma the character is aware, of course, that being a gentleman ideally means something more than having money. Hence the application of the adjective "true" or "real" to designate those (like Knightley) whose conduct is in keeping with their social class. Even so, when push comes to shove, Emma cares more about and falls back on the traditional economic designation as the ultimate determiner of social rank. ("He is not so genteel as a real gentleman" is the tautologically-comic-socially-true-but-morally-inaccurate concession about Martin that Emma finally wrings from Harriet.) Elton may not act like a gentleman, but he is. The Martins may be admirable in their conduct, which is commendable, but pristine manners will never make them socially equal to Emma.

In a roundabout way, we see Emma trying to exploit these competing notions of gentry in one area while trying to quell them in another. (The novel is, let us remember, a comedy.) Harriet, because of the "accident" of