

Performing Intimacies with Hawthorne, Austen,  
Wharton, and George Eliot

Maya Higashi Wakana

Performing Intimacies  
with Hawthorne,  
Austen, Wharton,  
and George Eliot

A Microsocial Approach

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*For Susumu*

## FOREWORD

As nineteenth-century novelists love to remind us, it is the business of the novel to show us ordinary people in their everyday lives. “Something real, cool, and solid lies before you,” Charlotte Bronte announces at the beginning of *Shirley*. Put aside your craving for melodrama or spectacle or high adventure, she counsels, for here you will instead find men and women just like you and me engaged in the mostly unremarkable activities that make up our common lives together.

But everyday life is far from simple, and even our most unremarkable day-to-day activities are bursting with complexity and nuance. How human beings navigate the often perilous waters of social intercourse is one of the subjects of Maya Higashi Wakana’s splendid book. Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, Higashi Wakana provides us with a perspective and a vocabulary that allow for a richer sense of the myriad microsocial interactions on which our lives are built. Over and again she shows just how much tact, sensitivity, intelligence, foresight—how much *work*—even mundane interactions require, and how seldom we are fully aware of what we are doing and why.

Because they convey so vividly the textures of individual lives lived socially, nineteenth-century novels in the realist tradition can help us to a better understanding of microsociality. Yet, Higashi Wakana contends, we have barely begun to scratch the surface of what these fictions have to teach us. The “microsocial reading” she practices is a species of close reading that is most alive to the effects that unspoken—indeed, often unconscious—behavioral norms have on the most intimate human

relationships. Higashi Wakana meticulously unravels the many strands that, woven together, motivate even the simplest social actions, just as she parses the tacitly shared rules that govern various types of face to face encounter.

The novels and tales this book takes up are so sturdily canonical that it might seem there is little new to be said, but here they become bracingly unfamiliar again. Sometimes we are led to fresh perceptions of well-known scenes, as when Higashi Wakana calls attention to Elizabeth Bennet's turning her eyes away during Darcy's proposal—a proposal she is eager to accept—and attributes it to her uneasiness at having to “perform the role of a woman being proposed to” and her worry that her performance will not be on par with Darcy's. Sometimes we take an oblique path into the heart of a novel, as when the extended attention Higashi Wakana devotes to the relationship of Mr. Tulliver and Mrs. Glegg slowly reveals the many ways that indebtedness structures the social economy of Eliot's novel. “Who owes what and to whom?” is a question Higashi Wakana returns to often in her analyses, always to good effect. Throughout the book, her commitment to the rigors of microsocial reading leads her to pose fundamental questions concerning these works. Often they are questions that critics have long since tacitly agreed cannot be answered satisfactorily. What is the source of the agitation the villagers feel when confronted by Mr. Hooper's black veil? Why does Newland Archer falter at the foot of the stairs, abandoning his intention to visit Ellen Olenska? Higashi Wakana's answers—the payoffs to her carefully wrought arguments—never fail to be compelling, yet they also actively invite us to keep the conversations open, to continue to inquire, to notice, and to think. We return to the texts with fresh eyes in order to think along with—inevitably, on occasion, counter to—Higashi Wakana as she works through the intricacies of these wondrous narrative fictions.

Readers occupy a central place in Higashi Wakana's conception of narrative fiction. For her, realist novels strive not only to reflect the world but to shape it by shaping readers. The ideal reader immerses herself in the fiction while also retaining her critical distance from it. She allows herself to be absorbed into the novel's represented world, to follow along with characters who are themselves trying to follow along with the social scripts available to them. At the same time she learns to take the measure of those scripts, not in order to repudiate or “transgress” them but to use them effectively, to the ultimate benefit of others as well as of herself. One of this book's subtlest insights is that conforming to conventional

scripts can in some circumstances be empowering, even liberating, but only if the conformity is intentional and self-aware. Novels teach us how best to engage in the performances that constitute social life.

In “The Art of Fiction” Henry James takes issue with the common assumption that “adventure” is synonymous with tales involving “murders, mysteries, ... hairbreadth escapes, miraculous coincidences, and buried dubloons.” There is as much danger and suspense and excitement, James contends, in the story of a young woman from Boston deciding whether or not she should marry an English duke. James is the subject of Maya Higashi Wakana’s previous book, and in many ways he presides over this one. Like him, she reveals how charged with drama and consequence our everyday lives are. Like him too, she has a deep, sustaining faith in the power of narrative fiction to guide us through the perils of those lives.

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# CONTENTS

1	Introduction: The Reader and Varieties of Intimacies	1
2	“Fitting in” and Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil: A Parable”	21
3	Host–Guest Relationships in Austen’s <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	33
4	“Working” Intimacies in Wharton’s <i>Ethan Frome</i>	73
5	The Gentleman in Wharton’s <i>The Age of Innocence</i>	103
6	Unconditional Love in George Eliot’s <i>The Mill on the Floss</i>	139
7	Conclusion: Art Makes Life, Which Makes Art, Which Makes Life	203
	Index	215