

The hidden risks and powers in "emma"



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In Emma, author Jane Austen uses third person narration and free indirect discourse to show the same objects from different perspectives. The detached narration provides an ironic perspective that criticizes the characters' misreadings of situations. The use of free indirect discourse in the novel shows how many different characters read the same people or situations in completely different ways. Through these contrasting perspectives of the same objects, the use of perspective in the novel reveals more about the subjects than it does about the object itself. The subjects' viewpoints reveal the characters' personal desires and biases. The objective third person narration reveals the misguided subjective realities of the characters and criticizes how one-sidedness and presumption blind objective judgment.

Austen highlights perspective in Emma by using free indirect discourse. Perspective is the practice of showing the same object from different viewpoints. The third person narration flows freely in and out of the minds of different characters who have contrasting perspectives. For example, when Mr. Knightley and Emma are discussing Mr. Martin's marriage proposal to Harriet Smith, the two argue about whether or not Harriet is a suitable match for Mr. Martin. In their discussion, their opinions about Harriet are revealed. While Emma believes Mr. Martin is "inferior to [Harriet's] rank in society," (98) Mr. Knightley argues that Mr. Martin is "as much her superior in sense as in situation" (97). Through the use of free indirect discourse, the narrator provides insight to both Mr. Knightley and Emma's personal stakes in Mr. Martin's proposal and Harriet's refusal. As he leaves the conversation, Mr. Knightley is "very much vexed" and feels "the disappointment of the young

man, and [is] mortified to have been the means of promoting it by the sanction he had given; and the part which he was persuaded Emma had taken in the affair, was provoking him exceedingly" (101). The narrator provides insight into how Mr. Knightley feels as he leaves the conversation with Emma and explains why Mr. Knightley has such a furious reaction to the news that Harriet refused Mr. Martin. During the conversation, Mr. Knightley never explicitly states that he is so angry because he is embarrassed that he endorsed the match, so the advantage into his mind because of free indirect discourse provides new information about his character and further insight to his opinions about Harriet. The narrator also enters Emma's mind during the argument, who " tries to look cheerfully unconcerned, but was really feeling uncomfortable...she [has] a sort of habitual respect for [Mr. Knightley's] judgment in general" so it is unpleasant to have him so angrily opposite her on this matter (100). The narrator asserts, though, that Emma "[does] not repent what she has done: she still [thinks] of herself a better judge of such a point of female right and refinement than he could be" (100). Emma believes she knows Harriet better than Mr. Knightley, and therefore her judgment of the situation is more valid and credible. Her confidence in her decision to persuade Harriet not to marry Mr. Martin does not waver. The use of free indirect discourse allows both Mr. Knightley and Emma's perspectives to be considered in the matter of Mr. Martin's proposal. The seamless movement in and out of Mr. Knightley and Emma's private thoughts gives the audience a balanced perspective of Harriet. Even though they are discussing and thinking about the same object — Harriet Smith — their differing opinions are revealed through their subjective perspectives of her.

Although one would expect that having multiple perspectives of the same object one would have a stronger objective understanding of the object, these perspectives end up revealing much more about the subject's desires and biases than about the object itself. For example, when Emma first meets Harriet she notices that Harriet is " a very pretty girl, and her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired" (69). As a result, Emma quickly becomes " quite determined to continue the acquaintance," (69) which is unsurprising considering Emma is still feeling " the absence of Mrs. Weston" (68). Emma decides in this moment that " she would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners" (69). While there is some insight into Harriet's character, the description of Emma's perception of Harriet reveals more about Emma's desires to shape and form Harriet into a suitable acquaintance for herself, " certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and her powers" (69). Emma uses the opportunity to mold Harriet in order to exercise her power and to have something to keep her from being bored. Her desire to exercise this power reiterates how the narrator warns at the beginning of the novel that " the real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (55). Emma's perspective of Harriet gives much more insight into Emma's personality and desires than it does into what Harriet wants and who she is. Similarly, Mr. Knightley's dissenting opinion of Frank Churchill reveals more about Mr. Knightley's desires and bias than it does about Frank Churchill's character. While everyone else in town seems to be liking Frank Churchill,

especially Emma, Mr. Knightley believes Frank is “ just the trifling, silly fellow [he] took him for” (203). This seemingly unjustified opinion of Frank makes a lot more sense when Mr. Knightley reveals his personal feelings for Emma, as it appeared prior that Frank and Emma would be acquainted or even married. Mr. Knightley’s perspective of Frank Churchill is therefore more indicative of his personal desires than it is of Frank’s character.

While the subjective perspectives are more telling of the subjects’ desires and biases than the object’s, there are instances in the novel where the perspectives of the subjects entirely contradict the objective reality. The use of free indirect discourse reveals the flaws of allowing personal bias to block objective judgment well before the characters realize it themselves. For example, when Mr. Elton gives Emma the charade, because she so desperately wants to play matchmaker and set up Mr. Elton and Harriet, she completely misreads the charade to be intended for Harriet, when it is so clearly intended for her. While reading the charade, Emma reinforces that “ this is saying very plainly” that Mr. Elton desires courtship with Harriet (106). Emma exclaims after the descriptions in the charade that the writing is “ Harriet exactly” and asserts that he must be talking about “ Harriet’s ready wit!” (106). At the end of the charade, Emma ensures Harriet that she “ cannot have a moment’s doubt as to Mr. Elton’s intentions. [Harriet] is his object — and [she] will soon receive the completest proof of it” (107). Emma insists she has no doubts whatsoever that Mr. Elton writes about Harriet, but later it is revealed that Mr. Elton intended the charade for Emma. It becomes quite clear that Mr. Elton desires Emma all along during the party when “ Harriet seemed quite forgotten” by Mr. Elton even though she is sick (139).

However, only after their confrontation in the carriage does Emma realize the error of her ways and understand that “ it was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together” (154). Emma “ look[s] back as well as she [can]; but it was all confusion. She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it” (152). In retrospect Emma becomes aware of how she manipulated all of Mr. Elton’s action in her mind to fit her subjective desires. While Emma’s intentions may have been good, she allows her own personal desires to blind any objective reality. Even when it is so obvious at the party that Mr. Elton desires Emma instead of Harriet, she still is shocked by the confrontation in the carriage where Mr. Elton “ protest[s] that he had never thought seriously of Harriet — never!” (152). Emma’s inability to separate her personal desires from objective judgment results in deeply hurting both Mr. Elton and Harriet. Her actions also have consequences, as the “ distressing explanation she had to make to Harriet” would cause “ poor Harriet...suffering” (154). Not only is Emma unable to see objective truth, she also ends up really hurting her dear friend Harriet in the process. The third person narration reveals much earlier than Emma realizes that Mr. Elton desires Emma, not Harriet. The narrator’s foreshadowing and clues throughout the novel that the characters perspectives are often incorrect and can cause harm to others if they do not consider objective judgment reveals the problems with only considering one’s own perspective.

The narrator’s use of free indirect discourse provides insight into all of the characters’ perspectives and opinions. This form of narration seemingly provides an objective and more balanced view of the objects. However, the

subjects' perspectives of other characters ends up revealing more about the subjects' desires and biases than they do about the objects they observe. The detached third person narration reveals a lot of information about the subjects using free indirect discourse, and also serves to criticize when their perspectives are entirely wrong. The multiple perspectives provided in the novel then also serve as a warning that one's personal biases and presumptions shape a subjective reality that blinds objectivity, and as a result can seriously hurt others.