

Free indirect discourse in emma

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Free and Direct Discourse in Jane Austen's, Emma Jane Austen is often considered to have one of the most compelling narrative voices in literature. Blurring the line between third and first person, Austen often combines the thoughts of the narrator with the feelings and musings of the focalized character. Emma is perhaps her most prominent example of free indirect discourse, where the narrator's voice is often diffused into that of the characters. In the following passage, Emma takes on her role as match-maker between Mr. Elton and Harriet Smith, two naive and somewhat air-headed characters in the novel.

Mr. Elton was the very first person fixed on by Emma for driving the young farmer out of Harriet's head. She thought it would be an excellent match; and only too palpably desirable, natural, and probable for her to have much merit in planning it. She feared it was what everybody else must think of and predict. It was not likely, however, that anybody should have equaled her in the date of the plan, as it had entered her brain during the very first evening of Harriet's coming to Hartfield. The longer she considered it, the greater was her sense of expediency.

Mr. Elton's situation was most suitable, quite the gentleman himself, and without low connections; at the same time not of any family that could fairly object to the doubtful birth of Harriet. He had a comfortable home for her, and Emma imagined a very sufficient income; for though the vicarage of Highbury was not large, he was known to have some independent property; and she thought very highly of him as a good humoured, well-meaning, respectable young man, without any deficiency of useful understanding or knowledge of the world. (Austen, 88)

The narrative technique used in this passage is clearly free indirect discourse. There is a definite blur between the narrator and the character, who in this case is Emma, as it often is. The very first sentence delves into Emma's plotting thoughts of connecting Mr. Elton and Harriet. Austen then goes on to say that Emma has been the first to think of this, as she did so at Harriet's first arrival in Hartfield. It almost sounds as if Austen is bragging that Emma was the first to think of this earthshattering idea, but then again, was it Austen or Emma who was bragging? It is hard for the reader to decide.

Emma thought the idea so obvious that everyone must have already thought it, but what made her idea better was that it was had first. If a strict third person narrator would have related Emma's idea to us, we would not get as much insight into why it was such a good idea and Emma's thought process on it. Perhaps a third person narrator would have simply said, "and then Emma had the idea that Mr. Elton could replace the unworthy farmer." In the next couple of sentences, Emma continues her stream of consciousness by listing the qualities that make Mr. Elton a suitable match for Harriet.

This portion of the passage reflects Emma's subjectivity and can be considered "a transcript of [her] conscious thought" (Gunn, 40). These considerations were not being made by the narrator. The person telling Emma's story has no gain or loss in who Harriet decides to marry, but to Emma, it is of the utmost importance. This shows that the stream must be originating from Emma's consciousness, and not that of the narrator. The reader can hear Emma's judgments especially in the phrase, "quite the gentleman himself," which shows that she thinks all of these qualities that Mr.

Elton possesses makes him a worthy gentleman, and thus a candidate for Harriet's love and affection. Even the style that this phrase is uttered in is representative of a stream of thought. It is interjected into the sentence discussing Mr. Elton's suitability. Had a strict, third person narrator written this sentence, it would have been more crafted and less conversational. The entire concept itself is not entirely necessary for the reader to follow, but it helps to understand the character of Emma and why she feels such a need to be a match maker among her acquaintances.

Emma also expresses her thoughts about Harriet's suitability in the following sentence, although it is brief. She says of Mr. Elton that he is, " at the same time not of any family that could fairly object to the doubtful birth of Harriet. " Here, it is Emma, not the narrator, who is acknowledging Harriet's inferior and " doubtful" birth. It is Emma who does not think that it will be an issue to be acted upon for the simple reason that Mr. Elton has no family to object to the union. Although Emma's voice is very prominent in this passage, the third person narrator still remains, which is what essentially makes it Austen's style of free indirect discourse. In phrases such as, " Emma imagined," or, " she thought," the reader is forced to consider that the third party narrator is still present and relating the story. Some literature theorists consider this " contamination" to free indirect discourse (Gunn, 40). Instead of contamination, I think it is what makes Austen's narrative voice so interesting. The reader must stay attentive in order to follow the stream of consciousness wavering between the narrator and the characters.

While being told the story, the reader is also made aware of more minute details that they may not have been presented with had the story been told

without free indirect discourse. The fact that the two voices do intermingle so often is a suggestion " that the distinction between them is arbitrary, at least in Austen's fiction" (Gunn, 40). Although Emma's thoughts are freely transcribed within Austen's passages of free indirect discourse, the ever-present narrator remains in order to guide the characters in their thoughts as to what needs to be presented to the reader.

The 2009 BBC film version of Emma did a very nice job reflecting Emma's thoughts throughout the movie with voice overs while showing a tight shot of her face on the screen and her respective facial expressions to the thoughts she was having. In this movie, the narrator was removed when Emma pondered over her thoughts. An interesting way to do it could be that the narrator remains, still telling the story through free indirect discourse just as in the novel and filming it in a similar way to the BBC version.

The narrator would speak almost directly from the novel and Emma's facial expressions would still reflect her passions about what was being said. In this particular passage, the narrator would be speaking Emma's thoughts on Mr. Elton's qualifications while Emma reacted. This would still allow the story to be told from a third person point-of-view while simultaneously allowing the viewer free range of Emma's thoughts. Resources: Jane Austen's Emma in electronic form Gunn, Daniel. " Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in Emma. " Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in Emma. 12. 1 (2004): 35-54. Print.