

# Style as character insight: the use of irony and free indirect discourse in jane ...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



No work of art achieves permanence unless its creator imbues it with a unique individual style that solidifies its value across cultures and across time. Truly, art would not exist without style. According to Susan Sontag, the earliest experiences of humankind reflected art as “incantatory, magical. Art was an agent of ritual” (65).

This view was followed by the preliminary theory of art as an imitation of reality understood by the ancient Greeks (Greenberg 2; Sontag 65). In any work of art multiple disclosures of truth take place.

These contextual revelations can be endless; revelations of the society, not to mention the revelations of the artist himself. It could therefore be argued that the objects seen and felt by the artist constitute the mirrored image of her distinctive society.

On the other hand, Alexander Pope argued that socialization itself murders authorial style (Miller 76). In Pope’s opinion, everyone is born with some taste that gets lost through education. Pope argued that nature played a crucial role in the judgment of style (Miller 76). From Pope’s assertion, the reader may deduce that in every art, there is a peculiar goodness that is peculiar to the artist.

It is therefore irrelevant to argue the subjective value of one piece of art over another (Galperin 50). Great art reflects its truth vis à vis “the relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific – not the generalized – individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place” (Greenberg 1).

Jane Austen's novels clearly reflect these dual realities. Her work remains a stylized time capsule that reveals the complexities of the social world that existed in the United Kingdom during the Regency period. The continued popularity of the author's works speaks to the individuality and appeal of her writing style to generations of readers and scholars since that era.

Jane Austen's stylistic choices typically present male characters as one of two types: shrewdly reluctant romantics, or fools easily duped by Jane Austen's wily female protagonists that have become so beloved over the years, including Emma Woodhouse, the heroine of *Emma*. The inner workings of Jane Austen's characters typically provide somewhat awkward and unnerving insights into polite society (Harding 167).

Many literary scholars view Jane Austen's works as "country house novels" (Le Faye 11). Some have labeled them as "comedies of conduct" according to Le Faye, comedies of manners that embrace the affairs and social conspiracies of upper class people living in a stylish and civilized culture (11).

These comedies of conduct typically present a violation of social traditions and etiquette; while Jane Austen's keen social observations remain veiled by the sparkle and wit of her dialogue (Le Faye 45). As a rule, Jane Austen's fiction has come to represent "one of the most sophisticated analyses we have of the elusive character or quality of sociable human interaction" (Russell 176).

However, a number of literary scholars regard Jane Austen as a darker, more socially engaged writer. Her novels involve the author advancing 19th century social theory via the use of a style that reveals the theory of mind within each character (Ferguson 118).

Many of Jane Austen's works feature characters that adopt one self publicly and another privately; thus, the conflict between these selves becomes the meat of the novel (Ferguson 118). This paper endeavors to critically analyze the stylistic devices Jane Austen employs in her work to recreate the social psychology of the 19th century British upper classes for the reader.

The paper favors the devices of irony and free indirect discourse as the main stylistic choices Jane Austen applies to give the reader insight and access to the interior, psychological landscape of her characters.

Jane Austen was born in Hampshire, England in 1775, the seventh child of eight children. Jane Austen's early introduction to classical works arrived through the influence of her father, George Austen, a member of the English landed gentry who also worked as a preacher and educator (Galperin 49; Le Faye 10).

Though the family was not wealthy, they were land owners, and as such Jane Austen's childhood was a happy one with full access to intellectual stimulation and learning (Le Faye 10). After the death of George Austen in 1805, Jane, together with her mother and sister Cassandra moved to Chawton village, where she received a marriage proposal from a wealthy brother of her close friend (Tinkcom 134).

Jane Austen initially accepted this proposal but turned it down the following day; scholars argue the rejection of the proposal occurred because Jane Austen fully understood the role of marriage in the mobility of a woman in those days, together with all the vulnerabilities of single women who relied on wealthy relatives for accommodation (Tinkcom 57).

Marriage at that time remained the sole form of social leverage available to women of the upper classes (Galperin 50; Le Faye 11). This event appears to be a seminal one in the life of the author, as the social theme of marriage plays out very much in several of Jane Austen's novels, including *Emma*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, as does the theme of social class positioning, a phenomenon of great interest to the author.

Jane Austen's works can be identified with the eighteenth century novel traditions. According to Duckworth, Austen read broadly in many genres including works which were regarded as mediocre; however, the major feature of her reading activities was noting native genres traversed by women writers at the time (48).

The publishing environment for women during the 19th century was perilous (Ferguson 2). The social environment dictated that propriety be maintained above all else, and at the time literature was deemed too vulgar for women to engage in (Ferguson 2; Lascelles 88). In this sense therefore, Jane Austen remains one of literature's first female mavericks.

When critically examined, the works of Jane Austen show the effect of the literary state of affairs of the 18th century period. The works at this time

embraced the notion of and social environment and man's perspective relative to individual circumstances. In essence, an individual's needs were sublimated to the needs appropriate to his or her social role.

Satire and humor are characteristics embraced in literature during this period; however, the use of irony became the ultimate tool for authors to critique their society discreetly. In Jane Austen's novels, the romantic and passionate nature of her characters is evident, though implied (Ferguson 76). Jane Austen's works demonstrate the role of passion and its place in society.

Though these novels appeared in the middle of the Romantic period, they also involve an intellectual and cerebral quality that minimizes the absolute praise of the youthful passions expressed in other works written during this period. To this end, Jane Austen combines passion and reason through the use of irony.

Jane Austen has embraced the use of irony in many of her most famous pieces. Though scholars typically identify Jane Austen as a romantic author, her style largely renders a biting and acidic account of romance.

The author applies contrast to the plain meaning of a character's account of a situation or event, in order to create a witty twist and reduce the magnitude of the original statement and highlight its ironic disjunction. In her juvenile literary works, Jane Austen depended on satire, irony and parody fixed on absurdity to color the romantic view.

In her mature literary works, she employed irony to forestall social pretense and to highlight discrepancies between familial duties and character, as well as character foibles. A classic example of this occurs in *Mansfield Park*. The author writes:

To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience (Austen 16).

Jane Austen's use of irony is "exemplified in romanticism's earliest forms and carried into the nineteenth century, where absence, division, and fragmentation are completed by their readers' own mistaken ideas" (Greenham 163). In the above example, the reader's reaction to the neglect demonstrated by Lady Bertram toward her offspring fuels the irony of the story.

As such, Jane Austen's style employs irony to criticize not only the marriage institution but the parental ideal of care and concern for the welfare of children, placed in the hands of indolent, spoilt, utterly self-absorbed individuals.

As Greenham notes, romantic authors in the vein of Jane Austen's style "use our expectations to deceive us because their texts are completed only by the expectations of the reader, a use of expectation that reveals, through

negation, the reader's false ideas and ideals" (163). Jane Austen's genteel use of language and style barely conceals her contempt for the social conventions that would allow such individuals to prosper.

Similarly, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen draws the reader's attention to irony in the opening line. The author writes "it is a realism that is widely recognized, that a single man in charge of a good fortune should be in need of a wife" (6).

At first glance this statement appears simple and predictable; however, the plot of the statement contradicts it. As it says, it is a woman without a fortune who is in need of a husband. Also, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the major structural motif creates irony in the story which stimulates a reader's judgment and attention, besides engaging a reader's feelings.

Jane Austen's paradoxical and ironic character sketches also underscore the reciprocal impact of personality and society in *Emma*. Like many of Jane Austen's novels, *Emma* presents an explanation of how one learns to see oneself, others, and personalized relationships more clearly as events unfold.

But to prevent this occurrence Jane Austen has employed an unparalleled blend of styles to present her thesis. *Emma* comes out as Jane Austen's masterwork as she manages to capitalize on irony and the use of free indirect discourse effectively.

Greenham notes that the character of Emma Woodhouse is "femininity ironized" (165). The romantic novels of Jane Austen typically contain these



strong heroines, deeply restricted by the class and gender roles of their time, whose actions and inner thoughts do not align – herein lies Greenham's point. Jane Austen's style use irony to bedevil social veneer.

The reader understands this in the opening line of the novel: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen 1). Jane Austen uses the word "seemed" to pique the reader's suspicion (Austen 1).

As Greenham explains, this word is "always a sign of ambiguity" (165). Once the word "seemed" registers in the mind of the reader, everything that Jane Austen describes about the heroine becomes open to interpretation. As Greenham notes, the word leads the reader to assume "some kind of deflationary irony, which might in turn lead the reader to conclude that Emma is none of these things to the extent that she appears.

The tension, then, would be between appearance and reality" (165). The social psychology of the characters in the world of Jane Austen's novels remains ultimately ambiguous and uncertain; nothing can be assumed to be true, often since the actions and the words of the characters create an ironic distance.

Further use of irony becomes apparent when the reader witnesses Emma's thoughts at the first meeting with Harriet Smith. She immediately sees in Harriet some kind of project that she might embark on, the belief that she

could make an upper class woman out of Harriet's kind request could be a reflection of Emma's impolite disposition towards others.

It could also be construed as a confession that she is meddlesome and self-centered, as Emma's actions indicate that she is the only person entitled to effect such improvement on another human being. However, the ironic truth becomes apparent later, through Jane Austen's skilful use of irony, when the reader concludes that it is actually Emma who desperately needs improvement.

Emma is presented as one person with a contrary judgment; however, since the character only keeps such convictions between herself and the reader, she enhances the various ironic twists that Jane Austen has employed in the novel.

Brownstein argues that the use of irony in Jane Austen's novels speak to the actual physical and psychological experience of women at that time in history. Language itself was a chess match, and the social conventions so complex and rigorous that one wrong word could topple the most socially graced female.

As Brownstein notes, among the female protagonists such as Emma Woodhouse, "choosing language, commenting on the stereotypes and formulas of novelists, and the language available for use in social life, is always Austen's subject" (Brownstein 59).

An example of this occurs following Mr. Knightley's proposal of marriage in Emma. The response that Emma Woodhouse gives is the model of propriety, and illustrates the author's use of irony to highlight the restrictive and psychologically complex social environment of upper class women of marriageable age: "What did she say? Just what she ought, of course.

A lady always does. She said enough to show there need not be despair – and to invite him to say more himself" (Austen 386). In Brownstein's analysis, Jane Austen used irony not only to write as a lady but to illustrate life as a lady. As Brownstein explains, "Writing as A Lady, Austen savors the discrepancy between being a stable sign in her culture as well as a user and analyst of its signs" (Brownstein 59)

Authorial intention comes out as an issue of great interest in Jane Austen's work. Though this may be a difficult thing to find in the absence of the author, literary analysis involves the interpretive spectrum around the determination of authorial intention.

In this line of thought, many critics have viewed a literary work of thought which fades the author from the message that is being communicated; as such, many critics have not managed to find subtle ways of determining authorial intent.

The simplicity that Jane Austen exhibits in her work provides a clear template for authorial intention. There is usually a paradigm between what we learn from the novel and what we know about the real author's world. While

reading Austen's work, one construes several images of the author (Le Faye 135).

But, different people, depending on their inclinations and other factors, form their own images that fit those inclinations, hampered by the distance of time and the complete transformation that has occurred in the social relationships between heterosexual men and women since Jane Austen's time.

Looking at Jane Austen's works, several images of the author appear, and several different perspectives arise among private readers as to who Jane Austen really was, and what she really stood for as an artist and as a social critic.

Jane Austen has staged parodist sensations that imbue her later novels with a gothic quality – an example is her novel *Northanger Abbey*. Issues within the novel border on gender and power.

For example, Catherine experiences several challenges in her life through the novel such that by the time she arrives at *Abbey*, she has really faced an array of issues. From this Austen manages to present a sustained fear and anxiety throughout her work (Wilde 156). In *Northanger Abbey*, there seems to be a greater connection between surprise and emotion.

Jane Austen has also employed dialogue as a means of endearing the reader to the outward reality. She has effectively used this at the proposal scene in the novel *Emma*. For instance, some of the lengthy dialogues usually act as

preludes to something about to happen (Wiltshire 132). A case in point is the quarrel that ensues after Harriet refuses Robert Martin (Austen 113).

Emma's behind the scenes manipulation shines herein; to hide her machinations, she maintains a calm disposition. This demonstrates Jane Austen's multidimensional approach towards style.

Jane Austen has also presented Emma Woodhouse in such a way that her appearance does not coincide with the revelation. Such an ironic nature of presentation is a distinctive mechanism through which Jane Austen exhibits her authorial intention and unique style.

Jane Austen has meticulously utilized the practice of free indirect discourse. Free indirect speech was a literary device created by Henry Fielding in the 18th century and used liberally by many novelists at that time.

Todd indicates that the free indirect speech allows the speech and the thoughts of the characters to socialize with the voice of the narrator (33). As a device, the use of free indirect discourse facilitates access to the interior psychology of the character without interrupting the social convention in place in the world of the novel.

This device allows authors to write about things that would never be spoken about – in essence – to delve into the private mind of the character. In a Jane Austen novel, much of the action remains implied, an element of authorial style that mimics the social confines of its characters – essentially – no one says what they really mean, because to do so would be social suicide.

Without free indirect discourse, much of the actions of the characters within Jane Austen's novels would be indecipherable for the reader.

As Neumann explains, "so much of an Jane Austen novel is apparently shown or dramatized rather than told or narrated, [thus] it becomes of particular interest not just to trace how Jane Austen reports the speech and thought of her characters but also to consider when and how judgments on the characters' consciousnesses are implied as well as stated" (364).

The stylistic device of free indirect discourse illustrates one example of how Jane Austen authenticates the consciousnesses of her characters. This device renders the interior workings of the characters' minds visible to only the reader and themselves.

As Neumann explains, free indirect discourse in a Jane Austen novel employs "sentences which combine a character's reported voice with the narrator's reporting voice, sentences in which the narrator can both render, and comment on, the utterance reported" (364). The net effect of this device brings the quality of mind to life for the reader; as such, the action becomes interior and subtle, implied and muted.

In one of her works, *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen extensively uses this approach. For example, Mrs. John Dashwood "did not endorse intends of her husband... to take three thousand pounds from the plight of their precious little boy... she begged him to think again on the subject..... how would he have answered to him to deny his child....." (20).

The extract draws a straightforward story in the “ voice” of the narrator. In this example, Jane Austen proves the inner feelings of the character and fixes the imagination the reader is entering the characters mind.

In the novel Emma, Jane Austen applies the stylistic device of free indirect discourse masterfully to develop the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley. As Bray notes, the use of free indirect discourse ensures that “ everything is presented through Emma’s dramatized consciousness, and the essential effects depend on that” (10).

In Emma, one of the clearest and most effective examples of free indirect discourse occurs when Emma and Harriet Smith discuss Mr. Knightley. Emma asks:

Have you any idea of Mr. Knightley’s returning your affection?

Yes, replied Harriet modestly, but not fearfully – I must say that I have.

Emma’s eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like her’s, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress.

She touched – she admitted – she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet’s having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself! (Austen 335)

In this passage, Jane Austen uses the free indirect discourse to plumb the depths of her main character's denial. In this one passage, the author peels away multiple layers of truth slowly and steadily, to reveal the romantic yearnings that Emma holds very close to her core, the element of her affection that she has revealed to no one thus far, not even herself.

In this regard, the power of this stylistic device is threefold – it reveals character intention, explains character action, and functions as a bond between reader and character. The stylistic use of free indirect discourse places the reader in the role of confidante. As Bray explains, in this example, “ here Harriet's supposedly reciprocated feelings for Knightley force Emma to acknowledge the truth of her own heart.

A few minutes of reflection are enough for revelation to be reached. Notice that the trajectory by which Emma arrives at the truth, from touching, to admitting, to acknowledging, is first described indirectly, from the vantage-point of an external narrator, and then presented more directly, as the narrative enters into her mind” (18).

Herein lies the value of free indirect discourse as a means of drawing out the interior social psychology not only of the character, but of the larger social world that Jane Austen's characters inhabit, in all its rigidity and artifice.

Bray notes that it is “ Emma who asks herself, Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? and Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope



of a return?" (18). Through free indirect discourse, the reader learns the truth at the same time as the character.

The device allows the character's consciousness to become a character independent to the social character witnessed in the novel, which in turn reflects the schism that occurs in the selves of the characters between their social personas and their actual selves.

As Bray notes, Emma's "consciousness could be said to be dramatized here if by this is understood the narrative's attempt to re-enact, rather than describe externally, the character's actual thought-processes. From Why was it so much worse onwards the reader is granted intimate access to Emma's thoughts and anxieties, leading up to her final moment of anagnorisis" (18).

In regard then, the style device of free indirect discourse functions as a means of granting access to the deep action of the story, as motivated by the deep and largely unconscious desires of the characters. This phenomenon explains why several scholars view Jane Austen as one of the foremost romantic novelists writing from a social psychology perspective.

A number of the characters in Jane Austen's novels remain susceptible to feminine beauty, and the author's stylistic choices to use this weakness for beautiful women as a distraction, particularly among the male characters in her novels, often begets surprisingly comedic results.

In her essay *An Argument about Beauty*, Susan Sontag notes that "beauty, it seems, is immutable, at least when incarnated – fixed – in the form of art,

because it is in art that beauty as an idea, an eternal idea, is best embodied. Beauty...is deep, not superficial; hidden, sometimes, rather than obvious; consoling, not troubling; indestructible, as in art, rather than ephemeral, as in nature.

Beauty, the stipulatively uplifting kind, perdures” (Sontag 208). A perfect example of this power occurs in the novel Emma.

Through the character of Mr. Knightley, Jane Austen give voice to all of the less than stellar qualities of her heroine – her peevishness, her inability to cease meddling in other people’s romantic affairs, her liberal enjoyment of manipulation of family and friends, and her lazy and indolent nature – not to mention the fact that her family, especially her father, spoiled her.

“ I, [Mr. Knightley] soon added, who have had no such charm thrown over my senses, must still see, hear, and remember.

Emma is spoiled by being the cleverest of her family. At ten years old, she had the misfortune of being able to answer questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen...And ever since she was twelve, Emma has been mistress of the house and of you all. In her mother she lost the only person able to cope with her” (Austen 48).

Yet, Mr. Knightley remains struck by Emma’s pulchritude, a weakness that Mrs. Weston appears perfectly willing to exploit, as evidenced in the following example:

Oh! You would rather talk of her person than her mind, would you? Very well; I shall not attempt to deny Emma's being pretty.

Pretty! Say beautiful rather. Can you imagine anything nearer perfect beauty than Emma altogether – face and figure?

I do not know what I could imagine, but I confess that I have seldom seen a face or figure more pleasing to me than hers (Austen 49)

The beauty of the heroines in Jane Austen's works functions as a distraction, the problematic element of sexual desire thrown into the mix. Physical beauty at that time in history remained one of a woman's most potent tools of power, and Jane Austen's protagonists typically wield it as a means to avoid any deep form of dialogue or authentic emotional intimacy.

A master of style, Jane Austen's work reveals the complex social machinations at the heart of the romantic dealings between men and women in the United Kingdom during the 18th century Regency Period. The author's effective use of the stylistic devices of irony and free indirect discourse draw the reader into the deep stratum of each character's psychology to reveal the personal motivations behind the action of the novels.

Jane Austen developed a style that could essentially tell the story that could not be told in the rigid social environment that her characters dwelled in. As such, Jane Austen's style reveals the individual's desires in conflict and opposition to the social conventions that restricted their use of language, particularly in the realm of romance.

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