

A Publication of the
JANE AUSTEN SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

Persuasions #13, 1991

Pages 50-

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**Free Indirect Discourse and the
 Clever Heroine of *Emma***

LOUISE FLAVIN

Department of English, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio 45221

Jane Austen's *Emma* begins by defining the central character's position within the family and within the larger community. Essentially an orphan, Emma Woodhouse is left alone with her invalid father when her governess and friend is married. In addition, Emma's sense of exclusivity isolates her from many of the families within the community of Highbury because, we are told, the Woodhouses "were first in consequence" and knew no equals (7). While Emma reigns as mistress of Hartfield, enjoying youth, beauty, intelligence, wealth, "a comfortable home and a happy disposition" (5), her position is threatened by the very superiority she values. Emma is in danger, we learn as the novel opens, of "suffering from intellectual solitude" (7). To compensate for this isolation, she attempts to set up a little set of friends separate from the larger community of which Hartfield is a part. In doing so, she almost ensures her own complete isolation because she fails to understand the need to share in the friendships of the community as a whole, especially the bond to the lowly Miss Bates.

Miss Bates has none of the gifts and privileges united in Emma Woodhouse, yet she enjoys immense popularity with links to representatives from all classes within Highbury. She is described in terms that invite comparison with Emma Woodhouse, as in this description early in the novel:

... she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. And yet she was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good-will. (21)

While Miss Bates is unlike Emma Woodhouse in most obvious ways, a comparison is suggested by the fact that she, like Emma, cares for an aging parent and has a happy and contented disposition. This comparison prepares us for Emma's growing obsession with Miss Bates and "her set," a rivalry that occupies Emma's mind as she attempts to fill her solitude with new companions drawn from the community. Emma's fault is not that she has too much imagination or that she exercises a power over people through her machinations, but that she attempts to set herself apart from the community. The greatest challenge to her desire for exclusivity is the more egalitarian Miss Bates, who is the model of communal spirit, who is welcomed into every home, and who "loved every body, was interested in every body's happiness" (21).

It is not surprising then that Emma is repeatedly the object of deflation through irony in the text. Our response is not, as Austen anticipated, dislike of Emma, but rather ironic distance.

Austen is able to control our response to Emma, Miss Bates, and the other Highbury characters through the careful manipulation of the modes of speech and thought renderings. By selecting free indirect discourse for speech and thoughts that reveal Emma's failures of perception or self-awareness, Austen comically undercuts the heroine, creating emotional, intellectual, even moral distance from her. Likewise, Austen uses free indirect speech to control our response to other characters in the novel whose emotional, intellectual, or moral development is incomplete or problematic in some way. Consistently, the narrator guides our response to the characters through the mode of speech presentation.

Free indirect discourse is a mode of speech or thought presentation that allows a narrator to recount what a character has said while retaining the idiomatic qualities of the speaker's words. Free indirect speech is often used to create the effect of heightened feelings, intensifying or dramatizing the character's words, unlike direct speech where the words of the speaker stand on their own without narrator involvement, exposing the speaker directly. The difference in effect is apparent in the passage that follows, where the narrator recounts what Mr. Woodhouse says upon discovering the Christmas Eve snowfall. His speech, rendered in free indirect form, is set off by brackets:

... not all that either could say could prevent some renewal of alarm at the sight of the snow which had actually fallen, and the discovery of a much darker night than he had been prepared for. ["He was afraid they should have a very bad drive. He was afraid poor Isabella would not like it. And there would be poor Emma in the carriage behind. He did not know what they had best do. They must keep as much together as they could;"] and James was talked to, and given a charge to go very slow and wait for the other carriage. (128)

This is readily identifiable as free indirect speech: the idiom is Mr. Woodhouse's ("poor Isabella" and "poor Emma" are his descriptions, not the narrator's), yet the lines are presented in third person with the tense of reporting, indicating that a narrator is telling us what Mr. Woodhouse said. And because no tag or introductory clause is attached to tell us "Mr. Woodhouse said that ..." the clause is considered free. Rewriting the passage as direct speech shows how the forms differ:

Mr. Woodhouse said with renewed alarm, "I am afraid we shall have a very bad drive. I am afraid poor Isabella will not like it, and there will be poor Emma in the carriage behind. I do not know what we had best do. We must keep as much together as we can."

In the original passage, rendered as free indirect speech, one can hear the over-cautious valetudinarian worrying over a half-inch snowfall. The passage rewritten as direct speech, while still showing his concern, sounds more reasonable, like a sensible man making arrangements for the safety of his daughters. Ann Banfield has noted that dialogue presented in free indirect form "is not understood as actual spoken words, but as words heard or perceived, registering on some consciousness" (31). In this case, the passage is reported as it must have sounded to Mr. Knightley and Mr. Weston, and the effect is a concentration of the absurdity of Mr. Woodhouse's fears. Because it is an echo of his words, not the words directly reported as he must have spoken them, a greater distance is put between Mr. Woodhouse and the reader.

A consistent pattern emerges in Jane Austen's novels of reporting speech in direct form when the appearance of greater authority is desired. Conversely, speech is presented in free indirect form to invite ridicule of a character. It is appropriate that Emma, the heroine most open to comic undercutting, should be given the greatest amount of any Austen heroine. As the scale below indicates, the characters receiving the largest amounts include the characters for whom readers feel the least sympathy or from whom the greatest intellectual, moral, or emotional distance is felt: Reverend and Mrs. Elton, Harriet Smith, Frank Churchill, Mr. Woodhouse, and Mr. Weston.

	<i>Distance</i> <i>Sympathy</i>										
	HS	FC	RevE	MrWo	MrW	AE	MrsW	MissB	JF	EW	GK
FIS	20	19	14	11	11	9	6	4	2	17	5

ABBREVIATIONS: HS—Harriet Smith; FC—Frank Churchill; RevE—Reverend Elton; MrWo—Mr. Woodhouse; MrW—Mr. Weston; AE—Augusta Elton; MrsW—Mrs. Weston; MissB—Miss Bates; JF—Jane Fairfax; EW—Emma Woodhouse; GK—George Knightley. FIS—Free indirect speech.

We would expect that Miss Bates, with her readily identifiable style of speaking, would receive a generous amount of free indirect speech, yet she is given relatively little, only four instances. While Miss Bates is a “great talker upon little matters” (21), her garrulity renders her ridiculous, while her “universal good-will” preserves our compassion. Her situation in life, so beneath Emma’s, should make her the object of Emma’s pity as well, but instead she is avoided by Emma, even insulted by her. Because Miss Bates draws the universal good wishes of the community, Emma’s sense of her own superiority in the Highbury community is challenged. Emma feels threatened further when the circle of friends surrounding Miss Bates is enlarged by the addition of her niece, Jane Fairfax, and the visitors who are drawn to their small apartments. Not only do Frank Churchill and the Westons, from Emma’s own special set, visit frequently, but Mr. Knightley offers enough attention to inspire the rumor that he might in fact be courting Jane. Stunned to hear this suggestion from Mrs. Weston, Emma responds by parodying Miss Bates’s way of speaking, ridiculing the connection that marriage to Jane Fairfax would bring. Presenting the passage as free indirect speech (in brackets) reinforces the mocking tone that Emma wishes to impart:

“... How would he bear to have Miss Bates belonging to him? – To have her haunting the Abbey, and thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane? – [‘so very kind and obliging! – But he always had been such a very kind neighbour!’] And then fly off, through half a sentence, to her mother’s old petticoat. [‘Not that it was such a very old petticoat either – for still it would last a great while – and, indeed, she must thankfully say that their petticoats were all very strong.’]” (225)

The maliciousness of the parody is in its calling attention to Miss Bates’s concern for thrift and trivia, but even more devastating is the mimicry of her excessive gratitude and good will. Miss Bates is ridiculous, but our empathy for Emma is undermined by her using her cleverness against a weak and vulnerable member of society. The narrator is more protective of Miss Bates, avoiding the ironic undercutting that free indirect speech would effect. The long, tedious, digressive speeches characterize her without narrator comment.

While Emma avoids visiting Miss Bates for fear of falling in with “the second rate and third rate of Highbury” (155), she is inconsistent in courting the favor of a young woman so decidedly beneath her as Harriet Smith. Harriet’s fault is her emotional and intellectual emptiness (Lauber 520). Rendering her speech in free indirect form on twenty occasions makes obvious the narrator’s attempt to effect distance. Often this free indirect speech is filtered through Emma, upon whose consciousness it registers. It increases the irony to know that “clever” Emma hears the vacuous speech of Harriet but does not seem to recognize her for the fool she is. It is a testimony to Emma’s imaginative powers that she can find Harriet companionable considering what she hears of her foolishness. In fact, by examining Emma’s thoughts about Harriet, it becomes obvious that she does know her limitations, but they are overlooked because Harriet is serviceable to her in providing diversion and expanding her set, which was diminished through the marriage of Miss Taylor. The following passage, for

instance, shows Emma's faulty logic as she gauges Harriet's value:

She was not struck by any thing remarkably clever in Miss Smith's conversation, but she found her altogether very engaging – not inconveniently shy, not unwilling to talk – and yet so far from pushing, shewing so proper and becoming a deference, seeming so pleasantly grateful for being admitted to Hartfield, and so artlessly impressed by the appearance of every thing in so superior a style to what she had been used to, that she must have good sense and deserve encouragement. (23-24)

This passage serves several functions. It reinforces our own judgment of Harriet, that she is not "remarkably clever." It provides the motive for Emma's taking on the admiring protegee in that Harriet will defer to Emma and be grateful, paying court to her in her kingdom of Hartfield. But most important, the passage tells us how Emma's logic can be distorted; the thoughts are in free indirect form, used against Emma as the narrator gathers together the most telling phrases to undermine the cleverness Emma believes she uses in making the arguments for encouraging the acquaintance with Harriet.

In contrast, Emma avoids friendship with Jane Fairfax, because to do so would mean involving herself in Miss Bates's set. Even though Jane Fairfax would provide an equal match in intelligence and accomplishments, to be her friend would mean she would defer to Miss Bates and the circle of friends who gather around her. When Emma examines her own feelings concerning her acquaintance with Jane, the free indirect speech collects together arguments that must have been made at different times over many years to Mr. Knightley and others. By bringing them together in one passage, the narrator effectively undermines their sincerity and honesty:

"she could never get acquainted with her: she did not know how it was, but there was such coldness and reserve – such apparent indifference whether she pleased or not – and then, her aunt was such an eternal talker! – and she was made such a fuss with by every body! – and it had been always imagined that they were to be so intimate – because their ages were the same, every body had supposed they must be so fond of each other." These were her reasons – she had no better. (166-67)

Excuses for bad behavior always appear more unconvincing when registered in free indirect form, perhaps because someone else, the narrator in this case, is repeating the words to a reader. When the character speaks directly, the effect is usually believability because no one stands between the character and the reader. The narrator's presence is obvious here: the repetition of *such* four times, of *so* two times, and the overused coordination – *and* appears three times – give a feeling of excess that points to the narrator's arrangement and selection, undermining Emma's attempt to explain away the jealousy she feels toward the "so very accomplished and superior" Jane Fairfax (104). Emma's jealousy is exposed by the rendering of her words as free indirect speech, although reader empathy is not diminished greatly. As Dorrit Cohn points out, even an impersonal narrator shows commitment to irony or sympathy through the use of free indirect discourse (what Cohn calls narrated monologue):

Precisely because they cast the language of a subjective mind into the grammar of objective narration, they amplify emotional notes, but also throw into ironic relief all false notes struck by a figural mind. (117)

Cohn notes that a narrator may "exploit both possibilities, even with the same character" (117). Emma's sincerity and honesty are often sympathetically felt by a reader – when she admits fault, for instance, or expresses her feelings for her father – but as in the examples above, the falsity of her excuses and evasions are equally obvious, resulting in reader detachment.

Just as free indirect thought renderings are a means to undermining the character's sense of her own cleverness, so is her free indirect speech, which is uncommonly prolific for an Austen

heroine. Her insincerity in courting the favor of Mr. Elton in hopes of his proposing marriage to Harriet Smith is revealed through several passages of free indirect speech. In fact, Emma's speech when talking to Mr. Elton is seldom presented in direct form, resulting in a reader's sense of the dishonesty of her words. Likewise, the reader becomes suspicious of Mr. Elton's remarks, rendered as free indirect speech in about equal amounts with his direct speech. By limiting the amount of his direct speech, the narrator keeps the focus on Emma since free indirect speech conveys the dual perspective of the speaker and its effect on a listener. As with Harriet's speech, what Mr. Elton says is often of less importance than how it registers with Emma. This passage, filled with gallantries and evasions, is purportedly Mr. Elton's compliment to Harriet and her portrait, but in fact the honor is all Emma's:

“Might he be trusted with the commission, what infinite pleasure should he have in executing it! he could ride to London at any time. It was impossible to say how much he should be gratified by being employed on such an errand.”

Emma's response is equally duplicitous, comically undermining her clever plot to secure Mr. Elton for Harriet:

“He was too good! – she could not endure the thought! – she would not give him such a troublesome office for the world” – brought on the desired repetition of entreaties and assurances, – and a very few minutes settled the business. (49)

While it is glaringly obvious to readers that Elton wishes to pay homage to Miss Woodhouse, she believes she has cleverly manipulated him into the service of Harriet. The reader has a feeling of mistrust not only because of what Elton says but also because of how it is relayed to us.

While free indirect speech alone does not create distance, in Austen's novels it reinforces the reader's sense that a character is untrustworthy in some way. Frank Churchill's speech is rendered in free indirect form on nineteen occasions – second only to Harriet Smith, who is granted the greatest amount of any Austen character. While Harriet's simplicity creates intellectual distance, Frank's duplicity leads to emotional and moral distance as well.

While free indirect speech is used to undermine the characters whose speech is in some way untrustworthy, Austen conversely avoids it in rendering the speech of the most reliable characters. Mr. Knightley is the standard of good judgment and trustworthiness in the novel, so it is not surprising that his speech is rarely rendered in free indirect form. That Jane Austen was aware of the effect that free indirect speech has on a reader's response to a character is obvious when we examine an instance when Mr. Knightley begins a mockery of a character in free indirect style. Earlier we saw that Emma mimicked Miss Bates's way of speaking to ridicule her possible connection to Mr. Knightley. Mrs. Weston even reprimands Emma by saying, “For shame, Emma! Do not mimic her. You divert me against my conscience ...” (225), an indication of the novelist's awareness of the comic potential of free indirect speech. But when Mr. Knightley has an opportunity to mock Mr. Elton after having read his letter announcing his engagement to Miss Hawkins, Knightley acts the true gentleman and refrains from the mockery inherent in recounting the speaker's words exactly:

“It was short, merely to announce – but cheerful, exulting, of course.” Here was a sly glance at Emma. “He had been so fortunate as to – I forget the precise words – one has no business to remember them. The information was, as you state, that he was going to be married to a Miss Hawkins. By his style, I should imagine it just settled.” (174)

After an indirect summary of the letter's tone, Knightley continues with what would have been, had he completed it, a mimicry of the writer's style and ridicule of Mr. Elton. But it is not in

Knightley's nature to mock a man for the entertainment of others, and he discontinues the passage, saying, "I forget the precise words." This passage intimates that Jane Austen, too, knew how one's words can be used, when mimicked, as ridicule. The message is the same, but Mr. Elton would have been made to look ridiculous by having his exact words recounted to the company listening.

Later, the narrator relates the particulars of Mr. Elton's courtship as he must have done to Mrs. Cole, repeating the clichéd terms he used to describe the affair. The effect is ridicule because the free indirect speech concentrates the "sort of parade in his speeches" (82) that had earlier made Emma laugh. The narrator remembers "the precise words," and, unlike Mr. Knightley, repeats them to scorn Mr. Elton and Miss Hawkins.

Much later in the novel, when Jane Fairfax confesses to Mrs. Weston her error in engaging herself secretly to Frank Churchill, Mrs. Weston relates her confession to Emma in first person as if Jane were actually speaking the words herself. Normally, we would expect a third person recounting of her comments, but when Mrs. Weston relates them in Jane's first person voice, she retains the sincerity, honesty, and authority of the speaker and preserves our sympathy.

Just as Mr. Knightley exhibits self-control in not repeating Mr. Elton's proposals, so Emma garners our sympathy when she controls her wit and sarcasm in situations that must greatly test her powers of restraint. Some of the empathy we feel for Emma comes from the knowledge that she is in fact superior to many of those around her: Miss Bates and Mr. Weston, for instance, her own father, and especially Mrs. Elton whose ramblings reveal at every turn her self-importance and bad taste. That Emma controls her speech and restrains from verbal sparring and insults is a testimony to her good judgment and overall good will. However, readers share the perspective of her thoughts on many occasions when she is mean-spirited or wrong in judgment, often rendered as direct thought. Just as direct speech is generally free of narrator bias toward either distance or sympathy, so direct thought, which purports to be the thoughts of the character formulated into words by the narrator, is conventionally believed to be free of editorializing and commentary. That so many of Emma's thoughts are rendered directly would indicate that the narrator is allowing the reader direct access to her mind, while refraining from the implicit commentary that free indirect thought would carry.

As these examples of free indirect discourse reveal, the craft of Jane Austen's fiction has reached a very sophisticated level in the novel *Emma*. While it is not possible to know if Austen was consciously aware of free indirect discourse as a stylistic device, there appears to be striking evidence that she understood its significance as a means of controlling the reader's sense of distance from characters. Emma's position within the community of Highbury – her distance from its center and her closeness to her own set – corresponds with how closely readers ally with her thoughts and words. Near the end of the novel Emma fears that Knightley may have involved himself with Harriet, and that such a match would mean the desertion of two more of her friends from Hartfield. At this point, her lowest in the novel, she fears that she and her father will be left alone, her circle of friends diminished to just themselves:

If all took place that might take place among the circle of her friends, Hartfield must be comparatively deserted; and she left to cheer her father with the spirits only of ruined happiness. (422)

Emma goes on to acknowledge that should her foreboding prove true, it would have been "all her own work" (423). Emma's realization, shared with the reader as sympathetic free indirect thought, is that she has been responsible for the loss of friendships, that her attempts to rival the circle of friends set up by Miss Bates and the town, her exclusivity, may have in fact determined her own exclusion. However, Mr. Knightley does not marry Harriet Smith, and the heroine so used to the best treatment is married to Knightley herself, a ceremony witnessed by "a small band of true friends" (484). The final word of the novel is "union," and perhaps the lesson our heroine has learned is that the greatest cleverness can best be exercised, not in solitude, but

among the best and truest friends.

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