

Austenesque: A Study of Free Indirect Speech in Jane Austen's Works
and Its Benefits as a Style of Narration

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Out of all the notable female writers that have ever laid pen to paper, few can claim to have incited as much debate and feeling as Jane Austen. She has inspired enough reverence to accumulate a following of Janeites, and sparked dislike in such an extreme that Mark Twain once famously wrote that when reading *Pride & Prejudice*, he wanted to dig up Austen and beat her with her own shin bone. Skipping over the mental image of Mark Twain violently attacking Jane Austen's skeleton with her own fibula, it is not a stretch to say that Jane Austen is a writer whom most scholars form an opinion on, and upon which almost none of those opinions seem to agree.

In comparison to the large amount of discussion about what Jane Austen wrote and why, the level of discussion on how she wrote is very little. Austen's mode of third-person narration is distinct enough to coin the phrase "Austen-esque", a phrase whose definition I have endeavored to discover on my own after a peer described my own narration style as Austenesque.

To understand why Austen's narration is so distinct, the method and style of narration in which she wrote must be understood. Austen wrote in a little-known and not-often-used method of third-person narration called free indirect speech. Free Indirect Speech (FIS) is a distinct kind of third-person narration which seamlessly slips in and out of a character's consciousness while still being presented by the third-person narrator. Other names for it are the French *discours indirect libre*, the Spanish *estilo indirecto libre*, and the German *erlebte Rede*. Linguistically, FIS separates the character's thoughts or speech from the clause that would directly tie the character to them as a subject while still discoursing in the tone and viewpoint of the character. Roy Pascal presents the differences between this mode of narration using the following examples:

1. *oratio recta* (direct speech): He stopped and said to himself, “Is that the car I saw here yesterday?”
2. *oratio obliqua* (indirect speech): He stopped and asked himself if that was the car he had seen there the day before.
3. [FIS¹]: He stopped. Was that the car he had seen here yesterday?

Pascal goes on to distinguish these forms of narration from each other, and pays particular attention to the distinctions of FIS and how it uses tense and grammar in comparison to direct and indirect speech. He writes:

“This third type has the syntactical form of a normal authorial report, as we find it in simple indirect speech, and the second part of it is grammatically identical with No.2. That is, in place of the first person and the present tense of direct speech, both the other forms have the third person and the past tense ('he' for 'I', 'was' for 'is'). But the second part of No. 3 is clearly not a question posed by the author to a reader; it is directed by the character 'he' to himself. In our example, the deictic adverbs 'here' and 'yesterday' both clearly inform us that the question asked reflects the situation, in time and place, of the character, and hence must emanate from the character, not the author. [...] The simplest description of No. 3 would be that the narrator, through preserving the authorial mode

1 Early on, Pascal distinguishes that Charles Bally was the first to recognize FIS as a distinct narrative style and give it a name. Pascal defines this example not as FIS, but as “free indirect style” as Charles Bally would have defined it had Bally written it in English.

throughout and evading the 'dramatic' form of speech or dialogue, yet places himself, when reporting the words or thoughts of a character, directly into the experiential field of the character, and adopts the latter's perspective in regard to both time and place.”

Pascal here acknowledges the benefits of FIS as a style of narration. The narrator is allowed to insert himself directly into the character's experience, sponging up the latter's perspective, tone, and inner reality, but can still report these personal thoughts and dialogue without breaking the narrator's authority. It's all the benefits of third-person narration with the additional closeness and inclusion of character tone that first-person narration provides. It is strange to me that this mode of narration is not used more often, considering that it includes the “best of both worlds”, so to speak.

The emotional reactions and opinions of a character can be given impartially by the narrator by using FIS. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen writes:

“They [Elizabeth's family] were hopeless of remedy. Her father, contented with laughing at them, would never exert himself to restrain the wild giddiness of his younger daughters; and her mother, with manners so far from right herself, was entirely insensible of the evil. Elizabeth had frequently united with Jane in an endeavor to check the imprudence of Catherine and Lydia; but while they were supported by their mother's indulgence, what chance could there be of improvement? Catherine, weak-spirited, irritable, and completely under Lydia's guidance, had been always affronted by their advice; and Lydia, self-willed and careless, would scarcely give them a hearing. They

were ignorant, idle, and vain. While there was an officer in Meryton, they would flirt with him; and while Meryton was within a walk of Longbourn, they would be going there forever.”

This entire paragraph is written in third-person narration, but the narrator is telling us the information with Elizabeth's opinions and feelings on the subject. Just before this passage, Elizabeth has read Darcy's letter and has had her prejudices and incorrect assumptions laid out for her to gawk at, so Austen has already established that Elizabeth's opinions are not always the most accurate. If the same information were given from Elizabeth's viewpoint, the reader would be more inclined to associate her prejudices with it, particularly because of Elizabeth's tendency to judge indiscriminately. Thus, direct speech would have rendered this entire paragraph as unreliable, and perhaps even ironic or hypocritical. With the narrator claiming these things about the family's character, the authoritative tone asserts them as facts, not just as opinions of the naturally prejudiced Elizabeth.

The style of Austen's prose is as elegant, sophisticated, and structurally complex as the society she is rendering. The intricate layers of association and social connection which permeate Austen's novels and drive much of the conflict concerning inheritance and marriage are mirrored in the complexity of the plots and relationships which Austen renders, and also echo in the language itself. Each character has his or her natural and distinct voice, of course, but most characters have a tendency for complex sentences or even complex subtle silences.

Austen's natural dialogue style, which was typical of her era, is similar to that of her characters. This means that her third-person narrator is bound with this verbal common ground.

It is these similarities in speech that facilitate the relaxed, flawless mobility with which the narrator is able to assimilate each character's experiences and display them through FIS. The closer the voice and mode of speech of the narrator is to the voice and mode of speech of his subjects, the greater the ease in which the narrator may operate within their experiences. It also loans some reliability and authenticity to the style of voice.

For example, in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, the two main female characters have wildly different voices and opinions. Elinor, the eldest, is mindful of social restraints, has self-control in abundance, and favors rational thinking over impulsive emotional reactions. Marianne, the middle child, is a Romantic in the truest sense. She is quick to form strong opinions, and even quicker to voice them. She is heartfelt in all that she does, both for good and for ill, and is affected as much by her emotions as any one human being could be. The two sisters are, as Marilyn Butler so aptly says, "professors of two opposing creeds." (Butler, 189) Elinor is controlled, disciplined, and "learnt" in the fact that she understands all the nuances of society, and Marianne is natural, expressive, and untamed. There the pillars stand, dividing the sisters into the sophisticated individual, and the natural one. Jane Austen's use of FIS allows her narrator to slide into and out of each sister's mind without tainting the narrative. For example, in chapter 19 of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen gives us these two paragraphs which concern themselves with the same subject (Elinor's behavior after Edward leaves) through each sister's unique perspective.

"Elinor sat down to her drawing-table as soon as he was out of the house, busily employed herself the whole day, neither sought nor avoided the mention of his name,

appeared to interest herself almost as much as ever in the general concerns of the family, and if, by this conduct, she did not lessen her own grief, it was at least prevented from unnecessary increase, and her mother and sisters were spared much solicitude on her account.

Such behavior as this, so exactly the reverse of her own, appeared no more meritorious to Marianne, than her own had seemed faulty to her. The business of self-command she settled very easily – with strong affections it was impossible, with calm ones it could have no merit. That her sister's affections were calm, she dared not deny, though she blushed to acknowledge it; and of the strength of her own, she gave a very striking proof, by still loving and respecting that sister, in spite of this mortifying conviction.”

The free indirect speech here is found in such phrases as “spread much solicitude” and “mortifying conviction.” It is Elinor's opinion that her family is spared from worry by her actions; on the contrary, her mother and sisters continue to be hyper-aware of her and Edward, and he is their chief concern for her. It is Marianne's opinion that Elinor is unaffected and apathetic, and it is her opinion that such feelings are mortifying and shameful. These paragraphs, these opinions and viewpoints, are strikingly dissimilar, but the free narrator may slide from one to the other without compromising what is actually going on with poor Elinor.

Precise use of FIS is what allows Austen to seamlessly transition from character to character, as previously shown. But what it also allows, and here I must open that dreadful can of worms, is a certain level of irony. Whether or not Austen is ironic or not, whether she is a satirist or not: these are not questions which I will contend with in this paper. But there is undoubtedly

irony in Austen's writing: Mrs. Ferrars' pleasant treatment of Lucy Steele while snubbing Elinor (the reader knows that Lucy Steele is the real threat to Mrs. Ferrars), Anne Steele's careless comments about Lucy and Elinor's beaux (the reader knows they are the same person), and even the passage above, in which Elinor and Marianne both do exactly what the opposite would find appropriate, and think themselves kinder and more considerate than the other (the reader knows that they are actually embarrassing one another with their actions). What FIS allows in this regard is again, that seamless transition of opinion while maintaining the narrator's distance, which highlights the ridiculousness of the viewpoints of the characters.

With FIS, the relationship between the narrator and the characters is blurred; the narrator is almost spirit-like, floating the reader in and out of character's mindsets without ever losing the narrator's authority. For the reader, this is a mixed bag. On one hand, the reader is given all the benefits of a third-person narration such as different character viewpoints and more expansive experiences, but also receives the more personal benefits that a first-person narration would provide: intimacy with the character, a clear understanding of character tone, and the ability to experience the character's innermost reality. On the other hand, FIS can be difficult to swim through; the thoughts and dialogue are not directly tagged to the character, which can lead to some murky moments. For example, during Mrs. John Dashwood's diatribe against her husband, John Dashwood, giving his half-sisters the money which his father begged him to, Austen's use of FIS vacillates so quickly from thought to speech that it reads very strangely, which ends in “a failure, very rare in Jane Austen, to use FIS with precision.” (Pascal, 48) This is a downside to FIS: the versatility it allows can quickly turn into a bit of a sloppy mess as far as narration goes. Speech, thought, opinion and voice can all be blended into a kind of indistinct slurry, which is

why precision is so necessary.

As I have previously stated, it is strange to me that FIS is not more commonly utilized in modern day literature. I am aware that the modern reader is no longer enchanted with the authoritative voice of a narrator, and that primarily first-person and third-person-limited points of view are in vogue at the moment. But considering how FIS blends the benefits of third-person authority and first-person character intimacy, I am surprised that it has not been played with more often in modern literature. Perhaps modern readers really are too tired of going through a narrator to get to the story, but I think if done correctly, FIS can be used without too strong of a narrator tone.

I have, in my personal works, attempted to reconcile FIS with my own writing. Distinct character voice is a key component in everything I write, but my own natural narrative voice is also very distinct. My voice, and my narrator's voice, often accidentally bully my character's voices out of the way. How then, to reconcile a "loud" narrator with a "loud" character? The answer appeared to be FIS. The latest and most difficult challenge I have faced as a writer is this question of voice reconciliation.

My most recent work (still in progress) dealt with this question rather strongly; I was caught between a third-person omniscient narrator, and the main character, Dominic "Saltshaker" Frederickson, telling the tale in third person after the events had been done. I enjoyed the tragedy of the character telling his own tale, particularly because his disjointed, distant, and critical voice lent an interesting and distinct color to the narrative itself, but there was necessary information in the story that he could not possibly know. I needed exactly what FIS provided: a way to tint the

tale with Dominic's unique voice and perspective, but still retain the omniscience and authority of a narrator. I developed a sort of translucent narrator who provided information Dominic could not possibly know, but still presented all information in a way that was characteristic to Dominic and his viewpoints. As a man with schizotypal personality disorder, it was imperative that his viewpoint on the world be distinct and solid in order for the reader to understand why he did the things he did.

Another benefit that FIS provided in this regard was establishing a good distance between the character and the reader. To tell the story in the first person was impossible. Schizotypal personality disorder is characterized by a lack of emotional connection with others, so to force the reader directly into his mind and force the character to be that intimate with them would have read as false, forced, and uncomfortable. The reader needed to be close enough that Dominic was confiding in them, but not close enough that they were completely immersed in his experience. There needed to be distance, and third-person created that. However, a third-person narrator completely disconnected the reader from Dominic's voice, which is an integral part of his character. Again, FIS provided the perfect balance.

There are many different methods of narration, and many different authors who utilize them in unique and fascinating ways. Although Jane Austen is hardly the only writer to ever use free indirect speech², she is the writer whose work first introduced me to it and has been most instrumental in my own exploration of FIS and what exactly “Austenese” narration is. I feel that although this method of narration may not be particularly in line with the flavors of modern literature, it is still a valuable method and ought to be explored, for the transient preferences of

2 Though she may be the first to characterize it and use it as a consistent style – for more, read Pascal.

the modern age should not restrict the tools and modes by which a writer communicates.

For all the controversy and chaos which surrounds her, her life, and her stories, Jane Austen is undoubtedly an important literary figure. Not only what she wrote, but how she wrote, remains as a testimony to her distinct stylistic approach and her own personal abilities. Austen's methods of third-person narration are not only distinct, unique, and well-known enough to coin the term "Austenique", but are also seamless and definitive enough to serve as a wonderful example of free indirect speech, illuminating what that kind of style can do for an author. It is accomplishments and creative writing like this that exemplify little-known tools of story-making, which serve as guide posts to future generations of writers.

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