

Context Corner: Free Indirect Discourse in Emma

Also referred to as “free indirect speech,” “free indirect style,” “*style indirect libre*,” “*erlebte Rede*,” “narrated monologue,” and “represented speech and thought,” **free indirect discourse** is one of the most commonly studied narrative techniques in literary studies.

from **Gerald Prince**, *Dictionary of Narratology*:

Free Indirect Discourse: “A type of discourse representing a character’s utterances or thoughts. Free indirect discourse...has the grammatical traits of ‘normal’ indirect discourse, but it does not involve a tag clause (‘he said that,’ ‘she thought that’) introducing and qualifying the represented utterances and thoughts. Furthermore, it manifests at least some of the features of the character’s enunciation (some of the features normally associated with the discourse of a character presented directly, with a first person’s as opposed to a third person’s discourse.)” (Prince 1978)

from **Daniel Gunn**, “Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in *Emma*”:

“FID in Austen functions primarily as an imitation of figural speech or thought, in which the narrator echoes or mimics the idiom of the character for the purposes of the fiction. In this sense, the continuing presence of the narrator suggested by the third-person references is crucial, since the imitating voice inevitably reinfects and modifies the language it imitates” (Gunn 37).

from **Dorrit Cohn**, *Transparent Minds*:

-narrated monologue → “the technique for rendering a character’s thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and basic tense of narration” (Cohn 494)

quoted monologue

(He thought:) I am late
(He thought:) I was late
(He thought:) I will be late

quoted monologue

“Insufferable woman!” was her immediate exclamation. “Worse than I had supposed. Absolutely insufferable! Knightley!—I could not have believed it. Knightley!—never seen him in her life before, and call him Knightley!—and discover that he is a gentleman!” (259)

narrated monologue

He was late
He had been late
He would be late

narrated monologue (free indirect discourse)

Perhaps it was not fair to expect him to feel how very much he was her inferior in talent, and all the elegancies of mind. The very want of such equality might prevent his perception of it; but he must know that in fortune and consequence she was greatly his superior. (129)

psycho-narration

He knew he was late
He knew he had been late
He knew he would be late

psycho-narration

She had frequently thought—especially since his father’s marriage to Miss Taylor—that if she *were* to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition. He seemed by this connection between the families, quite to belong to her. She could not but suppose it to be a match that everybody who knew them must think of. (112-113)

from **Jane Spencer, “Narrative Technique: Austen and Her Contemporaries”:**

“In free indirect discourse, a text’s dominant narrative style (typically third-person and past tense) incorporates, for brief snatches or longer passages, words emanating from a particular character, without such tags as ‘he said’ or ‘she thought’ to make their attributions explicit. Character and narrator momentarily merge and move apart again” (186).

History of the Use of FID in Fiction: Growth of the technique is associated with the novel’s transition from first person (esp. epistolary) modes to 3rd person narrative through the end of the eighteenth century. There are different histories of FID based on English, French, German traditions of studying the technique, but in English literature it is primarily associated with Austen as an early practitioner. However, uses of FID can be seen in Henry Fielding, Frances Burney, Anne Radcliffe, and Walter Scott, among others.

A (Very) Brief History of the English Novel:

1688 – Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, Or the Royal Slave* (third person)

1719 – Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (first person)

1740 – Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (epistolary)

1749 – Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (third person)

1778 – Frances Burney, *Evelina* (epistolary)

1794 – Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (third person)

1811 – Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (third person)

1814 – Walter Scott, *Waverley* (third person)

1815/6 – Jane Austen, *Emma* (third person)

Discussion questions:

- 1) Look through the passages included below. Which of these passages use free indirect discourse? What other narrative techniques are being used? What signals you to the use of FID?
- 2) What is the effect of having two perspectives included in the same passage (or even the same sentence)? Can a third person narrator be seen as truly objective if it is drifting in and out of another character’s consciousness?
- 3) Most of the examples of free indirect discourse included in both the talk and the handout are passages in which FID is used for representing Emma’s perspective. What effect does FID have on the novel as a whole when it is predominantly used to help the audience better understand the protagonist?
 - a. Can you think of any moments in the novel where the narrative takes on another character’s thoughts and mode of speaking?
 - b. Do you think that the effect rendered by FID changes when we see events or characters through another character’s (unfiltered) perspective?
- 4) How does the use of free indirect discourse in *Emma* affect the characteristically ironic tone that we tend to associate with Austen’s narrators? Do you think that the use of FID makes the narrative voice easier to relate to than a more “objective” omniscient narrator?

Passages from *Emma* for Discussion:

- 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. Encouragement should be given. Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her. (24).
- Yes, good man!—thought Emma—but what has all of that to do with taking likenesses? You know nothing of drawing. Don't pretend to be in raptures about mine. Keep your raptures for Harriet's face. (42)
- She had frequently thought—especially since his father's marriage to Miss Taylor—that if she *were* to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition. He seemed by this connection between the families, quite to belong to her. She could not but suppose it to be a match that everybody who knew them must think of. (112-113)
- The carriages came: and Mr. Woodhouse, always the first object on such occasions, was carefully attended to his own by Mr. Knightley and Mr. Weston; but 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. (122)
- The hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think and be miserable.—It was a wretched business, indeed!—Such an overthrow of every thing she had been wishing for!—Such a development of every thing most unwelcome!—Such a blow for Harriet!—That was the worst of all. Every part of it brought pain and humiliation, of some sort or other; but, compared with the evil to Harriet, all was light; and she would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistaken—more in error—more disgraced by mis-judgment, than she actually was, could the effects of her blunders have been confined to herself. (127)
- Small heart had Harriet for visiting. Only half an hour before her friend called for her at Mrs Goddard's, her evil stars had led her to the very spot where, at that moment, a trunk, directed to *The Rev. Philip Elton, White-Hart, Bath*, was to be seen under the operation of being lifted into the butcher's cart, which was to convey it to where the coaches past; and every thing in this world, excepting that trunk and the direction, was consequently a blank. (175)
- Oh! had she never brought Harriet forward! Had she left her where she ought, and where he had told her she ought!—Had she not, with a folly which no tongue could express, prevented her marrying the unexceptionable young man who would have made her happy and respectable in the line of life to which she ought to belong—all would have been safe; none of this dreadful sequel would have been. (387)
- The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own.—“Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful

business!—Selina would stare when she heard of it.”—But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union. (453)

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