Title

Jane Austen’s Role in the Development of Free Indirect Discourse

Abstract

Free indirect discourse (FID) is a form of narration in which the tone and inflection of an individual character replace the narrator's objective, omniscient perspective. Regency novelist Jane Austen (1775-1817) is an important figure in the development of this narrative technique. In my thesis I plan to investigate the stylistic legacy of free indirect discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel. To do so I will focus on Austen and use her work as a basis of comparison between the literary styles that came immediately before and after she wrote. I will answer the question – What is Jane Austen’s role in the history of free indirect discourse?

Statement of the Problem

FID can only be found in novels written in which there is an omniscient, third person narrator. Novels that have FID focus on the interiority of characters because this style of narration involves examining the consciousness of the individual. FID offers readers a more intimate view of a character’s thoughts and feelings. As readers we are able to feel the characters’ bliss, and their sadness, more keenly because it is described in their own words.

In her novels Austen defines FID. Austen’s use of this narrative style is an essential characteristic of her work. She is the first British author to use FID extensively. Free indirect discourse (FID) is “the major formal innovation in eighteenth-century fiction and, for this reason, the achievements of Austen in the novel could even be compared with those of Wordsworth in poetry” (Skinner 261).
Trying to pinpoint the origins of FID in the rise of the novel is too ambitious a project for an undergraduate thesis. As I said in my abstract, I will focus on Austen’s place in the development of FID. What is Jane Austen’s role in the history of free indirect discourse? Through my research I aim to discover how Austen’s use of FID is different and similar to the way in which FID appears within the novel genre. This seemingly straightforward question immediately leads to a fascinating vein of literary theory. How often and in what way does FID appear in works that preceded Austen? How did Austen, and her particular brand of FID, influence the narrative styles of authors in the next generation?

In order to address these questions I will concentrate on the examples of FID provided by Austen’s novels. I will also include a comparative study of the appearance of FID in four other significant novelistic contributions to the canon, two before Austen, and two after.

Previous Work

Many critics have analyzed FID in Austen’s work. Their studies are often filtered through specific schools of literary thought. Feminist critics are interested in the gender of the voice telling the story; they ask why certain characters are given narrative precedence over others. Margaret Kirkham analyzes Austen from a feminist perspective in her book *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. Critics interested in phenomenology, the philosophical study of the awareness of existence, and epistemology, the study of human knowledge, delve into the abstract and seek to discover in what way FID changes the reality of the world Austen creates for her characters. In his book, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* Harry E. Shaw studies the connection between narrative styles and
realism. Some examine FID in Austen as a rhetorical device; they search for the significance of how a story is told. Critic Joe Bray makes an interesting connection between Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novels and the development of FID in his article, “The Source of ‘Dramatized Consciousness’: Richardson, Austen, and Stylistic Influence.” He observes letter writing naturally leads to FID because you are your own narrator, but an event in the past is often described in what could be considered third person narration. Studying critical texts such as these would allow me to develop a strong and varied understanding of how Austen and FID is interpreted in the literary world.

Although I had previously read all six of Austen’s novels, I became more familiar with her work last semester in Robyn Warhol’s seminar, “The Novels of Jane Austen.” In my seminar paper I explored the link between FID and irony. The scenario of the reader sympathizing with the characters, yet knowing more than they do, is the ideal environment from which Austen’s famous irony stems. I am fortunate to begin my thesis with a comprehensive familiarity of FID in Austen’s body of work. Having studied closely the themes, formal techniques, and criticism of her writing provides me with an already strong knowledge of the focus of my thesis.

**Significance**

Several critics have independently studied Austen’s FID, but surprisingly few have compared her distinct form of the style to that of other authors. This thesis would lead to a more cohesive understanding of FID. My work would be a valuable contribution to the legacy of literary studies.
I have already established what FID is and what I intend to do in my thesis, clearly there remains one more significant question worth addressing: Why is style important? The way a book is written, or the way a story is told, affects how one reacts to literature. Many people have interesting things to say; few however have the talent to say them well. Literary theories are often intangible, and revolve around abstract concepts and ideas. I say this not to dismiss the importance of examining the historical context out of which an author came, but to make it clear that badly written books are not studied at all. Style is something with which one can identify because it is concrete. Anything can interest someone to pick up a novel, a flashy cover, interesting subject, or a peer recommendation, but if one cannot become involved in the telling of the story, than that novel is quickly cast away. The social implications and historical context of a book can be easily forgotten if the narration is stunted and the images are bleak. Studying why one particular way of writing captivates the mind while another fails to evoke any reaction leads to a greater comprehension of human emotive response.

Proposed Methodology

My thesis will be divided into three sections. In the first I will illustrate in what way Austen used FID. That is to say, how it affected the connection to the reader, why FID was more poignant in a particular passage as opposed to objective narration, and how FID alters the reality of a character’s world. The second section will focus on FID in two authors who precede Austen in the canon. I have selected Samuel Richardson’s (1689-1761) Sir Charles Grandison and Susanna Rowson’s (1762-1824) Charlotte Temple as examples of novels that were written before Austen. Section three will focus
on the appearance of FID in two Victorian novels; *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1857-1876), and Charles Dickens’ (1812-1870) *Our Mutual Friend*.

In Austen’s letters she admits that Richardson was an important stylistic influence. Novels of romance, such as, *Charlotte Temple* were popular reading while Austen lived, and there is also clear evidence that she was an avid reader of this type of fiction. The novel as a genre gained a new respect in the Victorian era and I will look for Austen’s narrative technique in the work of Dickens and Eliot. During biweekly meetings with professor Warhol, I will discuss my observations and complete a five-page thought paper for each novel that will allow me to organize my thoughts and reflections. These essays will facilitate the writing process and prevent confusion as I become more involved with each new novel.

**Timeline**

- September 25, 2002 – Begin reading *Charlotte Temple*
- October 1, 2002 - Thesis proposal submitted
- October 9 – Finish *Charlotte Temple*, submit first thought paper
- October 10 – Begin *Sir Charles Grandison*
- October 25- Finish *Sir Charles Grandison*, submit second thought paper
- October 28 – Begin *Middlemarch*
- November 13 – Finish *Middlemarch*, submit third thought paper
- November 14 – Begin *Our Mutual Friend*
- December 2 – Finish *Our Mutual Friend*, submit fourth thought paper

-During winter break I plan to study various literary essays that would support, or negate, my own discoveries within the texts. As well as begin writing the first section of my thesis.

- January 17, 2003- Hand in section one draft to Warhol
- January 25 – Receive comments on section one from Warhol
- January 31- Begin writing section two draft
February 14 – Hand in section two to Warhol
February 21- Receive comments on section two from Warhol
February 28- Begin writing section three draft
March 14 – Turn in final section to Warhol
March 21 – Receive comments on section three from Warhol
March 24 – Hand in the three revised sections to Professor Thomas
March 31- Receive Simone’s comments on thesis
April 11 – Submit final thesis to readers
May 2- Thesis defense

Chapter Outline

I. Austen’s FID
   A. Pride and Prejudice
      1. Relationship between heroine and reader
      2. FID versus third person narration – who is communicating what
to the reader
   B. Persuasion
      1. Voices besides those of the narrator and heroine written in FID
      2. FID and its ability to broaden character’s personalities
   C. Mansfield Park
      1. The balance between FID and a strong narrative voice
      2. The contrast of perspectives, first person and third, and how
they influence the way in which the reader interprets the reality
of the novel.

II. FID before Austen
   A. Samuel Richardson’s Sir Charles Grandison
      1. Is there a direct connection between Austen’s FID and
Richardson’s, or is it clearly a precursor to what developed in her
writing?
   B. Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple
      1. Does the heroine lend itself to FID more easily than the hero,
and if so why?
      2. Is there a greater connection between Rowson and Austen than
Richardson and Austen, how does each author’s influence appear
in Austen’s work.

III. FID after Austen
   A. Charles Dickens’ Our Mutual Friend
      1. Where, when, and why does FID appear in the text
      2. Illustrating the influential links between Austen and Dickens
   B. George Eliot’s Middle March
1. What is different about her narration as opposed to that of Austen
2. Does FID establish a more intimate relationship between the reader and the main character?

Bibliography


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