

“Jane Austen’s Novels: Form and Structure” [from *The Jane Austen Handbook*]

[In this essay, David Lodge argues that in her novels Austen combines elements of two popular eighteenth-century genres—sentimental novels and comedies of manners—while adding narrative innovations of her own, creating works of mimetic realism with complex layers of dramatic irony. Lodge goes on to employ Russian formalism in an analysis of the novels’ narrative structure, including Austen’s use of free indirect discourse and focalizing characters; such techniques, he argues, were central to Austen’s achievement of a realist mode that proved at once flexible and immersive, and which makes her books both intensely pleasurable and critically acclaimed.]

Each of Jane Austen’s novels has its own distinctive identity, but they also have a strong family resemblance, one to another. Since it is impossible in the space available to do justice to the specific form of each novel, I shall try to bring out what they have in common in this respect. It is essentially a question of genre: what *kind* of fiction did Jane Austen write? The short answer is that she fused together the sentimental novel and the comedy of manners with an unprecedented quality of realism.

By the “sentimental novel,” in this context, I mean the didactic, heroine-centered love story of which the prototype was Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740–41) and which survives today in the popular women’s fiction generally known as “romance.” This latter designation is somewhat ironic, since Samuel Richardson prided himself on writing a kind of prose fiction that eschewed the characteristic devices and implausibilities of traditional romance and would be morally improving precisely because it was “true to life.” The eponymous heroine of *Pamela* is a young maidservant in a great house who, at the death of her mistress, is subjected to the sexual advances of the latter’s son and heir, Mr. B——. Although she admires her master, the principled Pamela resists all his efforts to seduce her with such spirit and steadfastness that his lust is converted into love and he eventually makes her his wife. The story, which Richardson claimed was based on an actual case, is told entirely in the form of letters and journal entries, mostly written by the heroine; and it initiated a long line of sentimental epistolary novels, among them the first version of *Sense and Sensibility*, called *Elinor and Marianne*.

Richardson's epistolary technique became obsolete with the development (in which Jane Austen played a crucial part) of more subtle and flexible methods of representing a character's thoughts and feelings in literary narrative. The basic structure of *Pamela* as a love story has, however, had a remarkably long life and proved adaptable to many literary purposes, high and low. Though invented by a male author, it is an essentially feminine kind of fiction, usually written by women, centered on a heroine rather than a hero and directed particularly at a female audience. It arose at a time when women were beginning to assert their right to choose their partners in marriage but were restricted by social convention to a very passive role in the courtship process. The "happy ending" of the didactic love story rewards the heroine, who copes with various emotional, social, economic, and ethical obstacles to union with the man she loves without losing her integrity. If there were no obstacles, of course, there would be no story.

Structurally, then, the love story consists of the delayed fulfillment of a desire. The delay puts the heroine under stress and thus generates the "sentiment"—that is, the representation of feelings, anxieties, and moral choices that is the real source of interest and value in the sentimental novel. In *Pamela*, the cause of delay is very simple: Mr. B—— wants extramarital sex, but Pamela wants love and marriage, and eventually she wins. This plot was too explicitly sexual, and perhaps too democratic in its implications (Pamela is promoted from the bottom to the top of the class system by sticking to her principles), for Richardson's more genteel, mainly female successors in the sentimental novel tradition, such as Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen. The heroine, though often inferior to the hero in social status and fortune, is not as remote in class terms as Pamela was from Mr. B—— before her marriage. The hero is not morally compromised by having designs on the heroine's purity, and illicit sexuality is displaced onto other characters—a seducer whose designs are frustrated by the hero, for instance, or a seductress or "fallen woman" who throws into relief the heroine's moral integrity. The necessary delay in the union of hero and heroine then has to be contrived by other means. For example, the lovers get off on the wrong foot, and one or both take some time to recognize the true nature of their feelings; they are alienated by misunderstandings, by other characters' intrigues, by apparently insurmountable obstacles to do with fortune, family prejudice, and the like. In many of these novels (e.g., Fanny Burney's *Evelina* [1778] and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* [1801]), some of the romance motifs that Richardson had rigorously excluded from his *Pamela* begin to seep back into the sentimental

novel as a way of resolving the plot in a flurry of wills, confessions, discoveries of long-lost daughters/sons/parents, and so on. Jane Austen did not use such devices; indeed, she pointedly abstained from them. But all her novels have the basic structure of the didactic love story that derived from Richardson, albeit with much variation, modification, displacement, and even inversion of its basic components.

Of all Jane Austen's works, perhaps *Pride and Prejudice* cleaves most closely to the paradigm of the classic love story. Here the delay of the lovers' union is caused by their mutually unfavorable "first impressions" (the original title of the novel). Darcy offends Elizabeth by his arrogance, by his interference in the promising relationship between Mr. Bingley and her sister Jane, and by his alleged ill-treatment of Wickham. She refuses his first, totally unexpected proposal of marriage, thus demonstrating her integrity as well as her impulsiveness, because the match is a tempting one in material terms. When, for a number of reasons, her feelings toward Darcy change, she is rewarded with a second chance to accept him. Elizabeth rejects the cynical *realpolitik* of the marriage market as expounded and practiced by Charlotte Lucas; she also survives unscathed the temptations of the erotically attractive but immoral male, represented by Wickham. Wickham demonstrates his dangerous power on Elizabeth's younger sister, Lydia, and Darcy's moral rescue operation in this crisis precipitates his union with the grateful and admiring Elizabeth—a good example of the displacement of the Richardsonian seduction plot onto secondary characters. Something similar happens at the end of *Mansfield Park*, where the adultery of Henry Crawford with Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford's failure to condemn it "justify" Fanny's earlier refusal of Crawford and precipitate her union with Edmund. The peripeteia (the surprising but satisfying reversal of expectation) in Jane Austen's plots very frequently takes the form of sexual misbehavior, or something like it (such as Lucy Steele's marriage to Robert Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*).

The classic love story consists of a delay not only of the heroine's desire but also of the reader's desire—to know the answer to the basic question raised by the narrative: will the heroine get the man she wants? There are three principal sources of interest in narrative: suspense, mystery, and irony. Suspense raises the question What will happen? Mystery raises the question Why did it happen? When the reader knows the answer to the questions but the characters do not, irony is generated. Thus, all rereadings of novels tend to create an effect of irony, but this is especially true of Jane Austen's novels, which are permeated with irony, rhetorical as well as dramatic,

and which can sustain an infinite number of readings. On first reading they tend, like most love stories, to engage the reader's interest through suspense rather than mystery. *Emma* is an exception, since it is full of enigmas (—why is Mr. Elton so keen to attend the Westons' dinner party when Harriet is ill?—Who sent the piano to Jane Fairfax?—What are Frank Churchill's real feelings about Emma?). This follows from the fact that Emma does not fall in love until the book is almost over; therefore, the question Will she get the man she wants? cannot provide the main source of narrative interest. In *Pride and Prejudice*, too, though to a lesser extent, the heroine's knowledge of her own heart is delayed, and enigmas, mainly to do with Wickham and Darcy, supply narrative interest, together with the suspense plot concerning Bingley's intention toward Elizabeth's sister Jane. In the other novels Jane Austen makes relatively little use of mystery as a means of engaging the reader's interest, and in *Northanger Abbey* she mocked Mrs. Radcliffe's rather mechanical reliance on this device in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

In *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen played a delightful (and risky) double game with both the conventions of the sentimental novel and the conventions of traditional romance that were beginning to invade it through the contemporary cult of the gothic—a process in which Mrs. Radcliffe played a crucial role. At first sight, Jane Austen seems to be simply justifying the former at the expense of the latter. The famous conclusion to chapter 5, in which the narrator defends the novel as a form “in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (*NA*, p. 38), explicitly cites titles by Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth. Catherine's naive addiction to the gothic novel retards the happy consummation of her love for Henry Tilney—first, by leading her into uncritical friendship with Isabella Thorpe and her brother John, whose intrigues constantly threaten her happiness, and second, by tempting Catherine into a ludicrous suspicion, during her stay at Northanger Abbey, of General Tilney's having murdered his wife, thus herself temporarily forfeiting Henry's good opinion.

But as several commentators have observed, Catherine's opinion of the general is not totally unwarranted, since he shows himself to be a thoroughly nasty man. Furthermore, the conventions of the more realistic sentimental novel are themselves subjected to ironic undermining—none more devastating than the passage in which the narrator tells us that Henry Tilney's affection for Catherine “originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a

persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought" (*NA*, p. 243); and none more witty than the narrator's admission that the anxiety of Henry and Catherine about the general's opposition to their marriage "can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity" (*NA*, p. 250). It seems that there is no great "virtue" in this heroine, and the narration of her "reward" is almost contemptuously offhand, making the reader feel guilty of the pleasure he takes in it and sending him back, perhaps, to reread that highly equivocal defense of the novel as a genre in chapter 5.

Of all Jane Austen's novels, *Northanger Abbey* is the only one that lends itself to a modern deconstructive reading, for it does seem to deny the reader any sure ground for interpretation and discrimination and to make explicit the impossibility of getting the world into a book. The other novels take the paradigm of the didactic love story more seriously, invest it with deeper significance, and center it on heroines of more worth than Catherine Morland—but without sacrificing comedy and humor.

Comedy is not easily combined with the sentimental novel. *Pamela* is unintentionally funny, a weakness Henry Fielding riotously exploited in *Shamela* (1741) and *Joseph Andrews* (1742). His own most sentimental novel, *Amelia* (1751), is his least amusing. In Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747–48) and in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* (1761), the sentimental pursuit of personal authenticity leads to tragedy, or at least pathos, to gestures of renunciation and loss, in which neither Jane Austen nor her heroines are interested. Emma's happiness—her eventual marriage to Knightley—entails disappointment for Harriet Smith, whose misplaced hopes of marrying him were unintentionally encouraged by Emma herself. Emma is sorry for Harriet, but not extravagantly so:

For as to any of that heroism of sentiment which might have prompted her to entreat [Knightley] to transfer his affection from herself to Harriet, as infinitely the most worthy of the two—or even the more simple sublimity of resolving to refuse him at once and for ever, without vouchsafing any motive, because he could not marry them both, Emma had it not. (p. 431)

Both Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth leavened the sentimental novel with comedy, and Jane Austen undoubtedly learned from them; but their comedy is, compared with hers, more in the nature of "comic relief" from the main story and often takes a rather robust,

farcical form reminiscent of the comic fiction of Fielding, Sterne, and Smollett, which itself derived ultimately from Rabelais, Cervantes, and the picaresque tradition. Jane Austen's comedy seems more theatrical in its origins, reminding us faintly of Congreve, Molière, and even Shakespeare.

One of the most venerable distinctions in general poetics is that drawn by Plato in Book III of *The Republic*, between diegesis (description of actions by an authorial narrator) and mimesis (representation of action through the imitated speech of characters). Drama is pure mimesis, in this sense, but the epic, and the novel which formally derives from it, combine diegesis and mimesis. Among the classic novelists, Jane Austen tends toward a dominantly mimetic method. Her stories are unfolded in a series of scenes, with a minimum of authorial description, and her skill in revealing character through speech is justly celebrated. Many passages from the earlier novels (e.g., the discussion between Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood in chapter 3 of *Sense and Sensibility*, and the dialogues between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*) could be performed as written (and have been, on radio, television, and film). Action, in Jane Austen's novels, is social interaction of people in pairs, in groups, in social situations such as parties, dinners, balls, courtesy calls, walks, and excursions—situations that lend themselves naturally to “scenic” presentation and emphasize “manners.” This is one reason why the comedy in Jane Austen does not seem tacked on to the love story but permeates it. This is true even of *Mansfield Park*, the most earnest of the novels and often disliked on that account. The comings and goings in the “wilderness” at Sotherton (rather reminiscent of Shakespeare's Forest of Arden), for instance, and the whole saga of the theatricals are exquisitely comic in a highly dramatic way, culminating in the wonderfully funny moment when the astonished Sir Thomas Bertram, unexpectedly returned home from the West Indies, interrupts Mr. Yates rehearsing his part in *Lovers' Vows*:

He stept to the door ... and opening it, found himself on the stage of a theatre, and opposed to a ranting young man, who appeared likely to knock him down backwards. At the very moment of Yates perceiving Sir Thomas, and giving perhaps the very best start he had ever given in the whole course of his rehearsals, Tom Bertram entered at the other end of the room; and never had he found greater difficulty in keeping his countenance. His father's looks of solemnity and amazement on this his first appearance on any stage, and the gradual metamorphosis of the impassioned Baron Wildenhaim into the well-bred and easy

Mr. Yates, making his bow and apology to Sir Thomas Bertram, was such an exhibition, such a piece of true acting as he would not have lost on any account. It would be the last—in all probability the last scene on that stage; but he was sure there could not be a finer. (pp. 182–83)

Here Jane Austen very characteristically turns the conventions of a falsifying kind of art inside out in order to reinforce the truthfulness of her own representation of experience. The encounter between Mr. Yates and Sir Thomas takes place on the interface between life and art and is equally disconcerting to both parties on that account. Sir Thomas walks unintentionally onto a stage for the first time in his life and becomes willy-nilly an actor in a scene, just as Yates is startled by the reality of the encounter out of the artificial rant and exaggerated gesture of melodrama into a genuine “start” from which he recovers by a piece of “true” social acting. The touch of genius in the passage is, however, the introduction of Tom Bertram as a kind of audience for this piece of real-life theater. It is through his eyes that we see and relish the ironies of the spectacle—and to recognize that fact is to recognize that, scenic as it is, Jane Austen’s fiction is an achievement of narrative, not dramatic art. This kind of focalizing of the action through an individual viewpoint is peculiar to written narrative and is one of the constituents of fictional “realism.”

The realism of Jane Austen’s novels, the illusion of life that they create, has always been one of the chief attractions of her work to many generations of readers, from Sir Walter Scott’s tribute, in his journal of 1826, to “the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment,” to Arnold Kettle’s declaration, in 1951, that “*Emma* is as convincing as our own lives, and has the same sort of concreteness” (Kettle’s essay is reprinted in Watt, p. 113). More recently, realism as a literary effect has fallen into disfavor. Poststructuralist criticism, especially that which derives from the work of Roland Barthes, has identified the “classic realist text” as an instrument of ideology, a genre founded on bad faith, on the pretense that bourgeois culture is “natural,” using the dominance of the authorial voice over all the other discourses in the text to limit meaning in the interests of control, repression, and privilege. To engage fully with this argument as it applies to Jane Austen is beyond the scope of this essay. It is certain that she took for granted the existence of class-society (though she did not see it as fixed or static), that she subscribed to the Christian-humanist notion of the autonomy and responsibility of the individual self, and that her novels unequivocally

endorse certain values and reject others. If these are grounds for condemnation, then she stands condemned—though it seems a perverse and anachronistic judgment. Jane Austen's admirers have, however, often seemed handicapped in defending and celebrating her art by the poverty of their critical tools for analyzing it. Without a metalanguage (a language for talking about an object language—in this case the language of literary realism), criticism is apt to find itself reduced to mere paraphrase, retelling Jane Austen's stories in language that is of the same kind as hers but inferior in eloquence, precision, and wit. Part of the problem is that realism is a literary effect that works by disguising its own conventionality. Some of the concepts and methods of structuralist and formalist criticism may help us to see through that disguise and understand how Jane Austen constructs a fictional world "as convincing as our own lives."

For example, Roland Barthes's analysis of the classic realist text in *S/Z* as a "braiding" of multiple codes of signification—some having to do with the raising and resolution of narrative questions, some contributing to the creation of character, others imparting through devices of connotation the underlying themes and values of the story—all bound together in a kind of aesthetic "solidarity," so that any segment of the text can be shown to be communicating several messages simultaneously: this would seem to be highly relevant to Jane Austen's fiction, in which every detail, every nuance of gesture and conversation, is charged with significance. One must make the reservation, however, that the codes of connotation in Jane Austen operate under much stricter constraints and offer the critic much less opportunity for exegetical display than Balzac (the subject of *S/Z*). Another way of putting this is to say that Jane Austen's novels exhibit in a very pure form the dominance of metonymy over metaphor that Roman Jakobson argued is characteristic of realism as a literary mode (Jakobson; Lodge 1977). Metonymy is a trope that works by manipulating relationships of contiguity (as opposed to metaphor, which manipulates relationships of similarity). "Metonymic" discourse thus emphasizes sequence and causality, and Jane Austen's novels illustrate this bias very well. Her novels have a seamless quality, one episode leading logically and naturally to the next. She is particularly artful in the way she introduces, or reintroduces, one character to fill the space left in the story by another. Thus, in *Emma*, when the enigma of Mr. Elton's equivocal behavior toward Emma and Harriet is solved to their mutual embarrassment and mortification and he departs Highbury in a huff, the advent of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, heralded many pages previously, provides a new focus of attention; and when Churchill, in turn, leaves the scene of Highbury,

back comes Mr. Elton with Mrs. Elton (whom he has very plausibly married on the rebound from Emma). The reader of Jane Austen never feels, as he so often does with classic fiction, that the action has been patently contrived, new characters invented, new settings provided, to satisfy the exigencies of the plot and theme or simply to preserve the momentum of the text. Motivation of character conforms scrupulously to a code of psychological causality. In reading sentimental fiction by Jane Austen's contemporaries, one's credulity is frequently strained by the ability of hero and heroine to misunderstand each other (Fanny Burney's *Camilla* of 1796 is a particularly flagrant example of a novel kept going, for some nine hundred pages, virtually by this means alone); but the mistakes and misjudgments of Jane Austen's characters satisfy the modern reader's most stringent standards of plausibility.

Metaphor and metaphorical symbolism are used very sparingly by Jane Austen, and under strict constraints. Mark Schorer showed how, in *Emma*, buried or "dead" metaphors drawn from the language of commerce and property imply a scale of values that contrasts ironically, and almost subliminally, with the emotional and moral issues to which they are applied, and I have written elsewhere about the extraordinarily subtle and delicate way in which the pathetic fallacy is used in the same novel to mark the transition of the heroine from despair to joy (Lodge 1971). Even in *Persuasion*, by general consent the most "poetic" or "romantic" of the novels, the seasonal symbolism that attaches to the heroine's progress from an autumnal mood of resignation to a joyful "second spring of youth and beauty" (*P*, p. 124) arises metonymically out of the actual seasonal span of the main action; and the metaphor of "bloom" that articulates this theme most insistently (Anne is said to have lost her bloom at the beginning of the novel but to have recovered it by the end) is so conventional as scarcely to be perceived as a figurative expression.

One of the most fruitful concepts in modern narrative theory has been the Russian formalist distinction between *fabula* (the story as it would have enacted in real time and space) and *sjuzet* (the story as it is represented in the text). In the case of fiction (as distinct from historiography), the *fabula* is not a prior reality but an extrapolation from the *sjuzet*, to be used as a tool of comparison. By observing how the narrative text selects, manipulates, and "deforms" the raw material of the *fabula*, we can uncover the formal choices that realistic illusion tends to disguise and relate those choices to the thematic and affective properties of the text. These choices crucially concern the handling of time, and what in Anglo-American criticism is loosely called "point of view" (loosely, because it concerns not merely the

perspective from which the action is seen but also the voice in which it is narrated).

Gérard Genette has identified three categories of time in which there may be more or less disparity between *fabula* and *sjuzet*: order, duration, and frequency. Jane Austen's narratives rarely deviate from chronological order. If there is a retrospective account of some event antecedent to the main action or a delayed explanation of some event in the main action, either it is incorporated into the time span of the main action in the form of a letter (e.g., Darcy's letter to Elizabeth explaining his involvement with Wickham, *PP*, pp. 196–203) or in dialogue (e.g., Willoughby's apologetic confession to Elinor, *SS*, pp. 319–29), or it is briefly summarized in a nonscenic way by the authorial narrator (e.g., the account of Anne Elliot's former relationship with Wentworth at the beginning of chapter 4 of *Persuasion*). In other words, there is a minimal disturbance of chronological order in Jane Austen's novels. We don't encounter in them the effect of flashback, in which the temporal progress of the main action is suspended and for a while effaced by the scenic presentation of an earlier event; nor do we encounter anything like a "flashforward"—a proleptic glimpse of what is to come. The former effect is characteristic of fiction in which reality is seen as highly subjective—*Tristram Shandy*, for example, or the modern stream-of-consciousness novel; the latter effect is one in which the author as omniscient maker and manipulator of the fiction is apt to show his hand. By eschewing both these effects, Jane Austen strengthens the correspondence between her fictional world and the public, "commonsense" notion of time as a plane on which we all move, from a known past toward an unknown future, according to a logic of causality that becomes intelligible only in retrospect.

By "duration," Genette means the relationship between the time putatively occupied by the action of the *fabula* and the "reading time" it is accorded in the text. The main action of Jane Austen's novels never occupies more than a year, and usually rather less. *Emma*, for instance, begins with Mrs. Weston's marriage in the autumn and ends with the heroine's marriage the following autumn. *Persuasion* begins in autumn and ends the following spring. *Mansfield Park* stands out from the other novels in having a longish prelude describing Fanny's background and how she was adopted as a young child by the Bertram family, but the main action properly begins with the arrival of the Crawfords at Mansfield Park "in the month of July, and Fanny had just reached her eighteenth year" (*MP*, p. 40). It ends the following summer. Why is there this consistency in the time span of Jane Austen's novels? Perhaps six months is about the shortest time in which to portray plausibly the development of a meaningful

relationship between hero and heroine, particularly if it entails a revolution in feeling, as in Elizabeth Bennet's attitude to Darcy, Edmund Bertram's to Mary Crawford and Fanny, Wentworth's to Anne Elliot; and anything longer than twelve months would draw attention to ellipses in the temporal continuity of the narrative and slacken its grip on the reader.

The tempo of a fictional narrative can seem faster than reality (e.g., the thriller) or slower (the stream-of-consciousness novel) or to move at about the same pace. Jane Austen's novels seem to have the tempo of life itself, yet their stories occupy several months, and the reading of them takes only a few hours. The illusion is achieved by the highly selective and dominantly scenic presentation of experience. Jane Austen notoriously—it is one of the chief causes of critical controversy about her—left out a great deal from her novels: physical love, the work men do, historical events, “local color.” Her novels are concerned with the personal and social relations of young middle-class women confined to a very limited field of activity. The plot, which is concerned ultimately with the choice of a husband, is furthered in a series of social encounters or “scenes” that, because of the amount of direct speech in them, create the effect of more or less neutral duration, neither noticeably slower or faster than the tempo of “reality”; and because of the habitual, repetitive quality of these scenes, we are scarcely aware of the intervals between them.

Consider, for example, the events in the second volume of *Emma* (chapters 19–36 in most modern editions): Emma and Harriet visit the Bateses and hear of Jane Fairfax's impending arrival; they visit again and meet Jane; Knightley calls at Hartfield, and so does Miss Bates, with news of Mr. Elton's marriage; Harriet visits the Martins; Frank Churchill arrives and visits Hartfield and walks in the village with Emma; all the principal characters meet at the Coles's dinner party; Emma, Harriet, Mrs. Weston, and Frank Churchill call on the Bateses; discussions take place at Randalls and the Crown Inn about the proposed ball; Frank Churchill, summoned by his aunt, calls at Hartfield to say good-bye; Emma meets Mrs. Elton and gives a dinner party in her honor. Two or three months have passed, yet we have no sense of the acceleration of the normal tempo of life.

By “frequency,” Genette refers to the ratio between the number of times an event occurs in the fabula and the number of times it is narrated in the *sjuzet*. As we might expect, Jane Austen generally follows the historical, “commonsense” norm of one-to-one. She does, however, use summary (narrating once what happened several times) in linking passages and to express with sometimes disconcerting candor the tedium and repetitiveness of the social round to which her

heroines are confined—for example, “that kind of intimacy must be submitted to, which consists of sitting an hour or two together in the same room almost every day” (*SS*, p. 124). Jane Austen seldom repeats the narrative presentation of a single event, unless we count Emma’s reflections on the Elton-Harriet debacle (*E*, pp. 134–39) or Edmund’s and Fanny’s inquests on the behavior of Mary Crawford (*MP*, pp. 63–64). She never presents successive accounts of the same event as experienced by two or more characters, in the manner of Richardson. This brings us to the topic of “point of view.”

The great advantage of Richardson’s epistolary technique—and the reason it enjoyed such a vogue—was that it short-circuited the simple alternation of diegesis and mimesis, author’s voice and characters’ voices, in traditional narrative by making the characters tell their own story virtually as it happened. The gain in immediacy and realistic illusion was enormous, but the technique had certain disadvantages, which, we may speculate, caused Jane Austen to abandon it after some early experiments. The machinery of correspondence was clumsy, uneconomical, and likely to strain credulity, while the elimination of the authorial voice from the text deprived it of an important channel of meaning. The nineteenth-century novel developed a new and more flexible combination of author’s voice and characters’ voices than the simple alternation of the two one finds in traditional epic narration, from Homer to Fielding and Scott—a discourse that fused, or interwove, them, especially through the stylistic device known as “free indirect speech.” This technique, which Jane Austen was the first English novelist to use extensively, consists of reporting the thoughts of a character in language that approximates more or less closely to their own idiolect and deleting the introductory tags, such as “he thought,” “she wondered,” “he said to himself,” and the like, that grammar would normally require in a well-formed sentence. For instance, after Mr. Elton’s unwelcome declaration to Emma, the next chapter begins: “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” (*E*, p. 134). Free indirect style, which enters this passage at the second sentence, allows the novelist to give the reader intimate access to a character’s thoughts without totally surrendering control of the discourse to that character (as in the epistolary novel). The passage continues in a more summary and syntactically complex style, in which the narrator’s judicial authority is perceptible, though Emma’s consciousness remains focal:

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. (ibid.)

Free indirect style, combined with presentation of the action from the spatiotemporal perspective of an individual character (the usual meaning of “point of view” in literary criticism) allows the novelist to vary, from sentence to sentence, the distance between the narrator’s discourse and the character’s discourse, between the character’s values and the “implied author’s” values, and so to control and direct the reader’s affective and interpretive responses to the unfolding story. Thus, for instance, we identify, and identify with, Elinor rather than Marianne as the heroine of *Sense and Sensibility* because we see much more of the action from Elinor’s perspective, because we have much more access to her private thoughts, and because there is much greater consonance between the narrator’s language and the language of Elinor’s consciousness. Marianne’s unhappiness at Willoughby’s desertion is consistently ironized, implicitly judged as self-indulgent, by an authorial rhetoric of oxymoron: “this nourishment of grief was every day applied. She spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying” (p. 83); “in such moments of precious, of invaluable misery, she rejoiced in tears of agony to be at Cleveland” (p. 303). Compare Elinor, confronted with apparent proof of Lucy Steele’s engagement to Edward Ferrars: “for a few moments, she was almost overcome—her heart sunk within her, and she could hardly stand; but exertion was indispensably necessary, and she struggled so resolutely against the oppression of her feelings, that her success was speedy, and for the time complete” (p. 134).

There is considerable variation between the novels in the amount of switching from one character’s perspective to another’s and in the degree to which the narrator explicitly invokes her authority and omniscience. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, such effects are frequent. Although Elizabeth is the dominant center of interest, and consciousness, the narrative frequently moves away from her perspective. Here is a characteristic shift:

Occupied in observing Mr. Bingley’s attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty. ... But no sooner had

he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. (*PP*, p. 23)

It is important to the effect of the novel that the reader should know this and Elizabeth should not. A little later in the same scene, Elizabeth is “eagerly succeeded” at the piano by her sister Mary.

Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached. Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well. (*PP*, p. 25)

This brutally frank comparison of the sisters comes to us straight from the authorial narrator, and Elizabeth is not compromised, here or elsewhere, by any suspicion of vanity or disloyalty to her mostly tiresome family. Throughout the novel the reader is put in a privileged position of knowing more than any of the characters know individually.

Emma follows an antithetical method. It is not quite true to say, as F.R. Leavis did, that “everything is presented through Emma’s dramatized consciousness” (p. 19n.). There are two important scenes in which Emma is not present and therefore, axiomatically, cannot provide the point of view. The first of these is chapter 5 of volume 1, a dialogue between Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston about Emma that remains wholly “objective” until the last paragraph, which gives us a hint of Mrs. Weston’s private hopes of a match between Emma and Frank Churchill. In the fifth chapter of volume 3, there is a shift of point of view to Knightley, when he begins to suspect Frank Churchill of “some double dealing in his pursuit of Emma” (p. 343) and “of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax.” (In the following chapter Mrs. Elton plans her strawberry-picking expedition when Emma is absent, but this scene is less important hermeneutically.) There are also some very clear authorial comments about Emma’s character at the outset of the novel that should put the reader on his guard against identifying too readily with her attitudes and opinions: for example, “The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (p. 5). But with these reservations it is true that the action of the novel is narrated wholly from Emma’s perspective, so

that the reader is obliged, on first reading at least, to share her limited knowledge and perhaps her mistakes and surprises. There is, to my knowledge, no precedent for such a novel before *Emma*—that is, a novel in which the authorial narrator mediates virtually all the action through the consciousness of an unreliable focalizing character. The effect is not only a wonderful multiplication of ironies and reversals but also an intensification of what Henry James called the sense of felt life—a more intimate relationship between fictional discourse and the processes of human consciousness. And not until Henry James himself, perhaps, was there a novelist in the English language who equaled the skill and subtlety with which Jane Austen carried out this difficult technical feat. To make that comparison inevitably recalls the astonishing perversity of James's own observation that "Jane Austen was instinctive and charming. ... For signal examples of what composition, distribution, arrangement can do, of how they intensify the life of a work of art, we have to go elsewhere" (p. 207). He never said an untruer word.

(1986)

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Abbreviations¹

SS	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i> , ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1933); by page number
PP	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> , ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1932); by page number
MP	<i>Mansfield Park</i> , ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1934); by page number
E	<i>Emma</i> , ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1933); by page number
NA and P	<i>Northanger Abbey and Persuasion</i> , ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1933); by page number

1 [The list of abbreviations has been altered to include references only to the material reprinted here.]