

Chapter II

THE IMPERSONAL NARRATOR

Normally, Jane Austen as narrator makes her appearances as unobtrusive as possible. The appearances are, of course, bound to be more frequent in the opening chapters where themes have to be stated and characters introduced.

The theme of the whole novel is usually stated by the impersonal narrator in the opening chapters of each of Jane Austen's works.

Pride and Prejudice opens with a brief but relevant generalization:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter I, page 1)

From this passage alone, we learn that the story will be about courtship and marriage; the hint "the surrounding families" indicates that this novel will be the concern not only of the chief protagonists but also of others, who turn out to be Jane and Bingley, Mr. Collins and Charlotte, Mr. Wickham and Lydia by turns; we see how the pressure of the family and the neighbourhood will bear on the individuals, for example; whereas most of the troubles of one of the characters, Jane,

are caused by her family, the neighbourhood's gossip encourages and intensifies Elizabeth's misrepresentations of Darcy.¹

In Mansfield Park the author spends pages on giving information to the reader through the mouth of the impersonal narrator before the characters begin to act their parts. As usual, the opening chapter states the themes of the whole novel; it begins with the Ward sisters' various marriages and their consequences, and continues with Mrs. Norris's proposal that Sir Thomas should educate Fanny; this is followed by consequent discussions which first of all raise the obvious and inevitable point that Fanny will fall in love with one of her cousins, and secondly show the different intentions of Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris while making it clear that, even though his motives are sound, their results for Fanny will be very much the same as the results of hers.²

The first chapter in Northanger Abbey entertains the reader with the account of Catherine Morland's childhood:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her... Catherine, for many years of her life, as plain as any. She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features; - so much for her person; - and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind.

(Northanger Abbey, chapter I, page 37)

¹W.A. Craik, Jane Austen: The Six Novels (London, 1965), p. 63.

²Ibid., p. 93.

Such a brilliant opening indicates the subject and tone of the whole novel while at the same time showing the kind of irony the reader is to expect. In the first account of Catherine, her looks and her parentage are all against her. Who would expect Catherine to be an heroine? The readers of the sentimental novels popular in those days could not imagine having such a heroine! The tone of the impersonal narrator is that of the satirist.

The first chapter of Emma introduces Emma Woodhouse, her father and the Westons. The author rapidly sketches the background of the heroine; Emma we are forthwith told is handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition. However, in the fourth paragraph, the chronicler stops, and the reflective moralist takes over, for a hint is given that the heroine has been accustomed to having things "rather too much her own way" and is inclined "to think a little too well of herself". This tells us the deficiency in Emma upon which the novel will be built, the possibility that things may happen both to distress and to vex Emma and that they will be very much her own fault.³ We see then that from the outset Jane Austen is willing to give the reader some assistance and nudge his elbow gently to turn him in the right direction. However, the tone she uses to nudge him in the middle of a recital of facts, is so quiet that we may overlook the hint. With such a hint, if the reader later over happens to believe in Emma's judgement he cannot complain of having been deliberately misled by Jane Austen, who lays her cards on the table on the very first page.

³R.E. Hughes, The Education of Emma Woodhouse(London, 1961), p. 189.

The opening chapters where themes are to be stated also have a few lines of impersonal narrative to introduce the different characters. As impersonal narrator, the author speaks with authority, showing the precise importance of her topic and directing the reader's attention to its relevant aspect; therefore her voice is incisive and direct to the reader.⁴ This is particularly true of the way she introduces her characters; the kind of comment she makes shows just how much use each will be to the action and how much and what kind of interest each is likely to provide. The way in which Jane Austen introduces her characters may be expressed as follows:

Characters who reveal themselves by their actions and words receive only the necessary emphasis on their most relevant traits.⁵ Elinor, who is often Jane Austen's mouthpiece,

possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment; which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother; and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter I, page 42)

As there is no suggestion in any of the wording or syntax that the author is not being altogether straightforward, we accept such statements about Elinor at their face value.

⁴Norman Page and Basil Blackwell, The Language of Jane Austen (Oxford, 1972), p. 56.

⁵Edgar Pelham, The Art of the Novel (New York, 1933), p. 77.

Minor characters who have chances to reveal themselves are depicted in a manner that indicates their function and capabilities:⁶

He [John Dashwood] was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter I, page 41)

This is firm and precise with mild irony. It also indicates that John Dashwood's selfishness will be exposed later through his speech and acts. Mrs. Jennings is described as:

...a widow, with an ample jointure. She had only two daughters, both of whom she had lived to see respectably married, and she had now therefore nothing to do but to marry all the rest of the world.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter VIII, page 69)

This shows roughly what she will do - "marry all the rest of the world", and hints that the reader will enjoy the kind of amusement she will provide in doing it.

Characters who have little chance to speak for themselves are the only one analyzed at length;⁷ the most obvious example is Edward Ferrars:

He is not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing. He was too

⁶Ibid., p. 79.

⁷Ibid., p. 81.

diffident to do justice to himself; but when his natural shyness was overcome, his behaviour gave every indication of an open affectionate heart. His understanding was good, and his education had given it solid improvement. But he was neither fitted by abilities nor disposition to answer the wishes of his mother and sister, who longed to see him distinguished -- as -- they hardly knew what.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter III, page 49)

We must form a sound idea of him from the first, lest we misjudge him, as he has little chance elsewhere in the novel to speak for himself.

Thus, the manner in which Jane Austen introduces her characters makes it clear that the reader is not intended to take all of them in the same way. Some figures are depicted fully and are natural portraits like those of imaginable people; others are certainly presented as types of people one might easily have come across. The latter group is generally known as caricatures and is usually presented with exaggeration and simplification.

In portraying a caricature, attention is focused on a few traits which, it is implied, are all the readers need to know about the figure. Each reappearance displays the same traits, with little or no development;⁸ and the range of situation and action provided for the caricature is restricted in such a way as to bring no more than a small segment of the personality into view.

The initial account of Sir Walter Elliot's vanity about his rank and personal appearance concludes with:

⁸ Robert Liddell, The Novels of Jane Austen (London, 1966), p. 105.

He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot who united these gifts was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.

(Persuasion, chapter I, page 36)

Not only the exaggeration, but the tone of ironic mockery in describing his personal defects also announces the intention of making him a caricature. One will see that his later reappearances only affirm this vanity of his.

Another example is Mr. Collins when he has annoyed Mrs. Bennet by supposing that one of her daughters has helped with the cooking. The impersonal narrator emphasizes the fact that:

He begged pardon for having displeased her. In a softened tone she declared herself not at all offended; but he continued to apologise for about a quarter of an hour.

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XIII, page 49)

The exaggeration of Mr. Collins' politeness is not only an ironic mockery of his pedantic and pompous manner, but also an announcement of his simple trait of personality which is to be reaffirmed over and over again in his later appearances in the novel.

Besides the introduction of individual characters, the impersonal narrator sometimes also has a function of providing an accurate sketch of the relationship between characters. Of the relationship between Darcy and Bingley, the reader gets an analytical account:

Between him and Darcy there was a very steady friendship, in spite of a great opposition of

character. Bingley was endeared to Darcy by the easiness, openness, ductility of his temper, though no disposition could offer a greater contrast to his own, and though with his own he never appeared dissatisfied. On the strength of Darcy's regard Bingley had the firmest reliance, and of his judgment the highest opinion.

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter IV, page 11)

The first chapter of Pride and Prejudice sums up the relationship between as well as the characters of, Mrs. and Mrs. Bennet thus:

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to devolve. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter I, page 3)

Here we are presented with a very economical and accurate sketch of both characters and their relationship drawn by someone who has complete insight into them. It implies Mr. Bennet's irresponsibility and Mrs. Bennet's selfishness, with a hint of their non-communication.

The impersonal narrator also provides direct comments on character; for example, when Henry Crawford tells his sister about his love for Fanny Price, all this is reported by the author rather than quoted directly:

...he had in fact nothing to relate but his own sensations, nothing to dwell on but Fanny's charms. - Fanny's beauty of face and figure,

Fanny's graces of manner and goodness of heart were the exhaustless theme. The gentleness, modesty, and sweetness of her character were warmly expatiated on, that sweetness which makes so essential a part of every woman's worth in the judgment of man; that though he sometimes loves where it is not, he can never believe it absent. Her temper he had good reason to depend on and to praise...Nor was this all. Henry Crawford had too much sense not to feel the worth of good principles in a wife, though he was too little accustomed to serious reflection to know them by their proper name; but when he talked of her having such a steadiness and regularity of conduct, such a high notion of honour, and such an observance of decorum as might warrant any man in the fullest dependence on her faith and integrity, he expressed what was inspired by the knowledge of her being well principled and religious.

(Mansfield Park, chapter XXX, page 297)

This event is described by the impersonal narrator for three reasons. First, the account given by the impersonal narrator, which appears to be factual, but is actually an understatement, is meant to contrast with the extravagant claims that Henry Crawford makes for Fanny. Second, this passage is intended to cast ridicule upon Henry's own reversal of position -- from the man who will make Fanny love him because he is bored, to the ardent lover. And lastly, Jane Austen thinks it necessary to underline the fact that this affection is serious, by telling us that Henry has "too much sense not to feel the worth of good principle in a wife..."⁹

Beyond these introductions, Jane Austen says very little in her own voice. She usually lets her characters reveal themselves through

⁹ Andrew H. Wright, Jane Austen's Novels (Middlesex, 1962), p. 62.

their own speech and actions. When the heroine of the novel is the lens through which the action is seen, very rarely does Jane Austen find it necessary to add to what she can say through her heroine. And when she does, it is because the heroine's judgment, though the main interest, is not the sole one. And when the heroine's judgment has limitations, the author has to make clear what those limitations are and to tell the reader the facts herself.¹⁰ Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins is an example. Jane Austen not only makes it clear that Elizabeth, owing to her own prejudice, cannot be the one to reveal Charlotte's thought to the reader but also makes sure that her reader knows that Charlotte has accepted him "solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment." Jane Austen appears here as narrator secondly because Elizabeth, though the main interest of the novel, is not the sole one; the title itself shows this - Pride and Prejudice can easily be made to stand for Darcy and Elizabeth.

However, in cases where the heroine of the novel is not the lens through which the action is seen, Jane Austen plays a very large part as narrator. In Mansfield Park, Jane Austen appears very often as the impersonal narrator for two reasons. First, there are many important scenes in which Fanny does not appear at all, such as that in which Henry Crawford tells his sister of his plan to flirt with Fanny, and the later ones where he confesses that, caught in his own trap, he intends to marry her. Second, there is much analysis of the

¹⁰ Craik, op. cit., p. 68.

motives and emotions of people other than Fanny herself, such as Maria's reasons for marrying Mr. Rushworth, Mrs. Norris's attitude to Fanny, and Sir Thomas Bertram's principles and rules of conduct.

Besides the above situations, Jane Austen also appears as narrator when some particular objective information is necessary for the reader to grasp. In Persuasion, the omniscient narrator of the story steps in when Richard Musgrove's early death becomes a source of grief to his parents. Wentworth has too nice a regard for the bereaved parents to tell us about their son, so Jane Austen discloses the facts of the situation.

The real circumstances of this pathetic piece of family history were, that the Musgroves had had the ill fortune of a very troublesome, hopeless son; and the good fortune to lose him before he reached his twentieth year; that he had been sent to sea, because he was stupid and unmanageable on shore; that he had been very little cared for at any time by his family, though quite as much as he deserved; seldom heard of, and scarcely at all regretted, when the intelligence of his death abroad had worked its way to Uppercross, two years before.

(Persuasion, chapter VI, page 76)

The omniscient narrator of the story has stepped in not only to record some facts which we could not otherwise know, but also to make some very sharp judgments lest the reader be confused by the grief of the Musgroves and the diplomacy of Captain Wentworth.

Again, after intimately recording Fanny's refusal of Henry Crawford's proposal of marriage, Jane Austen stands off from her heroine and tells us:

Fanny knew her own meaning, but was no judge of her own manner. Her manner was incurably gentle, and she was not aware how much it concealed the sternness of her purpose. Her diffidence, gratitude, and softness, made every expression of indifference seem almost an effort of self-denial; seem at last, to be giving nearly as much pain to herself as to him.

(Mansfield Park, chapter XXXIII, page 326)

Jane Austen speaks directly in this passage apparently because she feels the reader will not comprehend Henry Crawford's persistence, if this point is not made.

Thus, in Jane Austen's novels, the function of the impersonal narrator is to introduce characters and themes, to give the readers necessary information, to pass direct comments, and finally to clarify things. Beyond these, she says very little in her own voice. Consequently, her appearance as impersonal narrator is found less often in the later chapters than the early ones.

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