Jane Austen’s Influence on the Modern Novel

# “*Anyone who has the temerity to write about Jane Austen is aware of two facts: first, that of all great writers she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness; second, that there are twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighbourhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius as if it were an insult to the chastity of their aunts.*” – Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

Introduction

Although she is often touted as the author of “boring chick lit,” Jane Austen remains a literary giant who wrote six novels that are all designated as great classics. In her article “Emma and her influence on future self-deceiving literary heroines,” English scholar Zoe Kaplan argues that Austen’s genius resides mostly in her characters: “Austen's heroines are legendary – if varying – models of charm, independence of spirit (if not mistresses of their own lives in the modern sense of the term), degrees of moral consciousness, self-involvement, and self-dramatization” (Kaplan). While each of her books, and characters, earned its place as a great classic with its own merits, Austen’s novel *Emma* has an impact that reaches well beyond the canons of classic literature. In this novel, Austen introduced a new concept: the unreliable narrator. By using an unreliable narrator, Austen trusted her readers’ ability to think critically and figure out the truth using context aside from the narrator’s perspective. In addition to this innovation, Austen also used free indirect discourse to create a new kind of storytelling in *Emma*, influencing fiction in a way that spans genres and time. Austen’s new brand of an unreliable narrator changed the nature of narration and established a phenomenon that would help define the modern novel.

*Emma* details the life of Emma Woodhouse, a wealthy, nosy matchmaker who refuses to pursue any romance of her own. Emma’s conceit, arrogance and nosiness lead to disaster more than once, usually to the dismay of her friend Mr. Knightley and the expense of her friend and charity case Harriet Smith. She refuses to consider marriage for herself until Harriet confides her romantic feelings for Mr. Knightley, and then Emma realizes that *she* loves Mr. Knightley. By the time Emma discovers her feelings, the reader has anticipated this inevitable romance. John Mullan, an English professor at University College London, says that it is Austen’s writing technique that allows for the reader to simultaneously uncover the truth of the novel while witnessing Emma’s ignorance of her own feelings: “the novel’s stylistic innovations allow it to explore not just a character’s feelings, but, comically, her deep ignorance of her own feelings” (Mullan). It seems like a classic, and unoriginal, storyline where Mr. Right was under the heroine’s nose all the while, but in reality there is much more substance subtly woven into this book. Emma’s perception of reality alters the way the reader experiences the novel, and it is only once the reader realizes that Emma’s perspective is unreliable that the true genius of the book is revealed.

What makes this work is Austen’s use of free indirect discourse, also referred to as free indirect style, which is when a writer infuses the third-person perspective with the thoughts and expressions of a character in the novel. In *Emma*, Austen uses free indirect discourse to give clues about the novel’s villain and his schemes, Mr. Knightley’s true feelings for Emma and other major plot points that often elude the reader because of the trust they have placed in the narrator. Mullan states that Austen’s characters cannot be trusted fully because she writes them not as storytelling tools, but as real and flawed people: “instead of description, the common and easy resource of novelists, she has the rare and difficult art of dramatic presentation: instead of telling us what her characters are, and what they feel, she presents the people, and they reveal themselves” (Mullan). Austen’s use of free indirect style shaped the unreliable narrator in a way that is still relevant today. This technique changed the relationship between authors and readers, and this shift in fiction spans beyond classics and into genres and books still popular today.

Modern Novels Influenced by *Emma*

As argued above, this technical work in narration that characterizes *Emma* was not only new for its time, but it has an undeniable role in the development of the modern novel form. The unreliable narrator signifies the author’s trust that the reader is capable of understanding the book without direct help, and it influences genres including mysteries, thrillers, classics and more. Alex Woloch, Stanford English Professor and Austen scholar, says part of Austen’s genius is that her books maintain their importance, relevance and influence regardless of how much time passes: “her work falls so easily into dialogue not just with past literature but, strangely, with novels that had yet to be written.” Some examples of books involving unreliable narrators are *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn*, The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald*, The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie and *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. The plots vary in each of these examples, and so does the way Austen’s techniques from *Emma* are used. In *Rebecca*, for example, the narrator is unreliable because she is naive, whereas in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the narrator is deliberately unreliable to surprise the reader at the end. In every case, the reader must look beyond the narrator’s scope of perception in order to piece together the truth in the story on their own. Although the plots of these books and the way they use Austen’s techniques are all different, they are united by the fact that each narrator is unreliable – a literary tool that was brought into the arena of literary production by Jane Austen’s *Emma*.

Austen and Mystery Writing

While the number of books influenced by *Emma* is impossible to count, it *is* possible to explore the ways different novels use Austen’s techniques to serve their specific purpose. Alex Woloch, a Stanford English Professor, says that what makes Austen’s writing so rich is the intelligence and purpose behind every aspect of her work: “There is a level of intelligence in her work that the reader feels, and it has to do with her psychological perceptiveness and the sheer skill of her writing. When you read Jane Austen, you sense that you’re in the hands of someone authoritative and reliable… But there is always this feeling that she is one step ahead of you.” Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* relies on this same sense that the author is one step ahead of the reader, stringing them along on a clue filled journey. This particular mystery novel differs quite distinctly from *Emma* because it is a murder mystery set in 1950s England. The reader experiences the entire book from the perspective of a local doctor, and it is the doctor’s unreliable narration that makes the final plot twist so shocking to the reader. Similar to *Emma*, Christie gains the trust of the readers by presenting a seemingly reliable narrator, a doctor in a sleepy English village, before revealing at the end that he was the murderer all along. When this plot twist is revealed, the narrator switches into second person point of view and addresses the reader directly:

I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following: “*The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.*” All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes? (Christie 284).

This plot twist changes the reader’s perspective on the entire novel, making them look back and recognize the clues they missed simply because they were too trusting in the narrator. Although this novel is written in the first person perspective and *Emma* is not, Christie’s ability to present a seemingly reliable narrator and earn the reader’s trust before ultimately demonstrating that narrator’s unreliability is made possible by Austen’s trailblazing techniques.

*Emma*, in particular, demonstrates the types of mysteries Austen creates for her characters to solve. In her article “Mystery Without Murder: The Detective Plots of Jane Austen,” Ellen R. Belton states that Emma’s unreliable perspective plays into more than just the plot of this particular book, but also lends itself to the mystery genre: “She has become a reflector upon, as well as a participant in, her own mystery story. Thus the Austen heroine in some ways prefigures the detective heroes soon to flower in the fiction of Poe, Collins, Dickens, and others” (Belton 44). While Emma is not considered a mystery, Austen’s use of free indirect discourse and cryptic character motives creates the sense that the book is filled with interconnected riddles. The riddles in *Emma*, mostly concerned with who is courting whom, seem rather plain in comparison with the murder mystery at the heart of Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, but they are connected both by their unreliable narrators and the sense that there is always something for the reader to solve. Belton examines how the constant sense that there is something to be figured out when reading *Emma* adds richness and complexity to the novel: “The pattern of identifying, selecting, and finally solving mysteries is very clearly demonstrated in *Emma*… Here, as in the other novels, mystery is both a game and a guidepost” (Belton 46). Most mysteries, such as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, surround plots about murders, robberies and other swashbuckling events, but in *Emma* the intricacies of the characters and their motives serve as the heart of the mystery woven throughout the novel. The events of Highbury never crescendo to a breathtaking climax, but the constant sense of there being something more for the reader to discover fuels this sense of mystery almost from the first chapter: “The ‘deeper game’ in Emma is the game of solving conundrums, of unscrambling information about people’s thoughts and feelings” (Belton 47). Using Emma’s unreliable perspective to further confuse the reader’s understanding of events and people in the novel, Austen masterfully wrote a piece of literature that is not only considered a great classic, but one that subtly introduces elements of mystery that can be seen in the works of Agatha Christie and other mystery authors today. Austen’s then new brand of an unreliable narrator reaches beyond classic literature in her own time, or mysteries of today, but to modern classics as well.

*Emma* and the “Inward” Narrator

Nick Carraway narrates F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, interpreting the tragic love story through his own jaded perspective while appearing to be well meaning and, at times, even neutral. Despite repeated examples of his own untruthful behavior, Nick Carraway states that “Everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (Fitzgerald 65). Nick justifies his actions so well to himself that he in turn convinces the reader that because his actions are motivated by good intentions, they are morally justified and should be considered honest. When Nick reunites Gatsby and his married cousin Daisy, he describes his honesty as upholding his promise to Gatsby rather than acknowledging that he will be lying to Daisy’s husband. Throughout the novel, Nick’s inward reflection and justification of his actions carries not only much of the plot, but the reader’s perception of the story as well. Kaplan says that this sense of inwardness directly borrows from Austen’s techniques, making use of an important writing technique that Austen pioneered: “Jane Austen was the first author writing in English to apply – in James Wood's term – ‘inwardness’ to her heroines, to see their psychological workings which influenced their lesser or greater self-knowledge and, therefore, their inner growth” (Kaplan). The novel ends without Nick ever acknowledging his own falsehoods, and he remains convincing enough that only a close reading reveals what an unreliable narrator he actually is. Traditionally, critics have viewed Nick as an extension of Fitzgerald’s perspective and the novel itself as a fairly straightforward criticism of the American Dream. Kent Cartwright, Professor and Chair of the Department of English at the University of Maryland, disagrees: “Nick’s vision, however, is not identical to Fitzgerald’s, or at least to the novel’s, for Nick is capable of being an unreliable narrator at moments that are crucial to the story’s development. Indeed, in exactly the same ways that Nick may be a flawed character, he is also sometimes a confused, misleading, or inaccurate teller of his tale” (218). Whether or not a reader is aware of his unreliability, Nick’s dubious narration will alter their reading experience because this understanding shifts the novel from a straight forward critique to a layered, complex story rich in questions about truth, identity and the American Dream.

Austen’s *Emma* opened up this realm of possibility for books such as *The Great Gatsby* by pioneering the sense of inwardness that allows for readers to see the psychological workings and changes of a narrator. When, for example, Emma finally realizes her true feelings for Mr. Knightley, it is revealed to the reader through the psychological inwardness that Austen provides: “Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet’s having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (Austen 499). Emma’s sudden realization may come as no surprise to the reader, but what makes it important is that Emma finally has come to understand something of her own feelings and psychology. Austen’s techniques made it possible for authors to write unreliable narrators that earn the reader’s trust through apparent credibility while still allowing for the narrator’s psychology to inform the reading experience, just as Nick’s narration influences the reader’s perspective of the story in *The Great Gatsby*. While these novels exemplify how unreliable narrators shift the audience’s reading experience in modern fiction, certain books borrow from Austen’s style more directly.

*Emma* and Experimentation

One such example of direct borrowing is, surprisingly, James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man.* They are similar in the sense that an outside narrator describes the main character while also sharing their inner thoughts, which is the most similar use of free indirect discourse to that of Austen’s in *Emma*. Joyce’s 1916 novel is an experimental work that is radically different from any of Jane Austen’s books in almost every way. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* follows Stephen Dedalus as he grows from a boy into a man in Ireland. While the reader watches Stephen grow, they are privy to his inner thoughts while still viewing the book from a third person perspective:

The muddy streets were gay. He strode homeward, conscious of an invisible grace pervading and making light his limbs. In spite of all he had done it. He had confessed and God had pardoned him. His soul was made fair and holy once more, holy and happy. It would be beautiful to die if God so willed. It was beautiful to live in grace a life of peace and virtue and forbearance with others. (Joyce 179)

Here, Joyce uses free indirect style so that the reader sees Stephen’s thoughts about his changing relationship with religion while looking down into his world rather than seeing it directly through his eyes. While similarities between Joyce and Austen may seem scarce, Joyce’s use of free indirect discourse directly translates to Austen’s style in *Emma*, imitating her technique more closely than any of the other novels mentioned. Perhaps most importantly is the fact that both Joyce and Austen go beyond earning the readers trust by shifting out of the first person perspective and into the third person without losing a sense of intimacy. Paul Hernandi, Professor at University of California Santa Barbara and author of *What Is Literature*?, states that “Instead of pressing the contents of Stephen's troubled mind into the rigid frame of verbal communication, the narrator renders them obliquely, substituting ‘he’ for ‘I,’ simple past for present, pluperfect for present perfect, and conditional for future in what would otherwise be Stephen's silent soliloquy. But this series of substitutions does not result in lack of immediacy” (Hernadi 37). Despite being written in the third person, the narrator is communicating the thoughts and inner dialogue of the character, making it seem at times that he or she *is* the narrator, all while still remaining in the third person. In both books, the reader gets an inside perspective on the thoughts of Emma and Stephen without losing the sense of authority brought by the third person perspective.

*Emma* and Austen’s Use of Free Indirect Discourse

When writing *Emma*, Austen perfected her use of free indirect discourse, making it a tool that would mark her novel as revolutionary while opening possibilities for the future of fiction. While this novel may seem like a very quiet kind of brilliance, it’s impact on fiction seems to have no end. What exactly did Austen do to make *Emma* so successful, and how did she integrate free indirect discourse in a way that made it easy for future writers to borrow from, recognize, and understand? While Emma may seem like nothing more than a local wealthy matchmaker, her apparently harmless position severely shifts her point of view, which in turn causes problems on a larger scale. The reader sees the events of Highbury through Emma’s perspective for most of the novel, but certain sections switch perspectives to give readers clues as to what is really going on. Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, both Harvard English Professors, say it is especially the use of gossip that makes these techniques so successful:

Gossip functions as a powerful form of authority because its source is nowhere and everywhere at once. In *Emma*, indeed, rumor constitutes authority's most effective mode because it comprises a discursive strategy that tends to naturalize its operations, to disseminate them everywhere, and therefore to disguise them. Within the novel, gossip ceases to be a matter of this or that piece of “tittle-tattle,” this or that idle speculation, and becomes instead the very ground upon which the community is articulated, identified, and controlled. (Bowen and Finch 2)

In the third volume, most readers are convinced of Frank Churchill’s goodness and romantic potential because their perspective is skewed by Emma’s thoughts. In reality, he is leading Emma on while having a secret love affair with the mysterious Jane Fairfax. Just as readers become comfortable with Emma’s assumptions, Austen switches into Mr. Knightley’s perspective so the reader can see Mr. Churchill through fresh eyes: “It comes at a crucial point, where Frank uncharacteristically blunders by mentioning an item of parochial gossip that he can only know from his secret correspondence with Jane: Mr. Perry the apothecary is getting a carriage” (Mullan). This may seem like an insignificant detail, but it sows the seeds of distrust between Mr. Knightley and Frank Churchill that eventually help the reader to discover Mr. Churchill’s true intentions. Realizing that Mr. Churchill could not know this small detail without close correspondence with Jane, Mr. Knightley warns Emma that there may be some secret intimacy between them. Emma, of course, brushes off Mr. Knightley’s warning, but it is enough for readers to catch on to the tangle of deceit and miscommunication unfolding in the novel. When Emma finally does realize Mr. Churchill’s deceit, Kaplan says this moment of inward growth and recognition is essential to what makes *Emma* such a brilliant book: “this growth was, in small measure, an epiphany that just seemed a hiccup in the direction of change; sometimes it was a real turn in the psyche, showing the truth of her inner self and thereby paving the way for real change” (Kaplan). In a few small details, Austen successfully jars the reader from the spell of Emma’s consciousness long enough to question how reliable Emma’s perspective truly is.

Conclusion

Jane Austen came from a background of little education, little money and little social standing. In spite of her humble beginnings and consequently humble life, Austen managed to become a literary giant who is still revered today. Austen’s *Emma* changed the way author’s understood their audience in a way that is still affecting current literature. Authors have long incorporated mysteries and riddles for their readers to decypher, but Austen changed what readers could consider trustworthy. Through her subtle mystery plots, skillful use of gossip, experimental narration style and a host of other literary techniques, Austen created a book that would become both a great classic and an influence on modern fiction for generations to come. Although the plot and romance initially seem far from revolutionary, *Emma* contains more intellectual substance beneath the surface than most readers realize. The subject of *Emma* is not what defines this novel as revolutionary, but rather the form and technique Austen used to change the way people write and consume fiction.

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