

Chapter VII

JANE AUSTEN'S NARRATIVE TONE

Having dealt at some length with the various methods Jane Austen employs to carry on her narrative, we must now pay attention to the various narrative tones in her novels, so as to complete the study of her narrative techniques. If one lacks sensitivity to the tone which she imparts to her novels, he is likely to underrate her skill. As we read the novels, we are often aware of Jane Austen herself, standing in some sort of relation to the narrative, and conveying certain subtleties of feeling to incidents and conversations.¹ Superficially, she seems to be a mere neutral observer of behavior, but is she really neutral? Here is a sample passage:

Mr. Woodhouse was fond of society in his own way. He liked very much to have his friends come and see him; and from various united causes, from his long residence at Hartfield; and his good nature, from his fortune, his house, and his daughter, he could command the visits of his own little circle, in a great measure as he liked. He had not much intercourse with any families beyond that circle; his horror of late hours and large dinner-parties made him unfit for any acquaintance, but such as would visit him on his own terms. Fortunately for him, Highbury, including Randalls in the same parish, and Donwell Abbey in the parish adjoining, the seat of Mr. Knightley, comprehended many such. Not unfrequently, through Emma's persuasion, he had some of the chosen and the best to dine with him, but evening parties were what he preferred, and, unless he fancied himself at any time unequal to

¹John Halperin, The Language of Meditation (Elms Court, 1973), p. 36.

company, there was scarcely an evening in the week in which Emma could not make up a card-table for him.

(*Emma*, chapter III, page 30)

From this paragraph, Mr. Woodhouse's exposition appears on the surface to be delivered in a wholly straight-forward manner. However, a close look will betray this narrative as a revelation of Mr. Woodhouse's tyranny as well as his dependence. A cue is provided by the first sentence: "Mr. Woodhouse was fond...in his own way". When we read on, we find that everything turns on him; i.e., "He liked...his friends ...see him, ...his long residence...his good nature...his fortune, his house, and his daughter, he could command...his own circle...he liked ...his horror...made him unfit...visit him on his own terms...he preferred...he fancied...a card-table for him". Jane Austen successfully emphasizes Mr. Woodhouse's ego-centrism through the repetition of "he", "him", "his". These three forms occur very frequently, highlighting the fact that subject, and possessor are only different aspects of one all-encompassing ego.²

Moreover, this paragraph is employed by the impersonal narrator to convey one important theme of the novel: tyranny in the form of exploitation of one human being by another in the guise of affection. He tyrannizes over his daughter, friends and neighbours by exploiting his dependence upon them. In the guise of love and fondness, he "commands" them to see him in a "great measure as he liked". This

²Wayne Booth, *Control of Distance in Jane Austen's Emma* (London, 1961), p. 196.

theme is reflected later in Emma's befriending of Harriet Smith, in Frank Churchill's exploiting both Emma and Jane Fairfax, in Mrs. Churchill's tyranny over Frank, and in Miss Bates' attitude to Jane. One need not pursue the point further, except to observe that, despite her deceptively straightforward manner, Jane Austen as impersonal narrator is neither simple nor neutral.

The way Jane Austen presents her material is necessarily part of the material itself. Northanger Abbey is written with an intention to parody the sentimental novels much beloved by her contemporaries; so the impersonal narrative voice belongs to the satirist. The story opens with the impersonal narrator stating the disqualifications of Catherine Morland as a heroine. First, her parentage is against her:

Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard -- and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence, besides two good livings -- and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as any body might expect, she still lived on -- lived to have six children more -- to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself.

(Northanger Abbey, chapter I, page 37)

Second, Catherine grows up with no claim to beauty and less to accomplishment:

She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid.

(Northanger Abbey, chapter I, page 37)

Third, even when she has been "improved", the height of her musical powers is to "listen to other people's performance with very little fatigue", and as to drawing, she would be unable to "attempt a sketch of her lover's profile, that she might be detected in the design" (Northanger Abbey, chapter I, page 40), even if she had a lover.

Fourth, "she had reached the age of seventeen, without having seen one amiable youth...This was strange indeed!...There was not one lord in the neighbourhood; no -- not even a baronet" (Northanger Abbey, chapter I, page 40.). Moreover:

There was not one family among their acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door -- not one young man whose origin was unknown. Her father had no ward, and the squire of the parish no children.

(Northanger Abbey, chapter I, page 40)

Last, her departure from home is unheroic for it is remarkable that:

...she [Sarah] neither insisted on Catherine's writing by every post, nor exacted her promise of transmitting the character of every new acquaintance, nor a detail of every interesting conversation that Bath might produce. Every thing indeed relative to this important journey was done, on the part of the Morlands, with a degree of moderation and composure, which seemed rather consistent with the common feelings of common life, than with the refined susceptibilities, the tender emotions which the first separation of a heroine from her

family ought always to excoite. Her father, instead of giving her an unlimited order on his banker, or even putting an hundred pounds bank-bill into her hands, gave her only ten guineas, and promised her more when she wanted it.

Under these unpromising auspices, the parting took place, and the journey began. It was performed with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero. Nothing more alarming occurred than a fear on Mrs. Allen's side, of having once left her ologs behind her at an inn, and that fortunately proved to be groundless.

(Northanger Abbey, chapter II, page 42)

Who is speaking here? Who is telling the story? Obviously, Jane Austen is identifying herself with the sentimental novelist. Who would expect the heroine's father to be handsome, but poor and neglected? Who would expect him to lock up his daughters? Who would expect her mother to die in giving birth to the heroine? Who would insist on Catherine's writing by post? Who would expect the heroine to be "befriended" by robbers on her short journey? Only the reader of sentimental novels. There is obviously a pretence and a calculated illusion here, the pretence that the author is herself a sentimental novelist, and the calculated illusion that the audience will be composed of readers of this kind. Here Jane Austen pretends to identify herself, as far as possible, with the sentimental novelist in order to lead the reader to make the implied ironic reversals and thus to understand the real viewpoint from which the story is

being told.³

Mansfield Park is a book dealing with ordination and religious ethics. The strict moralizing tone of this novel stems in part from the frequent indirect comments by the impersonal narrator. After Mrs. Norris has confirmed the two Miss Bertrams' impression that Fanny is stupid because she does not know or "want to learn either music or drawing" (Mansfield Park, chapter II, page 55), the impersonal narrator sharply comments:

Such were the counsels by which Mrs. Norris assisted to form her nieces' minds; and it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. In everything but disposition, they were admirably taught.

(Mansfield Park, chapter II, page 55)

Another example is provided by the analysis of Maria's character:

In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete; being prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquillity; by the misery of disappointed affection; and contempt of the man she was to marry.

(Mansfield Park, chapter XXI, page 216)

Biting and humourless irony are evident in both paragraphs quoted. The tone of the impersonal narrator is highly serious and strongly accentuated with moral censure.

³Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art (London, 1939), p. 42.

Jane Austen's ability to command a variety of tone proper to different kinds of narrative is seen not only in the narrative of the impersonal narrator but also in the speeches of the characters.

Take Pride and Prejudice. In this novel, she allows the spirit of comedy to govern her characters' language as long as it may, for example:

"My dearest sister, now be, be serious. I want to talk very seriously. Let me know every thing that I am to know, without delay. Will you tell me how long you have loved him?"

"It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley".

Another entreaty that she would be serious, however, produced the desired effect; and she soon satisfied Jane by her solemn assurances of attachment.

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter LIX, page 277-278)

Here is another dialogue, like many others in Pride and Prejudice, tinged with a rhythm of comedy.

"So, Lizzy," said he [Mr. Bennet] one day, "your sister [Jane] is crossed in love, I find. I congratulate her. Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then. It is something to think of, and gives her a sort of distinction among her companions. When is your turn to come? You will hardly bear to be long outdone by Jane. Now is your time. Here are officers enough at Maryton to disappoint all the young ladies in the country. Let Wickham be your man. He is a pleasant fellow, and would jilt you creditably."

"Thank you, sir, but a less agreeable man would satisfy me. We must not all expect Jane's good fortune."

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XXVI, page 103-104)

Or later, after the elopement, though in state of depression

Mr. Bennet remarks:

"Wickham's a fool, if he takes her with a farthing less than ten thousand pounds: I should be sorry to think so ill of him, in the very beginning of our relationship."

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XLIX, page 224)

All these speeches prove that even the tone of the dialogue is rendered in accordance with the tone of the novel as a whole.

However, in reading Jane Austen's novels, one should not concentrate only on one aspect. By concentrating merely on their amusing qualities, he will make them seem much less substantial and important than they really are. On the other hand, by concentrating only on the author's critical comments and moral tone, he will make her books seem much heavier, more intensively moral, and duller books than in fact they are.

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