

On Jane Austen's style:

“The narrative style of *Pride and Prejudice* is elegant, prim, and judicious. Colorful storytelling and vivid comment are left to the characters; the narrator's remarks are confined to measured summary....the narrator's impersonality implies that all people of sense will see things as they are presented in the book. This lofty point of view is asserted at the outset: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” ...

The narrative style of the book presents a consistent standard of polite behavior against which the characters are measured, often to fall short. At times the narrator's slight inflation of language in describing what is actually taking place seems a prim withdrawal from a sharper judgment. ...Lydia and Kitty's glee in officers is seen as “felicity,” ...and the Miss Bingleys do not sneer, they “indulge their mirth.” The narrator appears to gloss over those elements in the story that appear improper, but in doing this the discrepancy between the actions and the words that describe them is widened, the essential crudity heightened by surface polish. When Mrs. Bennet's shrill complaints are termed “gentle murmurs,” the polite cliché introduces a standard of proper behavior that Mrs. Bennet does not meet.....

There is a sharp contrast between the language of the characters and the modulated tones of the narrative. The book is rich in well-defined characters with unmistakable idioms, and the variety of the characters' styles accounts for much of the fun.Lady Catherine's language is fierce, and Mrs. Bennet's hectic exclamations reveal a character the narrator's polite idiom cannot do justice to: “Well, my comfort is I am sure Jane will die of a broken heart, and then he will be sorry for what he has done.” The follies, self-deception, vulgarity and deceit of the characters stand out clearly against the grace and polish of the narrative style.

Joann Morse, Afterword. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Signet, 1961. 327-32.

Free Indirect Speech or Style

A character's internal speech or thought is freed of its authorial flagging; no “he said to himself” or “he wondered” or “he thought.”

“Mr. Bingley had soon made himself acquainted with all the principal people in the room; he was lively and unreserved, danced every dance, was angry that the ball closed so early, and talked of giving one himself at Netherfield.”

Here we can hear Mr. Bingley speaking in the phrase “was angry that the ball closed so early(11).” That's something Mr. Bingley himself would say, and is an example of free indirect style.

“Note the gain in flexibility. The narrative seems to float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to “own” the words. The writer is free to inflect the reported thought, to bend it around the character's own words (“”). We are close to stream-of-consciousness, and that is the direction free indirect style takes in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.....

Thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once....This is merely another definition of dramatic irony: to see through a character's eyes while being encouraged to see more than the character can see.

In the opening of Chapter 5 of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen introduces us to Sir William Lucas, once the mayor of Longbourne, who, knighted by the king, has decided that he is too big for the town, and must move to a new pile:

“ Sir William Lucas had been formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune and risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the King during his mayoralty. The distinction had perhaps been felt too strongly. It had given him a disgust to his business and to his residence in a small market town; and quitting them both, he had removed with his family to a house about a mile from Meryton, denominated from that period Lucas Lodge, where he could think with pleasure of his own importance....”

Austen’s irony dances over this...:”Where he had made a tolerable fortune.” What is, or would be a “tolerable” fortune? Intolerable to whom, tolerated by whom? But the great example of mock-heroic comedy resides in that phrase “denominated from that period Lucas Lodge.” Lucas Lodge is funny enough; it is like Toad of Toad Hall...., and we can be sure that the house does not quite measure up to its alliterative grandeur. But the pomposity of “denominated from that period” is funny because we can imagine Sir William saying to himself “and I will denominate the house, from this period, Lucas Lodge. Yes, that sounds prodigious.”...Austen has handed the language over to Sir William, but she is still tartly in control.

James Wood. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux. 2008. 9-21.