

Irony in Pride and Prejudice

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Abstract:

The basic feature of every irony is a contrast between reality and appearance. Jane Austen makes use of irony at different levels. She makes use of it in her narrative style to uncover the incongruities, even contradictions existing under the surface harmony, thereby adding a rich subtlety and complexity to her style and making it fit to be analyzed and interpreted at different levels. Her irony in her characterization to expose her character's misunderstanding of others as well as their own self deception. Even her dialogues are full of dramatic irony; they have one interpretation for the speaker, and quite another for the reader to who possesses more information than the speaker. Sometimes certain words uttered by a particular character and certain situations get imbued with ironic implications in the light of what happens later in the novel. Jane Austen's use of irony lends compactness, clarity and subtlety to her narrative, depth to her characterization, a comic touch to her plot, and it keeps her reader titillated and amused.

Keyword—Pride, Prejudice, Intricacy, Imprudence, Marriage.

Ironic theme of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ Like all other novels of Jane Austen, the theme of Pride and Prejudice also easily lends itself to an ironic interpretation. At the ironic level, Pride and Prejudice presents the contrast between ‘intricacy and simplicity’ as those terms applies to personality’. Darcy and Elizabeth’s intricacy is set against Jane and Bingley’s simplicity. The first two have depth, but their depth involves them in the dangers of Pride and Prejudice. The latter two are quite simple, and their simplicity turns out to be a virtue. But which one is more attractive and even preferable- the intricacy of the first two or the simplicity of the later is a question to the readers.

Both intricacy and simplicity have their virtues; both are equally desirable; on the other hand, both of them have their dangers too. Perhaps one would like to be both intricate and simple at the same time,

but the irony is that they are mutually exclusive and incompatible.

Ironic Tone of the Narrative.

Jane Austen’s ironic tone is established in the very first sentence of the novel “it is truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession a good fortune in must be in want of wife.” The first half of the sentence suggests that some great ‘universal’ truth is the subject of the novel. There is an ironic deflation in the second half when this truth is found to be concerned with a common social problem- marriage. The sentence itself means that people assume that a well- to- do young man should be on the look-out for a suitable wife. It conceals beneath it an ironic thought that in reality things may the other way round.

It quite likely that woman in the neighborhood of this young man are

desirous of having such a husband and he may be the hunted one rather than the hunter. Jane Austen's implications became clear when in the next paragraph the young man is even called the 'rightful property' of some young lady. In the same chapter, summing up Mrs. Bennett's character, Jane Austen writes, "the business of her life was to get her daughters married, its solace was visiting and news". Here the ironic implication is that she is not likely to show much discrimination about the young man they choose as their husbands- a fact later confirmed by her sense of exaltation in Lydia's marriage of Wickham.

Another example of this type of irony may be taken from the description of miss. Bingley and Mrs. Hurst in chapter IV- "they were in fact very fine ladies; not deficient in good humor when they were pleased nor in the power of being agreeable when they choose it, but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome, had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than thou ought, and of associating with people of rank, and were, therefore, in every respect entitled to think well of themselves and meanly of others."

Here the ironic implications of the expression ' very fine ladies' became clear as the readers have acquainted with their Pride, snobbery, selfishness. Such an ironic tone pervades the entire novel. A still finer example of this kind of irony may be found in the following words of Mr. Bennett about Mr. Wickham in chapter53;

He is as fine a fellow as ever I saw. He simpers, and smirks, and makes love to us all. I am prodigiously proud of him. I defy even sir William Lucas himself to produce a more valuable son-in-law.

In order to realize the ironic hidden in these words the reader can only to remain

themselves that the valuable son-in-law of sir William Lucas is none else but the affected ass Mr. Collins.

Irony of situation

Most of the event and situations in Pride and Prejudice have been given an ironic twist. Mr. Darcy remarks about Elizabeth that "she is not handsome enough to tempt me" and soon after gets captivated by her enormous eyes. Taking into consideration the imprudence of a marriage alliance with the Bennett family, he removes Bingley from netherfield but makes the same alliance himself. Collins proposes to Elizabeth when her heart is too full of Wickham. Darcy proposes to her exactly at the moment when she hates him most. Elizabeth quite emphatically tells Mr. Collins that she is not the type of girl who will reject the first proposal of marriage and accept the second, but this is what she exactly does. The departure of the militia from Meryton was expected to put an end to Lydia's flirtations; it brings about her elopement.

Elizabeth thought that her prospects of marriage to Darcy were blasted by the infamy of Lydia's misconduct, but the affair actually brings them together. Miss. Caroline Bingley leaves no opportunity of casting aspersions on Elizabeth and her family. But she succeeds only betraying her own ill breeding and alienating Mr. Darcy. Lady Catherine's intervention to check the marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy helps to expedite it. Examples of this type of irony are innumerable and can be picked from anywhere in the novel

Irony of character

Irony of character is even more prominent than irony of situation. Is not it ironical that Elizabeth, who prides herself on her perception and disdains Jane's blindness to realities, is herself quite blinded by her

prejudices? Darcy always thought he was such a gentleman, but his proposal to Elizabeth is quite ungentlemanly. Wickham is graceful to look at polished and rewinding his manners but at heart he is an unredeemed villain. The Bingley sisters hate the Bennets for their vulgarity but are themselves vulgar. The fact is that there are incongruities and contradictions inherent in human nature itself, and Jane Austen quite amused herself portrays them for the amusement and edification of his readers

Irony as a source of rich comedy

Irony in Jane Austen's hand is always a means to rich comedy. She enjoys depicting the incongruities of character but she does not allow them to taint the atmosphere of gaiety and mirth that fills the pages of her novels. Mrs. Bennett's vulgarity drives away the suitors but only temporarily. Lydia's thoughtlessness threatens irreparable disgrace but ultimately her marriage with Wickham does materialize. It is interesting to note that it is the villainous characters, Wickham and Lady Catherine who are responsible for uniting Elizabeth and Darcy.

Dramatic irony is one of the prominent features of Pride and Prejudice. The difference between appearance and reality is emphasized at every stage. Wickham appears to be refined and cultured but turns out to be villainous. Darcy is seemingly ill mannered, but the reader find him a fine gentleman. Caroline tries to prejudice Darcy against Elizabeth but the more she maligns her, the more Darcy is attracted towards her. Mrs. Bennett's efforts are aimed at trapping eligible suitors but she succeeds in only driving them away.

Lydia's elopement with Wickham is supposed to jeopardize Elizabeth's marriage with Darcy; it brings it about. Lady Catherine wants to prevent this marriage, but she simply facilitates it. Darcy checks

bingley from marrying a Bennett girl but ends up by marrying one himself. Elizabeth tells Collins that she is not the type of girl who will reject the first proposal and accept the second, but this is precisely what she does.

There is a dramatic irony at the narrative level pervading practically every page of the novel. Mrs. Bennett tells her husband that their daughters after all cannot be expected to have sense of their parents. And how sensible are the parents indeed. Mr. Bennett exclaims that Wickham happens to be his favorite son-in-law, and that why shouldn't he be after all the discomfort he has caused.

In Pride and Prejudice both the action and the characters develop through dialogues. It is rarely that Jane Austen indulges in direct comment, description or analysis. Mostly she is in the background and lets her drama unfold in itself or her characters reveal themselves through short, pithy dialogues. The reader may also learn about her characters from what others have to say. In the first chapter, Mr. and Mrs. Bennett reveal themselves before the novelist sums up their essential qualities.

The reader comes to know Mr. Collins through his letters before he makes a personal appearance at long bourn. Lady Catherine is first seen through the eyes of Collins, and then of Wickham and finally the reader meets her personally at Rosings. Some of the scenes have got great dramatic vividness and intensity. The hero Darcy, Elizabeth repartees at netherfield, the two proposal scenes, the clash between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth. In such scenes, Jane Austen reveals herself as a master dramatist with a perfect ear, a perfect sense of timing, a shrewd instinct for climax and anti-climax.

Conclusion

Jane Austen's irony is not tinged with any bitterness nor does it reflect her

cynicism. It is amusing but it is not just verbal wit for local entertainment. It provokes some deep thinking over some significant issues of human life. Hence irony in her hands neither indifferent nor responsible. Jane Austen is objective in her observation and depiction of the reality of life but not in her evaluation of the moral values governing this reality. She has her own ethos, her own set of values- whether adequate or not is an entirely different issue- and she makes her pronouncements on human activity with appreciable consistency. Thus irony in her hands is an instrument of moral vision and not a technique of rejection.

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