

INTRODUCTION

One can not but marvel at the high excellence Austen had reached in her use of irony both in quick repartees and surprising turns of situations. Irony is Jane Austen's forte, and much of her humour emanates from her use of irony. An important objective of the work is to trace Austen's departure from traditional approaches to the novel. With no exhibitionist critical apparatus, such as Fielding's theory of the comic epic, no pretentiously announced moral purpose such as Richardson kept repeating, Jane Austen is primarily known for her method of portrayal which is based upon acute observation and a quiet but incisive irony.

The novels of Jane Austen have received attention from a wide range of reviewers and critics. In fact, there are quite a number of relevant books and we can only mention a few. Most of these works introduce the readers to the varieties of opinion among professional critics. For example, one may refer to '*Jane Austen and the French Revolution*' by Warren Roberts (London, Macmillan, 1979), and '*Jane Austen in a Social Context*' by Dravid Monaghan (London, Macmillan, 1981) that consider Austen in historical and social perspectives

respectively. Then there are titles dealing with Jane Austen and the Woman Question, e.g. '*Jane Austen and the Question of Women's Educaion*', by Barbara Horwitz (New York, Lang, 1991). However, there hardly exists any full-length work on Jane Austen as an Ironist. Relevantly, Mr. Peter Conrad in his 'Introduction' to *Pride and Prejudice* (Everyman's Library, 1991) and Nicholas Marsh in his book *How to begin Studing English Liteature* (Macmillan, 1995) have made some references to the element of irony in Austen's novels. In this connection we may refer to two other titles containing chapters or essays on Austen's art which may bring an illuminating angle to bear upon her writing : first, *An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels: Character, Value & Ironic Perspective*, by John Odmark (Oxford : Black Well, 1981), and secondly, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity*, by Roger Gard (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1992).

There is no denying the fact that irony constitutes one of the major charms of Austen's novels. In other words, it is the very soul of her novels. Hence the chief objective of the work is to show how the ironic vision of the author has got its exposition through the weaving of the ideal and reality.

It will be quite pertinent here to discuss the five lettered small word 'irony'. It baffles us like anything eluding our attempts to comprehend its essence with the help of our known parameters. Notwithstanding the great difficulties one would come across in understanding the real significance of irony, the chief aim here would be to make an analysis of the modus operandi of irony in Austen's novels. Here the introductory chapter aims at presenting a general survey of irony - its growth, development and the characteristic features of its different types. In the succeeding chapters an attempt has made to trace Austen's characteristic use of irony with reference to each of her six novels. As for example, in *Northanger Abbey*, the first written of all her published novels, which presents the unpretentious story of a rather ordinary girl, the irony is sometimes a little crude in comparison with what Jane Austen showed she could do in later novels, but it is always carefully poised and well-directed. The tone is not mock-heroic or burlesque; a note of affectionate understanding runs together with the irony.

To one who has first become acquainted with Austen's maturer novels, *Sense and Sensibility* is lacking in subtlety and quiet irony. Here the ironical situations are rather restricted in its object. The

characterization is limited to the needs of the plot and of the ironic intentions, and the plot itself is rather awkwardly contrived. While a kind of unsentimental realism informs the presentation of Marianne. In presenting her Austen rather appears to be an affectionately ironic observer of the relations between society and individual personality. The adolescent energy and earnestness of *Sense and Sensibility* give place to a flow of detached ironic humour, not a new medium for Austen, but hitherto handled bluntly and somewhat unskillfully.

Jane Austen characteristically finds ways of subordinating her part as narrator; irony is not merely an attitude, it is a method of presentation, organization, analysis and judgment. Her skill in irony is at its greatest in *Pride and Prejudice* and also in *Emma*, where she can be serious without even being solemn. The irony and a good deal of the comedy of the first part of *Pride and Prejudice* come from the difference between what Mr. Darcy means and what Elizabeth thinks he means, between what Elizabeth's replies intend and how they appear to Darcy. The misunderstanding is all Elizabeth's doing, though the speeches of both are most skilfully ambiguous. Dramatic irony of this kind abounds in the novel. There is always a sharp contrast between knowledge and truth, between what the characters

understand and what the reader understands, between intention or expectation and fulfilment.

Austen's mastery of the art of ironic exposure is equally evident in *Emma*. Here there is irony in the dialogue, irony in the situation and a deliberate conscious irony in the technique of characterization. The three major narrative movements in the novel are built on irony. Of the highest importance is, however, the verbal irony, with which the novel seems to be permeated.

One of the major objectives of this approach is to trace how Jane Austen has projected her comic vision through the ironic treatment of situations, episodes and characters. Significantly, Austen's ironic world-view is an important contribution to the English novel. The irony of *Sense and Sensibility* is that the claims of sense and sensibility are irreconcilable. It is equally interesting to examine how far Austen's sense of the ironic is aroused by her reaction against the absurdities of the sentimental and Gothic novels she encountered. Her dissection of snobbery, bourgeois morality and hypocrisy in an understated manner may be viewed in terms of a relief from the excesses of many of her contemporaries.

We take our next example from *Mansfield Park* in which the irony provokes the readers to think about the different implications and attitudes they find. Thus the concluding sentence of *Mansfield Park* provokes thoughts and questions : Has Fanny forgotten all her sufferings at Mansfield Park? Does Fanny now believe the male and oppressive authority of Sir Thomas to be perfect? Has Fanny become short-sighted and narrow minded as she has now the man she always wanted? The simple irony of Fanny's uncritical attitude in this concluding sentence of *Mansfield Park* has given rise to far-reaching questions. These questions invariably touch on the themes of the novel and on the philosophy of the author.

The ironical implication is also significant in *Persuasion* in which Jane Austen allows many of her characters to be seen through Anne's eyes, but she is not content to do this consistently and adds her own coldly ironic gaze at frequent intervals. There is a colder irony in *Persuasion* than in any other of Jane Austen's novels. Sir Walter Elliot is very different from the well-meaning if pompously unimaginative Sir Thomas Bertram who is summed up in the opening of the novel, *Mansfield Park*. In the same way, one finds, *Persuasion* opens with a character-sketch of Sir Walter Elliot which is obviously ironical and

thus a source of much humour and amusement. He is described as having a great respect for himself because he combines the blessings of handsome looks with the blessing of a baronetcy.

Hence, Jane Austen has projected her comic vision through the ironic treatment of situations, episodes and characters. Significantly, Austen's ironic world-view is an important contribution to the English novel.