

## PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

In *Pride and Prejudice* the chief aim of the novelist is to exhibit the distinction between appearance and reality so as to make her readers conscious of the need of discovering reality at every step of their life. Austen's narrative technique is full of such irony as comes to expose the incongruity underlying the apparent or surface harmony which makes her style rich enough in subtlety and complexity for which Henry James welcomed her as the first modern novelist. In technical excellence she seems to be second to none because of the taut and coherent structure and dramatic skill employed in her novels, particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*.

A close analysis of the plot of the novel reveals Austen's masterly use of irony. Almost at every stage of the novel Austen lays stress on the difference between appearance and reality. The seemingly refined and cultured man turns out to be villainous and the boorish one as refined gentleman. Though Mrs. Bennet's effort is always directed at catching the suitors, she in reality scares them away. The effort of Lady Catherine and Miss Caroline is intended to sabotage the prospect of union of Elizabeth and Darcy, but this ultimately turns out to be

the catalytic agent in their happy union. Moreover, Miss Bingley maligns Elizabeth to degrade her in Darcy's eyes. She thinks that this will help her to secure Darcy for herself. Little does she know that her efforts are blasting all chances of matrimonial alliance between them. Besides these, there are other fine instances of use of irony. Elizabeth was terribly mortified when Lydia eloped with Wickham as she thought that the case of the elopement shall spell a disaster to her union with Darcy. But in reality the opposite only happened as it facilitated their union in the long run.

The whole plot of the novel deals with the contrast between intricacy and simplicity at an ironic level. The two sets of characters, so to say, Darcy and Elizabeth, and Jane and Bingley, represent this ironic contrast. The first two are intricate characters while the last pair are simple. Intricacy and simplicity are two desirable aspects of character, but they are mutually incompatible and here lies the irony. On this basis, we find in the title of the novel an ironic interpretation of the theme dealt within this novel.

Austen's narrative technique is spun with superfine threads of irony adding subtle humour throughout the novel. She has her

comments very cleverly contrived, of course, with a meaning lurking beneath the calm surface, yet always forcing the readers to find their own meaning. The first chapter of the novel is so finely done that no less a critic than Bradley had to say that had she written only the first chapter of the novel and nothing else, she could have claimed immortality <sup>in</sup> of English fiction.

Verbal irony pervading the whole novel makes it much too admirable. Let us take the beginning line as an example. It reads:

*"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."*

Reading this initially we think that the great universal truth is the theme of the novel but the last section of the sentence declares that the truth is nothing more than the common social problem of marriage. The irony is that the young man does not really search after a young girl, but truly the young girls in the locality are desirous of getting such a partner of life. He is, in fact, the 'rightful property' of

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1. *Pride and Prejudice*; Ch-1; P-321.

a lucky young lady. The ironic tone of the novel is thus established at its very outset.

The novel is replete with such verbal irony. Let us take the example of Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst as in chapter IV. It reads:

*"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 they ought, and of associating with people of rank, and were, therefore, in every respect entitled to well of themselves and meanly to others".<sup>2</sup>*

The irony becomes transparently clear when we find them proud, snobbish and utterly selfish. Let us recapitulate the remark of Mr. Bennet about Mr. Wickham in a later chapter:

*"I am prodigiously proud of him. I defy even Sir William Lucas himself to produce a more valuable son-in-law".<sup>3</sup>*

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2. Ibid; Ch-4; P-238

3. Ibid; Ch-53; P-429.

We can well appreciate the impact of this irony when we know that the so-called valuable son-in-law is none other than the seemingly stupid Mr. Collins.

Further, all the events and situations in this novel have been ironically contrived, a few of such things have already been discussed. Irony of characters is yet another point of interest. We see Elizabeth Bennet boasts of her perception and calls in question Jane's who is alleged to be blind to realities. But she is unaware of the fact that she herself is blinded by prejudices. Again, Darcy's claim to be a gentleman is tarnished by his ungentlemanly proposal to Elizabeth. Bingley Sisters hate the Bennets being unrefined while they prove themselves to be such. Jane Austen was very much amused by the contradictions inherent in human nature which she painted nicely to amuse her readers. In chapter VIII where the Bingley Sisters refer to Elizabeth's "low connections" and thereby indicate the social difference between Darcy and Elizabeth, readers wonder if Darcy's remark about Elizabeth's poor chances of marrying "a man of any consideration in the world" will not prove to be ironic. Again towards the close of chapter XI, we find Darcy is aware of his growing attractions for Elizabeth: "He began to feel the danger of paying Elizabeth too much attention."

The irony is that Elizabeth, who thinks that Darcy still dislikes her, and does not, therefore, even try to interest Darcy, is actually attracting him by her sharp wit, intellect and spirited repartees. Again in the portrayal of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's pride and good breeding, two of the themes of the novel, are treated ironically. We see that this highborn lady has really poor manners and her treatment of others betrays her lack of taste and principles of decorum.

The dialogues of *Pride and Prejudice* have been rendered effective by verbal irony. Mr. Bennet is in the habit of speaking ironically to his wife, and this is evident when he says that he has no compassion on her poor nerves:

*"you mistake me, my dear, I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at last."*<sup>4</sup>

It is a beautiful instance of verbal irony and we have no difficulty in understanding that he means the very opposite of what he says.

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4. Ibid; Ch-1; P-232

Actually he means that she has complained about her nerves incessantly ever since their marriage, and he finds the mention of her 'nerves' intensely irritating or ridiculous. More importantly, Mr. Bennet's words prepare the readers for some authorial remarks:

*"Mrs. Bennet was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper, when she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news."*<sup>5</sup>

Significantly Mrs. Bennet's appearance (her good looks) conceals from Mr. Bennet her reality (her mean understanding and illiberal mind) but when he discovers it, he is disillusioned and loses interest in his life. The misery of Mr. Bennet's life emphasizes the importance of making a timely distinction between appearance and reality.

Again, one is aware of the irony hidden in Darcy's statement about Elizabeth. When Mr. Bingley asked Mr. Darcy to dance with Elizabeth, he looked for a while at Elizabeth and coldly said:

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5. Ibid; Ch-1; P-232

*"She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men."*<sup>6</sup>

We relish the ironic flavour of this statement much later when we reflect, in retrospect, that the woman who, in Darcy's eyes, was not handsome enough to dance with was really good enough to marry.

Another fine example of irony may be taken from the description of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst:

*"They were in fact very fine ladies; not deficient in good humour when they were pleased nor in the power of being agreeable when they choose it; but proud and conceited."*<sup>7</sup>

Here the ironic implications of the expression 'very fine ladies' become clear as we are acquainted with their pride, snobbery and selfishness. But Jane is not very discriminating in her judgment of character. She never sees any fault in anybody and therefore considers even the proud conceited Bingley sisters charming. Elizabeth, on the

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6. Ibid; Ch-3; P-236

7. Ibid; Ch-4; P-238

other hand, is able to see through their conceit. Darcy also understands the distinction between appearance and reality only gradually. To him, in the beginning, lower middle class people belonging to the countryside appear to be vulgar and unrefined whereas refinement and culturedness appear to be the attributes of aristocracy. He gradually learns better and subsequently realizes that Jane and Elizabeth are refined whereas Lady Catherine and Bingley sisters are utterly alien to good manners.

Jane Austen's instinctive attitude is that of a humorist. Her first impulse was humour. The follies and foibles, illusions and self-contradictions of human nature were a joy to her for their own sake. She would have found little zest in an ideal world so perfectly cured of folly as to be completely deprived of matter for laughter.

The technique of ironic statement frees Jane Austen from the necessity of making involved commentaries on her character. It is left to the reader to understand the full force of the irony, and to make the criticism himself. 'Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth — and it was soon done — done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire.' Taken at its face value this is merely a statement of

fact—while Mrs. Bennet stirred the fire, Mr. Collins decided to marry Elizabeth instead of Jane. But there are implications behind Jane Austen's statement brought out by phrases such as 'had only to change', 'soon done'. Mr. Collins is considering a serious step, *i.e.* marriage, yet the woman involved is of so little importance to him as a person that he can change his mind in a second. And as yet he knows nothing of the feelings of either sister towards him. This is an aspect of Jane Austen's technique of ironic comment—a statement which does not seem to involve the author in any judgment, but which illuminates a character without unnecessary comment.

But these ironic statements are <sup>all</sup> made by Jane Austen *about* her characters. A further technique of irony is to put a speech into a character's mouth which is not intended by the speaker as irony but becomes ironic in effect. In this case, *the character* is made to say more than he intends, though it is left to the reader to notice the implications.

On Lydia's elopement with Wickham, Mr. Collins writes to Mr.

Bennet:

"I must not, however, neglect the duties of my station or refrain from declaring my amazement, at hearing that you received the young couple into your house as soon as they were married. It was an encouragement of vice; and had I been the rector of Longbourn, I should very strenuously have opposed it. You ought certainly to forgive them as a Christian, but never to admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing."

It is left to the reader to reflect upon the deficiencies of Mr. Collins' Christianity.

Of all her novels perhaps, *Pride and Prejudice* makes us laugh most. Jane Austen's problem was to draw a true picture of life which should also amuse us. She lived through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, but no shadow of their storm is permitted in her finest pictures of the sunny side of life. *Pride and Prejudice* is presented with the atmosphere of sunshine and hilarity. The immortal creation of Mr. Collins is the main source of humour in the novel. The man is ridiculous but the humour which he produces is quite unconscious. He takes everything seriously, but makes other people laugh at his words and deeds. The character of Mrs. Bennet is also a

rich source of humour. She is a gross fool and her husband a fastidious one.

Apart from these humorous characters, *Pride and Prejudice* is full of humorous situations as well. The crowning<sup>w</sup> example of such a humorous situation in the novel is the pompous stupidity of Mr. Collins's proposal to Elizabeth Bennet. The humour created by Mr. Collins gives a clue to the particular type of Jane Austen's humour. Her humour is not boisterous like that of Dickens or Fielding, nor it is bitter like that of Swift. It is delicate and ironical. But her irony is more subtle than is to be found in the writings of Addison. An especial characteristic of her humour is that it pervades the whole novel. Now satirical, now ironical, now mocking, now amusing and mock-serious, her humour changes forms according to the characters she deals with. The remarkable qualities of her humour are good sense, restraint and balance.

In her novels Austen chose to use irony as a stylistic device. The point derives support from Andrew H. Wright who rightly observes in his book *Jane Austen's Novels — A study in Structure* that "Jane Austen likewise often uses irony as a stylistic device and for quite

un-ironic purposes---to flay, to poke fun, to underline a decided judgement — when there is no real contradiction involved.”<sup>8</sup> “Pride and Prejudice and Emma are Jane Austen’s great ‘detective’ novels; in Emma the underlying mystery is kept up longer, but the plot of Pride and Prejudice till the moment of Darcy’s declaration, affords even more wonderful opportunity for irony and misunderstanding,”<sup>9</sup> —mentioned R. Liddell<sup>l</sup> in his writings regarding ironical portrayal in Jane Austen’s novels.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, there are a lot of ironical situations too which provide twists and turns to the action of the novel. Mr. Darcy remarks about Elizabeth that “she is not handsome enough to tempt me...”. Here, one can easily understand the ironic implication of this statement that the woman who was not handsome enough to dance with was really good enough to marry. He removes Bingley from Netherfield because he considers it imprudent to forge a marriage alliance with the Bennet family, but himself ends up marrying the second Bennet sister. Collins proposes to Elizabeth when her heart is full of Wickham and Darcy proposes to her exactly at the moment

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8. Andrew H. Wright: *Jane Austen's Novels-- A Study in Structure*; P-174; Penguin Books, 1964.

9. Robert Liddell: *The Novels of Jane Austen*, P-49; Longmans, 1963

when she hates him most. Elizabeth tells Mr. Collins that she is unable to reject the first proposal and accept the second but she does exactly this when Darcy proposes a second time. The Lydia - Wickham episode may seem like an insurmountable barrier between Elizabeth and Darcy, but is actually instrumental in bringing them together. Lady Catherine, attempting to prevent their marriage, only succeeds in hastening it.

In *Pride and Prejudice* irony is of a complex character. It presents the novelist's world-view in regard to the two types of human personality—simple and intricate. There are four central human pairs in the novel. At the centre there <sup>are</sup> Elizabeth and Darcy, both of whom are intricate characters. Their intricacy has both its virtues and vices. Jane and Bingley are simple and unexceptionable. Lydia and Wickham are again intricate, though woefully lacking in the breadth and humanity of the first pair. Charlotte and Collins who form the last pair are again intricate from another angle, that of the pursuit of worldly gain. Austen puts all these pairs in the milieu of love-making and brings out the contradictions in them, and sometimes through objective account, sometimes through indirect comments and sometimes through authorial remarks highlights the inseparable

admixture of intricate and simple characteristics in a human being. Herein lies the excellence of her ironic import and she imbues her novels – their subjects, structures, characterization and style – with this import. *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the best novels ever written with an ironic world-view.

With reference to Austen's use of dramatic irony in this novel one may refer to chapter 43. Mrs. Reynolds says that she does not know when her master Mr. Darcy will marry since —

*"I do not know who is good enough for him."<sup>10</sup>*

She is innocently praising him. But in Elizabeth's ear must be echoing Mr. Darcy's words:

*"She is not handsome enough to tempt me."<sup>11</sup>*

Mrs. Reynold's words, in the light of these words of Mr. Darcy and his recent proposal to Elizabeth get imbued with many ironic

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10. *Pride and Prejudice*; Ch-43; P-378

11. *Ibid*; Ch-3; P-236.

implications of which poor Mrs. Reynolds must be totally unaware.

We may also consider Mr. Bennet's words to Elizabeth in chapter 24 when Mr. Bingley has departed from Netherfield —

*"So Lizzy, your sister 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? Let Wickham be your man. He is a pleasant fellow, and would jilt you creditably ..."*<sup>12</sup>

In the words 'pleasant fellow' is hidden a dramatic irony at the expense of Mr. Bennet, for this pleasant fellow, i.e. Mr. Wickham, is destined to make a considerable dent in Mr. Bennet's complacency.

Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* is known for her wit, fine sense of humour and the spirit of caricature and ridicule. It is this sense of humour which sustains her through trials and difficulties. Darcy does not find her sufficiently pretty to tempt him. Elizabeth overhears this remark made by Darcy and she tells the story among her friends, because she has a lively sense of humour and enjoys anything that is

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12. Ibid; Ch-24; P- 314

ridiculous. While talking to Miss Bingley and Darcy, Elizabeth herself confesses that she loves to laugh at stupidity and nonsense —

“Nothing so easy, if you have but the inclination,” said Elizabeth.

“Tease him—laugh at him. Intimate as you are. You must know how it is to be done”.

“Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at!” cried Elizabeth. “That is an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to me to have many such acquaintances, I dearly love a laugh.”

*“Miss Bingley,” said he, “has given me credit for more than can be. The wisest and the best of men, nay, the wisest and best of their actions, may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke.”<sup>13</sup>*

There is an under-current of sarcasm in the above conversation. Elizabeth has inherited this habit of making sarcastic comments from her father Mr. Bennet. Mr. Bennet is <sup>is</sup> witty, but often cynical and

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13. Ibid; Ch-11; P- 264-65

pungent. Elizabeth's wit pleases with a true aesthetic pleasure, but it seldom hurts. In the sharpness and brilliance of her wit, she is comparable to Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* but in its innocence and ingenuity, she is like Rosalind in *As You Like It*. There runs a strain of innocent raillery in all her conversations.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen emphasizes the characters' misapprehension of themselves and their experiences. In a sense it is a complex study of human deception and self-deception. Throughout the book, characters are deceived by appearances, fool themselves and others, pretend to be what they are not. Their expectations are mistaken: their actions grounded in false premises. The author reveals the motives and consequences of these failures in perception by having their false understanding culminate in actions whose effects are the opposite of what is intended. This *Sharp contrast* between knowledge and truth, between what the characters understand and what the reader understands, between *intention or expectation and fulfillment* is called *dramatic irony*.

Dramatic irony may have an objective or a subjective foundation, or both. Appearances may lie, may suggest the opposite of what

actually is. Thus, Wickham's "appearance was greatly in his favour" (XV) and Darcy's proud bearing seems to imply a thoroughly bad character. But appearances are misleading: "One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it" (XL). Jane's modesty belies her ardent love for Bingley (VI, XXXVI). Georgiana's shy demeanor conceals a surprising capacity for passionate impulse (XLIII). Charlotte's attentions to Collins seem to be only common courtesy (XVIII, XX, XXI) for which Elizabeth is grateful, but she is actually stalking a husband (XXII). Because of what she has said of him in the past, Elizabeth is thought to despise Darcy (LVII, LXIX), when actually she is in love with him. In each of these situations things are not as they would seem. Reality wears a mask that solicits mistaken judgments.

But although there are objective occasions for superficial (and erroneous) opinion, a more cautious scrutiny of the facts would sometimes avoid this *discrepancy between estimation and actuality*. For example, Mr. Bennet is ignorant of Elizabeth's true feelings about Darcy. What he takes for the truth (that he will amuse Elizabeth with the absurdity of Collins's suggestion that she is engaged to a man she dislikes) is directly contrary to the truth (LVII). The source of her

father's ironic error, however, lies in the circumstances rather than in himself. On the other hand, Elizabeth is wrong about Wickham and Darcy because she has disposed herself to be deceived. Her offended pride (V) has blinded her judgment (VI). Things are the opposite of what she supposes (not only does she misread their characters, but Darcy admires rather than dislikes her). The irony here is compounded because Elizabeth prides herself on her intelligence and perception. When ignorance thus pretends to knowledge, it is evidence of a moral failure. When Mr. Collins understands Elizabeth's refusal of his proposal as an encouragement of his pursuit -- a covert acceptance (XIX) -- his blindness to the plain reality is a comment on his egotism, his snobbish exaggeration of his social importance. In these last two cases, the irony is more emphatic because deception is self-deception.

In order to dramatize comically the sham and pretense<sup>e</sup> of many of the persons in her book, the author juxtaposes their interpretations of themselves and their actual behaviour. Lady Catherine's pride in her social status is repeatedly shown by her petty mind and "ill-breeding" to be without foundation. Caroline Bingley implies that she is socially superior to the Bennet family, but her crude pursuit of

Darcy exposes the flimsiness of her pretension to refinement. Mr. Collins continually announces his importance, and simultaneously betrays his moral, social, and intellectual unimportance, and The pretensions of these characters are the *inverse* of what their behaviour shows them really to be. Because characters take appearances for reality, deceive themselves or are deceived, they act on wrong premises, look forward in error. Things turn out contrary to their anticipations. Their actions produce effects *opposite* to those intended. Thus, Darcy seeks to prevent a connection with the Bennet family (he has misjudged the power of the girls' attractions), and he ends up marrying a Bennet himself. Lady Catherine acts to prevent a marriage and she becomes the cause of it (LX). Mr. Bennet permits his daughter to go to Brighton in order to keep peace in a family that he regards with ironical detachment. But this results in his greater involvement and in a disruption of the family peace. Caroline acts to arouse Darcy against Elizabeth, but succeeds only in reminding him of the intimacy they share (XLV). Misled by appearances to believe that Darcy dislikes her, prevented by her prejudice against him from seeing the truth, Elizabeth tries verbally to rebuke him; but in doing so she actually makes herself more attractive to him (VI, IX, X, XI, XVIII, XXXI, LX). By allowing events directly to contradict the judgments, expectations

and intentions of the characters, the author clarifies their limitations. The reader (aware of the actual situation) is made to see reality mock and punish pride, vanity, and failures in awareness. Dramatic irony thus becomes a way of dealing out a kind of natural retribution and revealing the surprise and complexity of experience.

In Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen's irony has developed into an instrument of discrimination between the people who are simple reproductions of their social type and the people with individuality and will, between the unaware and the aware. The defensive—and destructive—weapon of *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* has here been adapted directly to the theme through the personality of Elizabeth Bennet, who reflects and illustrates her author's vision without ever becoming (except in her malice toward Lydia) merely her author's advocate. The irony is internal, it does not take disturbing tangents towards the author's need for self-vindication : even self defensive, it is internal and consistent - Mr. Bennet's shying from the consequences of his disastrous mistake, Elizabeth's provocative parrying of Darcy. And if this new control over her irony permits Jane Austen only to be more clever (and not particularly more

persuasive) in avoiding a commitment, by Elizabeth in love, for example :

“... 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 it must date from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley.”

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

the characteristic block of Jane Austen's against direct emotional expression has occasion only very rarely to operate in *Pride and Prejudice* : above all, in the talk and atmosphere of Darcy's proposals, and in his letter—passages which most nearly reproduce the flat and melodramatic textures of *Cecilia*, without any lift of emotion or of irony either. The moment is soon over; and irony is not only back, but back at its proper task of discrimination.

Irony in Austen's novels is a composite of varied attributes. Unlike the satirists, she does not openly, directly and violently attack the foibles and follies of the people but evokes a smile by exposing their folly. She is never angry with her characters and the subtle instances of irony give artistic touches of perfection to Austen's work. "By the mere tone of her voice," says David Cecil,

*"she sets drab reality dancing and sparkling with the sunlight of her comic vision."*<sup>14</sup>

← Undoubtedly, irony, humour, satire go hand in hand in her novels.

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14. David Cecil: *A Portrait of Jane Austen*. London & New York, 1978.