

MANSFIELD PARK

It is common knowledge that Jane Austen is a humorist whose favourite weapon is irony. Her novels are all comedies in which she exposes the absurdities and failings of her characters. Her attitude to life is essentially that of a comic artist and her vision is ironical and satirical. It may also be noted that there is little malice in her attitude, though a note of bitterness occasionally creeps into it.

While irony is all-pervasive in *Emma*, the use of irony in *Mansfield Park* is very limited. Irony as a device of character delineation in *Mansfield Park* is used mainly in the portrayal of Mrs. Norris, and to a lesser extent in the case of Lady Bertram and Mrs. Price. In the presentation of Mr. Rushworth, Mr. Yates and Mrs. Grant also irony is employed as a means of suggesting some of the traits of their characters and also some remarks which are ironical in the light of later events. It is, however, the irony of situation that seems to be pronounced in the present novel.

As in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* too, the chief interest lies in the structural irony and it is well evidenced by the Fanny-

Edmund plot. In this connection it seems relevant to note that some eminent scholars have referred to a marked absence of Austen's characteristic irony in *Mansfield Park*. Professor Lionel Trilling, for example, observes,

*"but there is one novel of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park (Published 1814), in which the characteristic irony seems not to be at work. Indeed, one might say of this novel that it undertakes to discredit irony and to affirm literalness, that it demonstrates that there are no two ways about anything. And Mansfield Park is for this reason held by many to be the novel that is least representative of Jane Austen's peculiar attractiveness."*¹

Nevertheless, there are critics who seem to disagree with Trilling and hold that "the structure of Mansfield Park as a whole is ironic,"² and "the central irony of the plot is that Fanny is indeed not their equal, though not in the sense suggested by Mrs. Norris, who never misses an opportunity of reminding Fanny of her inferiority. Fanny shows herself superior to all the other characters by constantly respecting and actively trying to uphold to traditional values symbolized by Mansfield Park."³

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1. *Jane Austen and Mansfield Park From Blake to Byron*, Pelican Guide to Eng. Literature 5 (Penguin 1957); P-113
 2. John Odmark: *An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels*; P-13
 3. *Ibid*

The difference between the external and the internal, the circumstantial and the moral, obviously is a central source of irony. The irony in Austen's novels determines the course of the action and we can locate it in the structure of the plot. The structural irony in *Mansfield Park* lies in the initial notion of a man's growing relationship with a woman when they are cousin brothers and sisters as a 'mischief'. Significantly, one remembers how Darcy's scornful comments about Elizabeth early in *Pride and Prejudice* sets the action on its ironic course; and in the same way, Mrs. Norris's uncalled for advice to Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park* discovers the facts of the novel's ironic course of action:-

*"you are thinking of your sons; but do not you know that of all things upon earth that is the least likely to happen, brought up as they would be, always together like brothers and sisters? It is morally impossible. I never knew an instance of it. It is, in fact, the only sure way of providing against the connection. Suppose her a pretty girl, and seen by Tom or Edmond for the first time seven years hence, and I dare say there would be mischief. The very idea of her having been suffered to grow up at a distance from us all in poverty and neglect, would be enough to make either of the dear, sweet-tempered boys in love with her. But breed her up with them from this time, and suppose her even to have the beauty of an angel, and she will never more to either than an sister."*⁴

4. *Mansfield Park*; Ch-1; P-471

Mansfield Park opens with a descriptive narration of situation regarding the marriage of the three ward sisters and this makes us glance backward over thirty years. In the social context, the marriage in Austen's novels is a crucial event. The 'Situation' in life of the three sisters is determined by the performance of choosing husbands. This narrative portion reflects the author's ironical vision in terms of the social context:-

*"About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the country of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a Baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer himself allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it."*⁵

What is significant about the above quoted passage is Austen's satirical twist and its calmest and most deadly way and Austen here seems to suggest rather ironically that marriage is a transaction.

5. Ibid; Ch-1; P-471

Early in the novel we get the impression that Mrs. Norris has a sympathetic nature. She has taken an initiative that Fanny is brought from Portsmouth to Mansfield Park to stay there as measure of economic relief and assistance to Mr. And Mrs. Price who have a large ^{nu} member of children. However, in accomplishing this commendable deed, she takes every precaution to make sure that she does not have to incur any expenditure herself. The manner of her refusal is comic and it reveals her parsimonious nature and her resolve never to spend a penny on anybody even out of charity. While urging Sir Thomas for maintaining Fanny she offers all kinds of plausible reasons, meeting all ^{and} this objections in this regard yet she has an assumption to say:-

*"Whatever I can do, as you well know, I am always ready enough to do for the good of those I love; and, though I could never feel for this little girl the hundredth part of the regard I bear your own dear children, nor consider her, in any respect, so much my own, I should hate myself if I were capable of neglecting her. Is not she a sister's child? And could I bear to see her want while I had a bit of bread to give her? My dear Sir Thomas, with all my faults I have a warm heart; and poor as I am, would rather deny myself the necessaries of life than do an ungenerous thing."*⁶

6. Ibid; Ch-1; P-471-72

The author here expresses her motive that Mrs. Norris's love of money was equal to her love of directing affairs, and she knew quite as well how to save her money as to make her friends and relations spend their money. Mrs. Norris is a talkative woman with a fertile mind making suggestions which involve no financial expenditure on her own part. Mrs. Norris is drawn ironically throughout the novel. When, at a later stage it is suggested to her that she should now take over the responsibility for the maintenance of Fanny, her reply is as follows:-

*"Me! never. I never spoke a syllable about it to Sir Thomas, nor he to me. Fanny live with me! The last thing in the world for me to think of, or for anybody to wish that really knows us both. Good heaven! What could I do with Fanny? Me? A poor, helpless, forlorn widow, unfit for anything, my spirits quite broken down; what could I do with a girl at her time of life? A girl of fifteen!"*⁷

These lines are full of self-pity. Nevertheless, they are very amusing because they clearly reveal Mrs. Norris's hypocrisy and her determination never to spend any money on anybody. In fact, she

7. Ibid; Ch-3; P-484-85

repeats the same arguments in different words in the course of the discussion on this subject, saying to Lady Bertram:-

"Dear Sister, if you consider my unhappy state, how can she be any comfort to me? Here am I, a poor desolate widow, deprived of the best of husbands, my health gone in attending and nursing him, my spirits still worse, all my peace in this world destroyed, with hardly enough to support me in the rank of a gentlewoman, and enable me to live so as not to disgrace the memory of the dear departed - what possible comfort could I have in taking such a charge upon me as Fanny?"⁸

It was described by Mrs. Norris to her sister Lady Bertram. Mrs. Norris was a hypocrite in nature and her hypocrisy is emphasized when she says to her sister:-

"My object, Lady Bertram, is to be of use to those that come after me. It is for your children's good that I wish to be richer. I have nobody else to care for; but I should be very glad to think I could leave a little trifle among them worth their having."⁹

What she means to say is that whatever money she can save in her life will be left to Lady Bertram's children and she further says-

8. Ibid; Ch-3; P-484-85

9. Ibid; Ch-3; P-485

"Well, Lady Bertram, I can only say that my sole desire is to be of use to your family."¹⁰

These ironical expressions are intended to convey to us Mrs. Norris's parsimonious nature. When Fanny arrives at Mansfield Park, Mrs. Norris takes pleasure in the thought that she has been instrumental in the girl's being brought there, she feels very self important. It is she who welcomes Fanny first of all and then recommends her to the kindness of the Bertram family. Here, Jane Austen seeks to emphasize Mrs. Norris's feeling of self-importance in an ironical manner. It is also an ironical and amusing manner of conveying to us some traits of Mrs. Norris's character. When Mrs. Norris has succeeded in bringing about the engagement of Maria and Mr. Rushworth, we find that the intercourse between the Bertram and the Rushworth families was carried on without restraint, and that no other attempt was made at secrecy than Mrs. Norris's talking of it every where as a matter not to be talked of at present. This is again an ironical remark. The irony here arises from the contrast between the attempted secrecy and Mrs. Norris's talking of the matter

10. Ibid; Ch-3; P-486

everywhere. When the theatricals are decided upon, the author ironically tells us that Mrs. Norris took great pleasure in the decision as "the whole arrangement was to bring very little expense to anybody, and none at all to herself, and as she foresaw in it all the comforts of hurry, bustle, and importance."

In this connection, an eminent critic remarks about Mrs. Norris:

*"Mrs. Norris is no amusing 'extra' in a crowded cast of characters, but the person directly responsible for the principal development in the novel: she has supervised her nieces, upbringing, encouraged two of them in the selfish pride that causes their ultimate downfall, and bullied the third into the spirit of humble resignation that ensures her ultimate happiness."*¹¹

What Sir Thomas Bertram observes after a short pause reflects a deeper understanding of the situation and also a more thoughtful resolve-

*"Yes, let her home be in this house. We will endeavour to do our duty by her, and she will at least, have the advantage of companions of her own age, and of a regular instructress."*¹²

11. *Jane Austen*: Yasmine Gooneratne, Ch-7; P-113; Cambridge Univ. Press

12. *Mansfield Park*; Ch-1; P-473

The comments contain a careful approach of ironical device meant for Mrs. Norris, which she understands with remarkable alertness:-

"Very true", cried Mrs. Norris, which are both very important considerations ; and it will be just the same to Miss Lee, whether she has three girls to teach or only two – there can be no difference. I only wish I could be more useful; but you see, I do all in my power. I am not one of those that spare their own trouble; and Nanny shall fetch her, however, it may put me to inconvenience to have my chief counsellor away for three days. I suppose, sister, you will put the child in the little white attic, near the old nurseries. It will be much the best place for her, so near Miss Lee and not far from the girls and close by the house maids, who could either of them help to dress her, you know, and take care of her clothes, for I suppose you would not think it fair to expect Ellis to wait on her as well as the others. Indeed, I do not see that you could possible place her anywhere else."¹³

What strikes one in the above quoted passage is the characteristic irony which Jane Austen often shows in portraying the characters in her novels. Mrs. Norris strikes us as an interesting woman and in the first place, she is a woman of action. She has some spirit of activities that drives her to suggest to Sir Thomas that

13. Ibid; Ch-1; P-473

something should be done to remove or relieve the financial distress of his sister-in-law, Mrs. Price. One of the most striking characteristics of Mrs. Norris which has been ironically described by the author that she is very careful not to incur any financial responsibilities herself or to undertake any financial burdens. Here, Mrs. Norris shows her moral courage acknowledging her own deficiency. She resumes the advisory role without any loss of face. She has a fertile mind for making suggestions which involve no financial expenditure on her own part. In this way, the character of Mrs. Norris is drawn through ironic suggestions by the author throughout the novel. The rest of the dialogue has been quoted for the consideration of possible problems of adjustment in accommodating a child in the Bertram family. Even Sir Thomas Worries:-

"There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs. Norris, observed Sir Thomas, as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my daughters, the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin, and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss Bertram. I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorise in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they can not be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different. It is a point of great

delicacy, and you must assist us in our endeavours to choose exactly the right line of conduct."¹⁴

Here we find Thomas Bertram's secure position in society which projects a clear perception. Although he can do nothing for Lieutenant Price, now he is prepared to extend his patronage where he can to assist those connected with him by family ties.

In chapter 4 of *Mansfield Park*, the main events are the return of Tom from Antigua and the introduction of three new persons in the social circle of the Bertram Family. On the other hand, in their absence (Sir Thomas and Tom), Mrs. Norris took a good deal of interest for her nieces, helping them in their toilettes, displaying their accomplishments, and looking about for their future husbands. All is arranged for a matrimonial alliance between Mr. Rushworth and Maria. This is also an ironical and amusing manner of conveying to us some traits of Mrs. Norris's character. The following extract reveals:-

14. Ibid; Ch-1; P-474

"The earliest intelligence of the travellers' safe arrival in Antigua after a favourite voyage, was received; though not before Mrs. Norris had been indulging in very dreadful fears, and trying to make Edmund participate them whenever she could get him alone; and as she depended on being the first person made acquainted with any fatal catastrophe, she had already arranged the manner of breaking it to all the others, when Sir Thoma's assurances of their both being alive and well, made it necessary to lay by her agitation and affectionate preparatory speeches for a while."

"The winter came and passed without their being called for; the accounts continued perfectly good; and Mrs. Norris in promoting gaieties for her nieces, assisting their toilettes, displaying their accomplishments, and looking about for their future husbands, had so much to do so, in addition to all her own household cares, some interference in those of her sister, and Mrs. Grant's wasteful doings to overlook, left her very little occasion to be occupied even in fears for the absent."¹⁵

There is also an example of the use of irony in chapter 12 when Mrs. Norris expresses the view that Henry Crawford would soon marry Julia. The irony arises from the fact that we already know, and we believe, with Fanny, that Henry has a preference for Maria. Evidently Mrs. Norris is too thick-headed to see the reality even though an elderly woman like her should have been expected to show more

15. Ibid; Ch-4; P-488

discernment in a matter like this. The irony here is to be found in Mrs. Norris's misreading of the situation or in the contrast between appearance and reality.

When the staging of the play has been decided, the author ironically tells us that Mrs. Norris took great pleasure in the decision as the whole arrangement was to bring every little expense to anybody and none at all to herself, and as she foresaw in it all the comforts of hurry, bustle, and importance. Here we find another example of the use of irony in the portrayal of Mrs. Norris. When Sir Thomas feels somewhat disappointed with Mrs. Norris because she had not tried to prevent the theatricals from being held in his house. The author here ironically tells us that it is Mrs. Norris's 'greatest support and glory was in having formed the connection with the Rushworths'.

The author has used the episode of the play to dramatise her attitude toward her art. Among other things, the rehearsals are a kind of metaphor for her own former irony. Acting in a play is a means of being another self, of speaking with another voice and irony and wit are dramatic in the same respect. But in *Mansfield Park*, she is shedding her ironic voices to speak what is predominantly her own.

Here her irony has served the same purpose for her and her characters as the rehearsals have for the young people at the park.

Later, we find an important development in the plot in chapter 21, and that is Maria's marriage to Mr. Rushworth to whom she has been engaged for quite some time. Maria has never been in love with Mr. Rushworth, and she marries him only after she finds that Henry Crawford, the man with whom she has really been in love, does not care much for her and has only been flirting with her. Indeed, she (Maria) has the feeling that Henry, by his attitude of indifference towards her after having shown a preference for her, has destroyed her happiness. She does not want to let him know that she has been longing for him, and so she marries Mr. Rushworth to produce an impression that everything is all right with her.

The marriage of Maria and Rushworth is described by the author in a comic and ironical manner. Thus we read:-

"It was a very proper wedding. The bride was elegantly dressed – the two bridesmaids were duly inferior; her father gave her away; her mother stood with salts in her hand, expecting to be agitated; her aunt tried to cry; and the service was

impressively read by Dr. Grant. Nothing could be objected to when it came under the discussion of the neighbourhood, except that the carriage which conveyed the bride and bridegroom and Julia from the church door to Sotherton was the same chaise which Mr. Rushworth had used for a twelvemonth before. In everything else the etiquette of the day might stand the strictest investigation."¹⁶

On this occasion, the behavior of Mrs. Norris really gives us pleasure. She is very happy in performing the duties of the occasion. She spends the whole day at Mansfield Park to support Lady Bertram's spirits. She drinks a couple of extra glasses of wine to the health of Mr. and Mrs. Rushworth; she feels happy indeed on this occasion because it was she who had made the match. Moreover, she has no doubt at all that the couple would lead a perfectly happy life. There is irony behind these words because later we shall find that the marriage, far from proving happy, turns out to be a disaster for both of them.

As in other novels of Austen, in *Mansfield Park* also one finds many occasions of authorial comments pregnant with ironic suggestions. One such situation is evident in the twenty-sixth chapter when we see that Sir Thomas decided to arrange a ball at Mansfield

16. Ibid; Ch-21; P-591

Park for his niece and nephew (Fanny and William). It has been arranged by Sir Thomas to have the pleasure of dancing. Even without the proffered help of Mrs. Norris, the date has been fixed and the invitations had already been sent to some neighbours. Thus we read:-

"Ah, my dear Sir Thomas!" interrupted Mrs. Norris, "I knew what was coming. I knew what you were going to say. If dear Julia were at home, or dearest Mrs. Rushworth at Sotherton, to afford a reason, an occasion for such a thing, you would be tempted to give the young people a dance at Mansfield. I knew you would. If they were at home to grace the ball, a ball you would have this very Christmas. Thank your uncle, William, thank your uncle!"

"My daughters", replied Sir Thomas, gravely interposing, "have their pleasures at Brighton, and I hope are very happy; but the dance which I think of giving at Mansfield will be for their cousins. Could we be all assembled, our satisfaction would undoubtedly be more complete, but the absence of some is not to debar the others of amusement."

"Mrs. Norris had not another word to say. She saw decision in his looks, and her surprise and vexation required some minutes silence to be settled into composure. A ball at such a time! His daughters absent and herself not consulted! There was comfort, however, soon at hand. She must be the doer of everything: Lady Bertram would of course be spared all thought and exertion, and it would all fall upon her. She would have to do the honours of the evening; and this reflection quickly restored

so much of her good humour as enabled her to join in with the others, before their happiness and thanks were all expressed.¹⁷

Through the above extract, Mrs. Norris expresses her unhappiness over Sir Thomas's decision about the ball at Mansfield Park. But soon we realise that she consoles herself with the thought that she would, after all, get another chance to show her importance. She told firmly that she would be the doer of everything and she would do the honours of the occasion. It became a repose in her mind that she would restore her good humour. In other words, it is clear to us that Mrs. Norris actually does not want the ball which should be held in honour of Fanny and William, but she adapts herself to the situation with the thought that she would get another opportunity to show her importance at Mansfield Park. This is also an ironical remark by the author who enjoys it through the representation of her creation in making the situation in her novels.

Before closing our discussion about *Mansfield Park*, we shall go one step further to discuss the ironical portrayal of the character

17. Ibid; Ch-26; P-622

of Lady Bertram, the wife of Sir Thomas Bertram. She was a girl of great beauty when Sir Thomas married her. It was approximately thirty years before the story of the novel begins. Early in the novel, she is described as a 'woman of very tranquil feelings and a temper remarkably easy and indolent'. Indeed, these are the special traits of Lady Bertram's character which frequently come into our discussion in the course of the novel. We also find that she was completely a lethargic woman sitting nicely dressed on a sofa. She does some needle work which is of no use and beauty. She thinks more of her dog than her children. She is always guided in everything important by Sir Thomas and in other smaller concerns by her sister, Mrs. Norris. This is an ironical way of mentioning her indolence and lack of the sense of responsibility as a mother. Lady Bertram's inability to take any decision and her complete dependence on her husband even any futile matter are ironically explained to us by the author. In this regard, we may cite here an example used by the author : when she was playing cards at the parsonage, she asks her husband whether she should play speculation or whist, and ultimately decides to play speculation because it was suggested by her husband, Thomas Bertram. When Fanny was sent to her parents' house at Parsonage in respect of an invitation, she asks her husband whether she can spare

Fanny for the day and ultimately allows her (Fanny) to go as the hints are given to Lady Bertram by her husband in the positive. There are such lot of examples which we find in the novel in the course of the action.

Another ironical remark comes on the occasion of the ball, when Fanny appears very elegant and well-dressed. It is demanded by her (Lady Bertram) that the credit completely goes to her only. Describing Fanny's elegance on this purpose, she had sent Miss Chapman, her maid to help Fanny in getting dressed. The actual fact is that Fanny did not take any help in getting dressed herself for the ball. The irony here arises from the contrast between Lady Bertram's claim and the actual fact.

Finally, there is the irony of situation. Edmund takes Fanny into confidence about his love for Mary. He wants support and sympathy from Fanny, not knowing at all that Fanny herself is in love with him. The irony here arises from the contrast between appearance and reality. This reality is that Fanny is in love with Edmund, but apparently she is only Edmund's confidante. Another ironical situation develops when Edmund earnestly exhorts Fanny to

accept Henry's proposal of marriage. Here again the irony arises from the contrast between appearance and reality. Edmund gives this advice to Fanny as Fanny's well-wisher, but he does not know that Fanny herself is deeply in love with him.