

THE FUNCTION OF IRONY IN THE WORKS OF JANE AUSTEN

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ABSTRACT:

This essay examines how irony functions in Jane Austen's books, emphasising how it advances the plot, develops characters, and serves as a social critique. Austen's approach is characterised by her use of irony, which allows her to expose the complexities of human nature and question social conventions. The essay emphasises how irony enhances the story and draws readers in with a deeper comprehension of the characters and issues in her writing

Keywords: Jane Austen, irony, English literature, character development, social critique, narrative analysis

Introduction

Austen regularly employs sarcasm to draw attention to the shortcomings and misunderstandings of her characters, exposing their limitations or providing opportunity for personal development. For instance, Elizabeth Bennet's well-known admission of bias against Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* stands in stark contrast to her final admission of her own mistakes in judgement. As their character arcs are driven by the ironic contrast between their professed ideals and ultimate deeds, Mr. Darcy's initial pride also gives way to humility. These instances of irony highlight the intricacy of human nature and encourage readers to feel something.

Jane Austen's skilful use of sarcasm is often used to convey her well-known wit and perceptive social observations. Irony in all of its forms is crucial to Austen's works since it not only moves the action along but also offers insightful commentary on the society she depicts. By using situational, dramatic, and linguistic irony, Austen highlights the absurdity of the social mores of her time as well as the flaws and contradictions in her characters. Her wry prose offers depth and humour while encouraging readers to reflect on the complexities of human nature.

Many of Austen's novels use irony to advance the plot, particularly situational and dramatic irony. There is tension and humour because readers are frequently given access to knowledge that the protagonists are not. A number of humorous turns arise from Emma's protagonist's misplaced efforts at matchmaking and her ignorance of Mr. Knightley's feelings. These misconceptions serve as a commentary on the perils

of overconfidence and self-deception in addition to complicating the story. All of Jane Austen's novels deal with courtship as a power struggle; the core theme of her works is the play with or opposition to power. Additionally, Jane Austen implies a strong and enjoyable relationship that women in patriarchal societies may have with discursive authority by using irony to highlight the boundaries of decisive and assertive language. The veiling signature demands the dignity of womanhood itself, something that "Mrs. Humphry Ward," "Carrer Bell," "George Eliot," and "Fanny Fern" do not. It suggests, as if modestly, that all women talk in the same voice—Austen was not the first one to write as one—which will avoid such blunt signifiers as proper names and express exactly what one might expect it to say with distinctively feminine obliqueness and no more.¹

Austen's review of social conventions, especially those pertaining to marriage, status, and gender places, is arguably the most important use of irony in her jotting. As seen in the first line of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen constantly uses verbal irony to question conventional wisdom "It's a verity widely conceded, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a woman ." This sarcastic expression parodies artistic presuppositions around marriage and wealth. Austen challenges compendiums to consider the inflexible systems of her period through these cases.

Austen illustrates the richness of human nature with characters such as Elizabeth and Darcy. The process of personal change is illustrated by their journeys from pride and prejudice to self-awareness. Austen's use of irony compels the reader and the characters to examine the boundaries of their presumptions and reevaluate what true moral integrity and virtue are. Austen regularly uses dramatic and situational irony to add humour and increase the tension in her stories. For example, the protagonist's attempts at matchmaking in *Emma* provide both humour and tension. In her self-confidence, Emma Woodhouse thinks she can influence the romantic relationships of everyone around her, but her misplaced meddling causes a number of misunderstandings. Even while Emma actively seeks to pair Mr. Knightley with someone else, the reader is aware that she is unaware of her own affections for him, which is where the dramatic irony lies. This gives the story more depth by contrasting what Emma doesn't know with what the reader does, in a hilarious way.

When events in Austen's works turn out differently than the protagonists had anticipated, situational irony also plays a significant part. For example, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor Dashwood's restrained and careful demeanour stands in stark contrast to Marianne's impetuous and passionate character; nonetheless, it is Elinor who eventually finds stability and happiness in marriage. This expectation reversal

¹ Rachel M Brownstain, *Jane Austine: Irony and authority* (Last Laught, 2022),57

underlines how foolish it is to rigidly uphold one's principles while ignoring the realities of life and love. Austen's criticism of strict social conventions and her support for moderation and balance in both emotion and reason are reflected in the irony in these circumstances. Verbal irony is arguably the most important type of irony in Austen's writings because it enables her to quietly criticise the social mores of her era, especially those related to marriage, gender roles, and class. Austen's use of language irony is exemplified by the well-known opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." This statement highlights the transactional character of relationships during the Regency era by parodying the social presumption that riches is inevitably associated with the necessity of marriage.

Austen uses verbal irony throughout her books to highlight the inconsistencies and constraints of the societal systems that control the lives of her characters. The rigidity of social class and status is exemplified by characters such as Sir William Lucas in *Sense and Sensibility* and Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*. Their acts frequently highlight the ridiculousness of their worries about decorum and ancestry. Austen's sardonic depiction of these individuals challenges readers to reevaluate the real principles that ought to govern interpersonal interactions and conduct, as well as the legitimacy of social norms. Austen used irony as a social critique in addition to being a humorous and character-building device. She challenges her readers to consider their own presumptions and the social conventions that influence their lives by highlighting the shortcomings and hypocrisies of her characters. Austen's irony promotes a more flexible, nuanced view of relationships and personal agency while challenging the strict customs of her era, especially those pertaining to marriage, class, and gender.

For instance, Fanny Price, the protagonist of *Mansfield Park*, is frequently viewed as weak and submissive in contrast to her relatives' more vibrant personalities; nonetheless, her moral fortitude and honesty make her the book's real heroine. The irony is that, although Fanny's modest goodness is frequently disregarded, the plot's denouement is ultimately brought about by her unwavering moral compass. In this sense, Austen emphasises the value of inner character while criticising snap decisions based on appearances.

Through her delicate use of irony, Austen challenges readers to think critically about the existing quo and how social influences influence people's actions. Austen employs irony to promote a greater comprehension of human nature and the world around us, whether through the development of her characters, her humour, or her societal commentary.

Conclusion

Irony is a sophisticated method that enhances characterisation, enriches plotlines, and offers insightful societal critique in Jane Austen's writings. It is much more than just a source of humour. Austen challenges readers to think critically about the morals and actions of her characters and, consequently, her society by incorporating irony into her stories. Her novels will always be cherished and relevant because of this ageless quality.

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