

THE FUNCTION OF HUMOR IN 19TH CENTURY BRITISH NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Humor in 19th-century British novels serves a multifaceted role, intertwining social critique, character development, and entertainment. This article explores how humor functions as a tool for satire, offering a critique of Victorian society's class systems, moral rigidity, and social conventions. Authors such as Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Oscar Wilde use humor to expose the contradictions of their time, often providing both a source of levity and a vehicle for deeper moral and societal reflection. Humor also plays a key role in characterization, revealing the complexities of relationships and personal motivations, while simultaneously entertaining readers and providing relief from the novel's more serious themes. Through the careful integration of wit, irony, and farce, 19th-century British novels demonstrate how humor can be both a means of entertainment and a method of social commentary, making it an essential aspect of the literary works of the period.

Keywords: Humor, 19th-century British novels, social critique, satire, character development, Victorian society, Dickens, Austen, Wilde, irony, wit, entertainment, moral commentary, class system, social conventions, satire in literature, Victorian era, narrative style.

Introduction

Humor has long been a cornerstone of British literature, particularly in the novels of the 19th century, where it functioned as both a source of entertainment and a subtle tool for social critique. The Victorian era, marked by rapid industrialization, moral conservatism, and significant social change, saw humor employed in diverse ways by writers to comment on the complexities of society. From Charles Dickens's satirical portrayal of the class system to Jane Austen's ironic insights into marriage and social expectations, humor in 19th-century British novels offers a unique window into the period's values, tensions, and contradictions.

This article examines the function of humor in key works of the 19th century, focusing on how it was used to critique societal norms, develop characters, and provide both relief and depth within the narrative. Humor in these novels is not merely for amusement; it serves as a vehicle for authors to challenge the status quo, expose human

folly, and explore the moral and social dilemmas of their time. Whether through sharp wit, farcical situations, or biting irony, humor in Victorian literature reflects the era's complexities while also offering readers a space for reflection on the social and cultural dynamics that shaped the period.

By exploring the use of humor in novels such as *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) by Dickens, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) by Austen, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) by Wilde, this article aims to demonstrate how humor not only entertains but also serves as a tool for deeper understanding of Victorian life, thought, and values.

1. Humor as Social Critique and Satire

In 19th-century British novels, humor often functioned as a critical tool for satire, allowing authors to challenge societal norms and expose injustices. The rapid changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and colonial expansion created a society rife with contradictions and hypocrisies, and humor became a means of pointing out these flaws.

Charles Dickens, known for his biting social commentary, frequently employed humor as a way to criticize the prevailing systems of law, class, and morality. In *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), Dickens uses exaggerated, comical characters to lampoon the inefficiencies and absurdities of the legal and social systems. For instance, the character of Samuel Pickwick, along with his companions, finds themselves embroiled in a series of ludicrous adventures that highlight the injustices faced by common people. Similarly, in *Bleak House* (1853), Dickens uses the comic character of Mr. Turveydrop, who epitomizes the idleness of the upper classes, to critique the moral decay of the British aristocracy.

Jane Austen also used humor to critique the social and gender norms of her time, particularly in her novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Her subtle wit and irony, often delivered through dialogue, reveal the absurdities of the class system and the institution of marriage. Characters such as Mrs. Bennett, whose sole concern is securing advantageous marriages for her daughters, are both humorous and a commentary on the social pressures that women faced in the early 19th century. Through humor, Austen critiques not just individual characters, but the society that dictates their behavior and values.

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) is perhaps one of the most famous examples of humor used to satirize the superficiality of Victorian society. The play's witty dialogue and improbable plot revolve around mistaken identities and absurd social conventions, all of which serve to expose the ridiculousness of the era's obsession with class, respectability, and marriage. Wilde's humor is sharp, often mocking the pretensions of his characters, while providing insight into the moral and societal shortcomings of the time.

2. Humor in Character Development

Humor also plays a crucial role in shaping characters and their relationships within 19th-century British novels. It allows readers to understand characters' personalities, motivations, and social dynamics in a more engaging and often revealing manner. Through humorous interactions, authors can subtly explore the complexities of human nature, revealing contradictions and hidden emotions that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë uses moments of humor to develop the relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester. Their interactions, though often emotionally charged, are punctuated with humor, particularly in the form of playful banter. This humor serves to break down the formal barriers between the characters, creating a sense of equality and intimacy. Mr. Rochester's sarcastic remarks, while seemingly lighthearted, also reveal his vulnerability and growing affection for Jane. These moments of humor help to humanize the characters, making them more relatable and multifaceted.

Similarly, in *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), Dickens uses humor to develop his protagonist and the relationships around him. Characters such as Uriah Heep, whose outward humility hides a manipulative nature, are presented in a humorous light, allowing the reader to both laugh at and recognize the character's true malice. Dickens's skillful use of humor allows for a deeper exploration of character traits and motivations, highlighting the tension between appearance and reality.

In *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), George Eliot's use of humor reveals the contradictions in the characters' social ambitions and moral values. The comic portrayal of Rosamond Vincy's pursuit of marriage and social status, as well as her interactions with Dr. Lydgate, serve not only to entertain but to critique the characters' misguided priorities. Humor, in this case, acts as a mirror to the characters' inner desires and flaws, offering readers a deeper understanding of their motivations.

3. Humor as Entertainment and Relief

Beyond its role in social critique and character development, humor in 19th-century novels provides much-needed entertainment and relief from the often heavy themes explored in the narratives. The serious issues of poverty, injustice, and personal suffering are frequently counterbalanced by humorous moments, which help to engage the reader while offering a respite from the tension.

In *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), Arthur Conan Doyle introduces humor primarily through the character of Dr. Watson. While Watson is earnest and often bemused by Holmes's eccentricities, his interactions with the detective provide both comic relief and a sense of balance to the otherwise intense and cerebral mysteries.

Watson's reactions to Holmes's genius and strange behavior serve to humanize the detective, making him more relatable while adding an element of levity to the stories.

Similarly, in *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens uses humor to balance the often grim realities of life with a sense of absurdity. The outlandish adventures of Mr. Pickwick and his companions provide comic relief, making the novel both entertaining and socially significant. By placing his characters in comically exaggerated situations, Dickens allows the reader to laugh at the absurdity of their experiences while simultaneously critiquing the systems that create such situations.

Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* takes humor to the extreme, using wit and farce to entertain while simultaneously poking fun at the very concept of social propriety. The play's exaggerated scenarios and outlandish characters provide an enjoyable escape from the rigidity of Victorian norms, all while mocking those very norms. Wilde's ability to blend humor with social critique ensures that the play remains both an entertaining comedy and a sharp commentary on the absurdities of the time.

Conclusion

Humor in 19th-century British novels serves a wide range of functions, from social critique and character development to providing entertainment and reflecting Victorian morality. Through the works of authors like Dickens, Austen, Wilde, and Brontë, humor becomes an essential vehicle for examining the complexities of the period's social, political, and cultural landscape. Whether it is used to expose the absurdities of class, marriage, and social norms or to deepen our understanding of characters and relationships, humor in these novels offers a powerful commentary on the contradictions and challenges of Victorian society.

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