

CC 10 Semester IV

British Literature : 19th Century

Presence of Irony in of "Pride and Prejudice"

One of the most prominent features of the literary style of Jane Austen is her frequent use of irony. In fact, in no other book is her use of irony more pronounced than in *Pride and Prejudice*. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen employs a variety of irony, verbal, thematic, situational, and dramatic.

The title of the novel contains a hidden strain of thematic irony. Jane Austen subtly introduces an inversion in the thematic foibles, 'Pride' and 'Prejudice' and the characters they belong to. It is Darcy who is supposed to have the pride and Elizabeth who is supposed to have the prejudice. But in their misunderstandings with each other, they accuse each other of excessive pride and prejudice.

Verbal irony is present in profusion in *Pride and Prejudice*. The oft-quoted opening sentence of the novel is one of the finest example of verbal irony: "It is truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife". The statement in fact encapsulates the ambitions of the empty headed Mrs. Bennet, and her desire to find a good match for each of her five daughters. Sometimes the characters are unconsciously ironic, as Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins. Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth serve to directly express the author's ironic opinion. Although Mr. Bennet is basically a sensible man, he behaves strangely because of his sarcasm with his wife. Mr. Bennet cruelly mocks his wife's silliness with the comments as "...you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party". Elizabeth is to some extent similar to her father's cynicism. At the second ball, not only does she reject Darcy's request to dance with her, but also mocks him with comments like "Mr. Darcy is all politeness", and "I am perfectly convinced by it that Mr. Darcy has no defect". Her speeches crackle with irony that is filled with pep and display vibrant humor.

Dramatic irony is at work when the audience knows something that the character doesn't, is seen mainly through Elizabeth and Darcy. Elizabeth is critical of Jane's blindness to others' faults. This criticism is filled with irony, because Elizabeth herself is blind to the true character of Darcy because of her prejudice against him. Also, Darcy was blind to his love when he declines to dance with Elizabeth. In addition, when the Gardiners are talking about a future mistress of Pemberley, they don't know that Darcy had proposed to Elizabeth and that she could have been that mistress now. This gives a clear example of a dramatic irony.

The focal point of the story's situational irony is Darcy's falling in love with Elizabeth. Mr. Darcy, who once called Elizabeth "tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt (him)", gets captivated by her fine countenance, and ends up admitting that "... it is many months since I have considered [Elizabeth] as one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance." Likewise, Elizabeth, who starts out hating Mr. Darcy with a passion, ends up marrying him. There is a fine streak of irony in her response to Charlotte's engagement and her own subsequent leniency towards materialism at the first sight of

Pemberley: "To be mistress of Pemberley might be something!" Elizabeth tells Mr. Collins that she is not the type of a woman to reject the first proposal and accept the second but does exactly this when Darcy proposes her second time.

Mr. Collins advises to Mr Bennet, talking of Lydia's elopement: "You ought certainly to forgive them as a Christian, but never to admit them to your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing." Mr Collins is being unconsciously ironic, his idea of 'forgiveness' isn't really forgiving at all.

Irony in character is even more prominent than irony of situation. It is ironical that Elizabeth who prides herself on her perception and disdains Jane's blindness to realities, is herself blinded by her own prejudice. Darcy always thought himself to be a gentleman but his own proposal to Elizabeth is quite ungentlemanly. Wickham is graceful to look at, but at heart he is an unredeemed villain. The Bingley Sisters hate the Bennets for their vulgarity but are themselves vulgar in their behaviour. Lady Catherine de Bourgh views herself to be a graceful lady, but is an equally self-conceited and haughty woman. Mr. Collins always boasts of himself as a clergyman, but is an ironical portrait of self-satisfied sycophancy and pomposity. Thus, the novel abounds in irony of characters.

To conclude, the irony of Jane Austin is not tinged with any bitterness, nor does she reflect her cynicism. Rather her irony can be termed comic. Irony is used by Jane Austin in *Pride and Prejudice* to expose the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of contemporary English society. Andrew H. Wright very aptly remarks that irony, at the hands of Jane Austen, is the "instrument of a moral vision."